



The United Democratic Front: a point of departure?

By Dr Sidney Luckett

“Look, when we founded the UDF, we had never in our wildest dreams expected that events would take off in the way they did. What happened was beyond everybody's expectations.” (Azhar Cachalia)¹

Mass anti-Apartheid Resistance

Table Mountain together with all its streams is a metaphor for the UDF; there are many streams that flow from the peaks of the mountain, streams that have come together to form the rivers that run into the sea, some have been hidden for decades, if not centuries. Likewise, the political streams were occluded from most UDF activists during the formation and ongoing development of the UDF; only the rivers were visible to all. Many of them are not discussed in this article because they are only dimly seen, if seen at all, by myself

Has the UDF got anything to teach us in our current context? A context in which the ANC² government has betrayed the vision of the Freedom Charter: *South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white*. Both the ANC, and the multinationals have prevented the poor – South African nationals and immigrants and refugees alike from fulfilling their capabilities within the borders of the South African state.

Because of the betrayal of the poor in South Africa, especially marginalized youth and women, there is currently a widespread longing for the revival of the UDF, with the hope that this might lead to the creation of a political party, capable of replacing the ANC, that is committed to the founding aims of the UDF; “a government based on the will of the people (...) the people themselves must govern, a single South Africa free from racial, ethnic and sexual divisions and free from economic exploitation”³.

Many books and articles about the UDF, and the context in which it operated, have been written⁴. My motive for writing this essay is not to critique, nor even to survey this literature. It is to give my thoughts about the ‘UDF as a point of departure’ for thinking about a way forward for a more free and just South(ern) Africa. My thoughts on this were formed primarily through my involvement in the Christian organisations that joined the UDF, as well

¹ van Kessel, p2)

² The African National Congress, one of the world's first liberation movements; was founded in 1912 as an elitist organization to unite the indigenous African tribes, against the British colonial territories (Cape and Natal) and the Boer republics, (Transvaal and the Orange Free State)

³ United Democratic Front (Western Cape) Declaration. (Personal files)

⁴ Jeremy Seekings (2000), Tom Lodge (1983) and Ineke van Kessel (2000) on the UDF as well as Josette Cole's Crossroads (1987) on Crossroads, provide the context for much of the UDF's struggle against Apartheid.

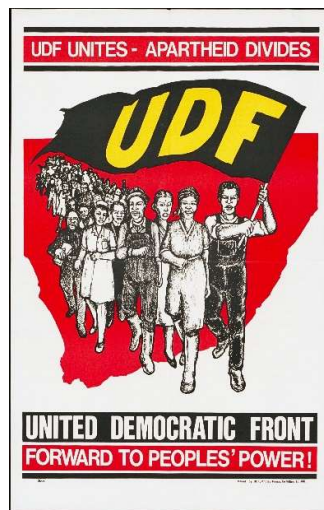
as serving on the UDF (Western Cape) executive. Added, is my memory of my involvement in an underground unit of the Western Cape Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) command⁵.

This article has a brief introduction to the UDF, “The UDF Unites, Apartheid Divides”, then a chronology of the formation, consolidation, and dissolution of the UDF. I conclude with a reflection, “Another Kairos moment?”, on the contemporary conjuncture of social conditions in South(ern) Africa.

For the history of the UDF, primarily of the Western Cape region, I draw largely on documents and articles in progressive newspapers written during that period as well as on my own copies of documents from that period.

There were three broad thrusts that together contributed to the downfall of the apartheid regime: a mass movement, international solidarity and an armed struggle. These three were intertwined within an ‘ideology’ of freedom, in which religion, notably the Christian and Islamic religions, played a significant role⁶.

I was closely involved in the Crossroads informal settlement on the edge of Cape Town in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As a priest in the Anglican church, I got to know senior and long-standing members of the ANC (although I didn’t know this when I started working there) as well as the young men and boys – sometimes referred to as ‘com tsotis’ – involved in ongoing battles against Apartheid functionaries, the police, army and administration board officials, who enforced the oppressive and humiliating conditions that were part of black South Africans’ everyday lives. This soon led to my involvement in the UDF in the Western Cape and later in the underground structures of MK’s Western Cape command.



⁵ I kept no notes of the decisions and activities of this unit for obvious reasons.

