



Dr Allan Boesak at UDF launching, Cape Town, August 1983

UDF — affiliate or cooperate?



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Should the Black Sash affiliate to the UDF? This is one of the 'cutting-edge' issues in the Sash at present — and has been for the best part of eight months.

This is not particularly remarkable. Much the same debate has taken place within several other organisations opposed to the government's attempted restructuring of apartheid through the new constitution and 'Koornhof Bills'.

And they have reached widely divergent conclusions. Some believe it is time to pool their strength and resources with other groups under the umbrella of the broadest anti-apartheid front since the nationalists came to power. Others believe their effectiveness lies in their independence, without which they cannot fulfill their organisational objectives.

Within the Sash, the 'UDF debate' has been particularly long and intense. It has sparked off deep feeling on both sides in what has become one of the most contro-

versial issues in the Sash's history.

This article is an attempt to draw out the arguments on both sides, to air and circulate the issues before the national conference in March when a decision is likely to be made. (According to the Sash constitution a two-thirds majority is needed for the Sash to affiliate to the UDF.)

No doubt by that time fresh arguments and considerations will have arisen and new compromises forged. Indeed, it is the purpose of this article to stimulate further debate, as the lengthy, healthy and sometimes painful process of internal democracy runs its course.

Arguments for affiliation

Many Sash members are strong proponents of affiliation. The Natal Coastal region has already made the move — with the majority support of its regional members.

Many supporters of affiliation make the following

points:

South Africa has reached a political watershed. Over the past decade, the National Party, sensing an impending political crisis on all fronts, devised a sophisticated plan to restructure apartheid, drawing in coloureds and Indians as its junior partners while entrenching the political exclusion of Africans.

At the same time, through the three Koornhof Bills, it is attempting to divide a relatively privileged group of African urban 'insiders' from the majority in the homelands who will face tightened influx control and increasing unemployment.

This political strategy demands an effective and organised counter strategy. Indeed, it has made such an organisation a pressing necessity — now, while the government is still trying to win legitimacy for its plans and implement them bit by bit. Individuals are isolated, vulnerable and incapable of effective opposition on their own, and so are organisations. Unless a unified front can mobilise its forces and pool its resources to oppose the implementation of restructured apartheid, the government will have a clear run, assisted by isolated and divided opposition groupings each doing its own thing.

The Sash has a unique opportunity to become part of a non-racial opposition movement that could influence the government's attempts at restructuring apartheid, simultaneously symbolising the alternative to apartheid: a process of non-racial, democratic co-operation and decision-making.

Indeed, this would be a logical step for the Sash to take, having played a pivotal role in analysing the shift from traditional to neo-apartheid, exposing the myths of reform, teasing out the real intentions of constitutional change and the Koornhof Bills.

Nor need the Sash sacrifice its autonomy and internal democracy. It is part of the very nature of the Front that affiliated organisations retain their own identity, policy and objectives — while co-operating on a limited number of issues of mutual concern. If this were not the case, the Front would collapse within a very short time because many organisations besides Sash would not tolerate interference in their internal affairs.

Mindful of the dynamics within its affiliate organisations, the UDF attempts to take decisions by consensus — and if consensus cannot be reached the issue is referred again to the individual organisations for discussion. This is what happened at the recent National General Council where the UDF failed to reach consensus on whether to participate in a possible referendum to test 'coloured' and 'Indian' opinion of the new constitution.

Of course, absolute unanimity may be unattainable, and there are times when decisions must be taken on common objectives. It is also conceivable that the Sash may not concur with the position adopted. But the very nature of democracy means abiding by a majority decision.

Nor is it valid to argue that the UDF has no specific constitutional and economic policy. As a Front, it shouldn't have. It consists in a number of different organisations with a range of policies, supporting a shared set of principles embodied in the UDF declaration. Yet it is inevitable that economic and constitutional issues will be discussed by the UDF in pursuing common objectives. If the Sash wishes to make an input into the development and growth of the non-racial opposition

movement, it can best do so from within. Moreover, affiliation would bring to a wider circle of Sash members a heightened awareness of (and participation in) the ongoing debate on economic and constitutional issues beyond the confined circle of white, middle-class women. This is an essential complement to the Sash's service role — particularly as the initiative of political opposition is increasingly centred in the organisations of the oppressed.