⁶ The battle for ideological hegemony within these religions is a topic that needs a separate article and will only be briefly alluded to in this paper.

“The UDF Unites Apartheid Divides”

The UDF was a broad-based anti-apartheid coalition⁷ of organizations,

conceived of as a transitional front, not a political party, nor a rival to already established liberation organisations. Consequently, initial programmatic statements were usually limited to a few key principles [nonracialism, non-sexism and a government based on the will of the people] intended to unite the broadest of social spectrums. (Lodge, 1989: 210)

The popular slogan, ‘The UDF Unites Apartheid Divides’ was the signature of the UDF, but it was a ‘signifier’ that galvanized action across classes and religions that involved a wide range of organisations because it could be widely interpreted. Who did the UDF unite? This question is explored below.

In a recent Eid-Mubarak message (23/4/2023), [Farid Esack](#) mentioned that the mass democratic movement had a lasting impact on the South African religious space,

This country of ours that we often have reason to cry for, is the most amazing country in the world in terms of celebrating and protecting religious and cultural diversity. I have always maintained - and I drop all pretences to modesty - with considerable authority, that South Africa is the freest country in the world to be a Muslim - with no consideration for what kind of Muslim you want to be. ...

That's it. No country in the world is as just and embracing as ours when it comes to religious minorities. And this is not due to any power - real - or imagined that these communities wield. It is because of the nature and the ideology of our mass democratic movement that we built, and how we struggled to secure this when we started building a post-Apartheid.

However, there were divisions in the Western Cape region of the UDF that reflected the divisions of society that it endeavoured, but was not completely able, to overcome.

Unique to the Western Cape was the harsh enforcement of the Group Areas Act that was a corner stone of an exploitative migrant labour system, which permitted (select) Africans⁸ to work in the White cities and farms but forbade their families to live with them. Another factor which contributed to the uniqueness of the UDF in the Western Cape, was the high percentage of Muslims in the religious composition of the social make-up.

Coming Together: 1981 to August 1983

Central to the impetus for the formation the UDF in the Western Cape, was the cycles of resistance by ‘illegal’ Africans to the harsh enforcement of Section 10 of the Group Areas Act.

⁷ Lodge refers to it as a ‘federation linking a large and heterodox collection of organisations’ (1989:205)

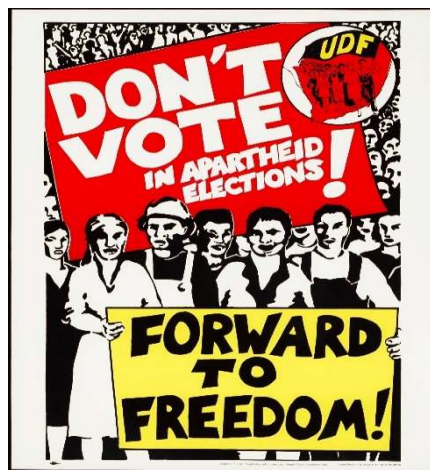
⁸ Throughout this article racialised ‘population groups’ are capitalised as they are in the Population Registration Act and its subsequent amendments.

The [evictions and the resistance reached a peak during the Winter of 1981](#) when, in one swoop, about 1,500 women were deported to their 'homeland', the Transkei and over 120 toddlers were left behind in the chaos of the arrests. These raids were covered daily by the English language press in South Africa; headlines such as "Hundreds Held in Pass Swoop" (Cape Times 16/06/1981) and a later "Woman Recounts 'Nightmare Trip'" (Cape Times 1/09/81) filled the pages of the local press. The event also attracted headline attention in the USA and in Western Europe; it was covered in the New York Times, with the headline, "[Uprooted Cape Town Blacks Doomed to Wander](#)" (21/10/81) and the Washington Post, "[South African Police Arrest 1500 Squatters Outside Cape Town](#)" (21/10/81) which contributed to the [growing international solidarity](#) against apartheid.⁹

A year later in an attempt to co-opt Indians and coloureds to support white minority rule, President PW Botha introduced an amendment to the Constitution; a Tricameral parliament, in which there were to be separate 'houses' for each of the minority 'population groups', each with the power to determine laws relating to their own 'racial group' together with the Black Local Authorities to govern the African townships.

Alongside these Constitutional changes, Pieter Koornhof, the (euphemistically named) Minister of Cooperation and Development, introduced the 'Settlement and Orderly Removal of Black Person's Bills', widely dubbed the 'disorderly bills'.

Throughout the country resistance was building against the Tricameral parliament and the Black Local Authorities. The anti-South African Indians Council (anti-SAIC) committee was established in 1981 to oppose elections for the Indians House of Delegates. It had a hugely successful campaign – supported by over 100 organizations across South Africa and less than 10% of Indians voted. At an anti-SAIC congress in January 1982, convened to consolidate the 'victory and gains' of the campaign, the UDF was born. Allan Boesak, then president of the World Alliance Reformed Churches, was invited to address the congress. He called for a 'united front' of organisations to protest the government's constitutional proposals and the 'Koornhof Bills'.



⁹ "Squatters: US Faith Wiped Out" (Cape Argus 22/08/81). (Personal files)

Coincidentally – was it a coincidence? – on January 8, Oliver Tambo, ANC president in exile, reiterated the ANC's call of the previous year, for 1983 to be "[A Year of United Action](#)" in which the ANC was "to organise all democratic forces into one front for national liberation"

Almost immediately the Disorderly Bills Action Committee (DBAC) was formed to campaign against the Koornhof bills (and the Constitutional changes). The Cape Areas Housing Action Committee (CAHAC), a Coloured working-class organisation, which had been formed in response to rent increases in Mitchell's Plain, was central to the formation of the DBAC. Its secretary, Trevor Manuel had attended the anti-SAIC Congress and with others, saw an opportunity for the DBAC to be a forerunner of a UDF. This aspiration is evident in a Draft Declaration circulated by the DBAC interim committee which clearly reflects the influence of the Freedom Charter (1955)

We representatives from trade unions and civic, women's, student, youth, religious and sports organizations in the Western Cape hereby declare:

That South Africa belongs to all who live in it,

That the government must be based on the will of the people and that the people themselves must govern,

That we believe in a single South Africa free from racial, ethnic and sexual divisions and free from economic exploitation, with a common citizenship for all.

In accordance with these beliefs, we reject the Constitutional and Koornhof Bills,

(....)

We therefore, re-emphasise our commitment to unity in struggle to a united non-racial and democratic South Africa; and we resolve to:

Reject and resist the government's Constitutional and Koornhof Bills

Form a united front to oppose these Bills,

And we pledge to fight together side by side of freedom in our lifetime.¹⁰

However, the meeting erupted in chaos when the Cape Action League (CAL)¹¹ objected to the presence of Black Sash and NUSAS members, calling them the 'Wives, Sons and Daughters of the Bourgeoisie'. A vigorous exchange followed in which chairs were scattered¹² and from then on, the DBAC became notorious as an "ineffective talk shop bogged down by

¹⁰ Draft Declaration (Personal Files)

¹¹ CAL, together with AZAPO, AZASM, SOYA and other 'associate organisations, formed the National Forum a Democratic Anti-Racist organisation based on the principles: Anti-racism, anti-Imperialism and anti-sexism; Anti-collaboration with the ruling class and all its allies and political instruments; Independent working-class organisation free from bourgeois influences.

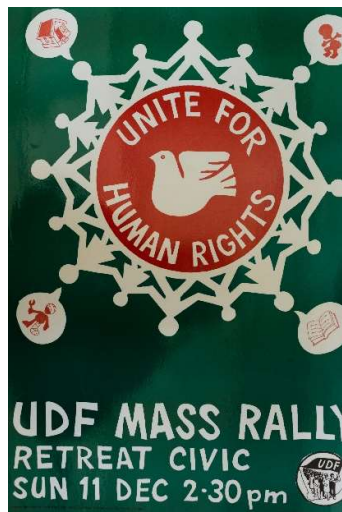
¹² Trevor Manuel, then the SG of the Cape Housing Action Committee (CAHAC) struggled manfully (the male prefix is deliberate!) to maintain some semblance of order but until I said something that exacerbated the growing disorder, upon which he shouted 'Luckett f&*k off' it is not a meeting that I will easily forget!

ideological and personal differences”. Consequently, it became known as the ‘Disorderly Committee’.