Finally, at a time when many young people have left the country, seeing armed struggle as the only remaining option for change in South Africa, it is remarkable that so broad an organisation could be launched committed to peaceful, non-racial methods of working for political transformation. As the Sash's primary objective is the non-violent struggle against apartheid, its logical place is in the UDF.

Arguments against affiliation

Many Sash members have indicated their opposition to affiliation — for a wide variety of reasons. They do not all necessarily subscribe to every reason listed below. But they all believe that the disadvantages of affiliation will outweigh the advantages.

The arguments run as follows:

The Black Sash's effectiveness is rooted in its independence. It has jealously guarded this independence since its inception, refusing to become tied to any political organisation or movement. This has given the Sash the freedom to co-operate with any political grouping on specific projects; to criticise their decisions and actions when necessary; and to serve as an independent catalyst for people of differing political views. Most significantly it has given Sash a high level of credibility in performing its essential service functions through its advice offices and its analysis of legislation and political trends.

During the past years this independence has become all the more important due to the deepening differences between Black opposition movements. The Sash would jeopardise its role and its credibility if it sided with one of them — particularly as some (such as Inkatha) are excluded from affiliation even though they also oppose the constitution and Koornhof Bills. Such exclusivism prevents the UDF from being a genuine Front of organisations with differing policies and strategies. It indicates that the UDF is not primarily concerned with promoting unity around common principles, but of laying down the line on the goals and tactics of different organisations.

Nor has it been necessary to affiliate to the UDF to support particular campaigns and objectives. During the referendum the Sash played a leading role in the 'No' vote campaign — as did Nusas, a prominent affiliate of the UDF, to the mutual benefit of both organisations. However, had the UDF advocated abstention (as initially seemed likely) the Sash, following its own internal democratic decision, would have found itself advocating a different strategy. Had it been a UDF affiliate, severe problems would have arisen.

It is entirely probable that similar situations could arise in the future. The UDF has its own internal structures and office bearers through which decisions are taken, implemented and announced via the Press. This process may well take place democratically — but this cannot prevent a contradiction arising between the internal democracy of Sash and that of the UDF. If Sash were to affiliate, it could easily find itself unable to iden-

tify with a UDF decision or statement. This would give rise to an untenable position: either Sash would have to publicly dissociate itself, to the severe detriment of both organisations, or remain silent, risking the loss of a substantial number of members. While Sash, as a small organisation, could not hope to influence the decision-making process in the UDF it would run the risk of impairing its own internal democracy.

Another problem concerning the UDF is its lack of a clearly defined constitutional and economic policy (beyond its widely worded declaration.) Inevitably in the course of time, UDF congresses will adopt more detailed resolutions on these issues. As a UDF affiliate, the Sash would automatically be associated with these decisions and statements, whether or not it supported them or had any part in their formulation. To rush into a political organisation without a clearly defined constitutional and economic policy would be as naive as signing a contract without reading it.

It is no secret that many of the UDF's leading affiliates subscribe to the Freedom Charter, giving the organisation strong Charterist leanings. This has unavoidably resulted in symbolic associations with the African National Congress. It also gives the movement a socialist flavour, as the Charter advocates the nationalisation of certain industries and banks as well as the transfer of agricultural land to public ownership. This identification by association could cause internal problems for Sash — particularly amongst its liberal members who would resist such implications.

In short, by affiliating to the UDF, Sash would run the severe risk of undermining its own membership base, independence and credibility. As a crippled organisation, it could add little to the strength of the UDF.

The compromise position

A compromise position is rapidly developing on both sides of the debate. There are proponents of affiliation who baulk at the possibility of splitting Sash or evoking mass resignations. They are working for a compromise that would involve endorsing the UDF's declaration of principles, and pledging co-operation in fighting the constitution and Koornhof Bills — but stopping short of affiliation.