Following the collapse of the DBAC within months of its founding, the Charterist community organisations and religious organisations came together in a workshop to discuss the formation of the UDF in the Western Cape. This led to a launch conference in Mitchell’s Plain, a Coloured area on the outskirts of Cape Town attended by delegates, representing about 400¹³ community organisations – women’s, youth and religious, as well as some trade unions and sports bodies. At the end of the conference a mass rally was held to officially launch the UDF. At this rally messages from Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were read together with messages from international figures and organisations¹⁴, expressing their solidarity with the UDF in its struggle against Apartheid.

Consolidation: August 1983 to July 1985

The UDF consolidated its position as the leader in the struggle against Apartheid through its involvement in intertwined ideological ‘sites of struggle’ and its solidarity with the African “illegals” who were resisting the brutal influx control measures in the Western Cape. This section focusses on the ‘site of struggle’ in the Christian religion, the struggle for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the ‘people’, and, on/within the military bastion of Apartheid through the End Conscription Campaign



Struggle within the Churches

Within the churches, the issue of justice revolved around the stance on Apartheid taken by the mainline English language churches (Anglican¹⁵, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and

¹³ If branches of organisations are counted separately, the number rises to 600 (The number embedded in popular memory).

¹⁴ The UN Special Committee Against Apartheid, SWAPO, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, The Irish Labour Party and others were listed in the National Launch booklet (Personal files)

¹⁵ Formally, the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (CPSA)

Catholic)¹⁶ Although these English-language churches were largely critical of Apartheid on traditional liberal-humanist grounds, none of them called for any form of civil disobedience against the regime. However, there were notable priests in these churches who did get involved in high profile civil disobedience to bring attention to the evils of Apartheid. Earliest amongst these was [\(Father\) Trevor Huddleston](#); this tradition was picked up by [Desmond Tutu](#), one of South Africa's most outstanding critics of Apartheid, from his early days as a priest to his, later, more globally recognised, General Secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) followed by his role as Archbishop of Cape Town. Also in this tradition was [David Russell](#) who brought attention to the plight of Africans who were forcibly removed to distant locations in the 'homelands'. These churches did not officially support the UDF on the (understandable) grounds that church members had a wide range of political affiliations. However, even 'though they all condemned the Apartheid policy, the English language churches at the time took a conservative position against the SACC's call for an end to 'unjust rule' through the 'removal of the present rulers of our country'¹⁷. However, a press statement issued by Peter Storey and Philip Russel, leaders of the Methodist and Anglican churches respectively, states that neither church had been '*approached nor has either given its support at any time*' to this call by the SACC. Philip Russel concurrently sent out a 'Pastoral Letter' to be read from the pulpit at all services on Sunday 16th June 1985. It begins with the words, 'June 16, 1976, belongs to the history of our land... Since 1976 June 16 has been observed as a day of prayer for the ending of all injustices and oppressions ...' and proceeds to argue against the SACC's call for the 'removal of the present rulers of our country.

The implications of ceasing to pray for the government and instead praying for its removal are immense ..It would mean that the thrust and wording of all prayers related to the State in both the South African Prayer Book and Liturgy '75 would have to be altered.'¹⁸

However, within the churches, there was a liberationist trajectory. In the Anglican church this trajectory was pursued by the staff of the Anglican Board of Social Responsibility (BSR), the Catholic Justice and Peace (CJP) and individual clergy from other denominations, which were influenced by the South American [liberation theology](#). These theologians established 'communidades de base', small Christian groups, which were officially part of the Catholic church (but freed from ecclesiastical dogma), a model which the BSR loosely followed in developing a network of parish-based Social Action Groups which engaged with local manifestations of neglect and oppression by the government.

The BSR staff, together with a few diocesan clergy, also initiated the Canon Calata Fellowship (CCF), named after James Calata, a priest who ministered (and was banned) in Cradock for 40 years during which time he became the Secretary General of the ANC and in that capacity

¹⁶ The biggest denomination the Zion Christian Church a syncretistic African independent church, was apolitical.

¹⁷ Desmond Tutu was the then General Secretary of the SACC, and Manas Buthelezi its President.