On the other side there are opponents of affiliation who don't want to place themselves in opposition to the UDF. They believe a straight YES/NO answer on affiliation would have the same implications as the 'Do-you-still-beat-your-wife' question. They also favour a compromise that would involve endorsing the UDF declaration and pledging co-operation, while maintaining Sash's independence.

Then there are those who don't fall into either camp. They are genuinely convinced by certain arguments on both sides and believe that only time can provide the right answer. This group also favours a compromise for the present.

Sure, it's an attempt at having your cake and eating it. But then, as someone put it: 'Who would want to have a cake and not eat it?'

What is the United Democratic Front?

It is a Front of some 400 widely divergent organisations (ranging from trade unions and community organisations to sports clubs) that have come together in a common commitment to resist the implementation of the new constitution and the 'Koornhof Bills.'



The most notorious of these Bills is the Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Person's Bill, currently undergoing revision, that seeks to intensify influx control.

According to Mr Popo Molefe, national secretary of the UDF, there are two conditions for an organisation to affiliate to the Front.

It must:

- * Support the UDF declaration
- * Work outside government created structures

The UDF declaration:

This is a widely-worded document consisting primarily of a rejection of apartheid in its traditional and restructured forms. It commits the UDF to work towards unity in opposing restructured apartheid, particularly as it is manifest in the constitution and Koornhof Bills. The declaration sets as its goal a 'united, democratic South Africa based on the will of the people' and an end to 'economic and other forms of exploitation.'

The UDF has not formulated a detailed constitutional and economic policy.

Working outside government-created structures:

The phrase 'Government-created structures' refers to homeland governments, community councils, Parliament etc. UDF officials have described this condition as 'flexible.' It is not a hard and fast rule that would be used to exclude, for example, community leaders in rural areas who had traditionally used official structures, such as village councils, to resist forced removals.

'Our criteria are that an organisation must not, in its use of platforms and structures, become part of the oppressive system,' said Mr Molefe. Each case, he said, would have to be evaluated on its merits.

However it seems clear that the UDF will not accept participation in homeland governments or in central government structures created under the new constitution.

The structure of the UDF

The UDF has a decentralised federal structure with five established Regions: Transvaal, Natal, Border, Western and Eastern Cape. Plans are also afoot to establish regional structures in the Northern Cape and Orange Free State.

Affiliation to the UDF is open to organisations only. Individuals who wish to join can only do so by becoming involved in 'area committees,' which, together with organisations, are represented on a Regional General Council.

All regions are linked by a National General Council consisting of representatives from different regional organisations. Area Committees are not represented on the NGC, giving organisations a significantly stronger role in the highest decision-making structures.

It is also the stated intention of the UDF to give greater weight to larger affiliated organisations, known as 'main-line' organisations. However a formula to give effect to this decision is still to be finalised.

A national conference will be held every two years at which executive members will be elected. The first national conference co-incided with the official launching of the UDF on August 20, 1983.

Would the Black Sash be welcome in the UDF?

There has been some debate within the UDF, particularly in the Western Cape, over whether the Sash, 'a middle-class organisation of white women' should be accepted as an affiliate. However it appears likely that a majority of regions would support Sash's affiliation.

Said Mr Molefe: The history of the Black Sash shows that it is an organisation that has played a significant role in the struggle against injustice in South Africa. It has been shown to have a very profound insight into legislation affecting black people, and has demonstrated a strong commitment in defending the victims of these laws. The Black Sash has also played a significant role in squatter and relocation issues. We regard the Black Sash as one of the most informed organisations and it has won itself a place in the hearts and minds of the majority of South Africans opposed to injustice.'

Mr Molefe was well aware of the present debate within Sash on affiliation to the UDF.

He said the UDF had been formed as a wide Front to oppose the constitution and Koornhof Bills as effectively as possible. 'Of course we would like organisations to affiliate to strengthen this objective. But we understand that different organisations have different internal dynamics and that for this reason they may not see their way clear to affiliating at this stage.'

Affiliation, he said, was not a pre-requisite for participation in UDF campaigns. 'While affiliation would be an advantage, the UDF does not regard it as a priority. Our major priority is co-operation with various organisations in our campaigns.'



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