¹⁸ The Western Province Council of Churches (WPCC) compromised by organising a 'June 16th Memorial Service' together with a 'theological rationale and a call to prayer for the end to unjust rule'

launched the ANC's [Programme of Action](#). The purpose in using his name was to popularize, and legitimize the Freedom Charter, amongst Anglican clergy.¹⁹

A Christian organization The Ecumenical Action Movement (TEAM) was formed to work in the ecumenical space unconstrained by denominational dogma. Together with a Christian youth movement, the Inter-church Youth (ICY), which brought together the Students Union for Christian Action (SUCA), the Young Christian Students (YCS), the local youth groups, were founder members of the Western Cape region of the UDF.

The most significant ideological struggle 'though was within the Dutch Reformed Church alliance. It was significant because it went to the heart of the theological justification of Apartheid. Allan Boesak, who grew up in the 'dorp' of Kakamas, studied to become a minister in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and went on to study in the Netherlands. On his return to South Africa, he became politically active within the church and wider South African society. In 1982 Boesak was elected President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the following year was closely involved in the formation of the UDF, of which he became a patron. It was however, in the WARC that he motivated the WARC and the WCC to declare Apartheid a 'heresy', and in so doing undermining the ideological apparatus of the South African regime.

These examples of ideological struggles, in the mainline Christian churches, for a free and just South Africa were sharpened by the [Kairos document](#), which [Albert Nolan](#), a prominent Catholic priest and liberation theologian, and Frank Chikane, then Director of the Institute of Contextual Theology (ICT), with other theologians, published in 1985, as a 'grey' discussion document on a critique of the complacency of the establishment churches. It gathered widespread support amongst progressive clergy and theologians across South Africa (Kairos Theologians, 1986) and was later published by the ICT.

[Squatter Camp Struggles](#)

The Crossroads 'Mayor' Johnson Ngxobongwana led a large army of 'Witdoeke', (migrant workers from the Transkei and Ciskei who distinguished themselves by wearing white 'doeke' around their heads), in raids to drive out the youth in Crossroads as well as the squatters who had erected zinc and plastic shelters in KTC. It is well known that the Apartheid government in its war against the ANC and the UDF, actively supported and recruited homeland leaders and tribal elders. However, the case of the 'Witdoeke' was more complex since Ngxobongwana the then president of the Western Cape Civic Association (WCCA), an affiliate of the UDF, proclaimed, "We are part and parcel of the local authority system, and we did not achieve anything by being boycotters" (New Era, November 1987)

In this period, KTC became the focal point of resistance to the pass laws. One of the apartheid regime's final attempts to enforce the Group Areas Act, was establishment of 'Site C', Khayelitsha. Although the UDF launched a major campaign, 'Asiyi KhayeLitsha', (We

¹⁹ From the constitution of the Canon Calata Fellowship (undated, personal collection).

Won't Go To Khayelitsha) against the removal of the KTC 'squatters' and other illegal African shack dwellers, many chose to move to this 'new home'.



Men who had been evicted from the Langa hostels because they did not have the 'dompasse' to be in Cape Town, gathered in the open space near Crossroads

This in turn resulted in bitter fights in the formal townships when 'comTsotsis' started 'necklacing' those suspected of moving to Khayelitsha. I recall one occasion when Alan Boesak and I went to address youth about the necklacing on behalf of the UDF. In the hall of the Anglican church in Gugulethu, after Boesak had implored the crowd of township youth, a 'com tsotsi' spoke up saying to Boesak, 'rev, you don't need to worry, we don't necklace people in the church halls.

The squatters in KTC resisted the daily onslaught of the Admin Board officials (protected by the SADF & SAP). During the stormy winter nights, they would erect flimsy shelters constructed of branches and plastic only to have to watch the Admin Board officials tear them down the next morning.

Throughout the squatter struggles in the African areas, the Black Sash provided legal support and highlighted these atrocities via parliament and the Cape Town English-language newspapers. But their Capetonian version of liberalism had limits. One night when the police under the command of a senior officer started encircling the entire KTC camp with rolled barbed wire fencing, I immediately got on my motorbike and headed to a hall in Claremont where I knew the Black Sash were holding a meeting to brief white Capetonians of the KTC struggle. I rushed in to announce the imminent threat, and urged anyone who was willing to follow me to KTC. When we arrived there, we encircled the squatters to protect them from the threat of teargassing. However, the commanding officer warned all Whites in the group that they were breaking the law by being in an African township and ordered them to disperse. With a few exceptions, the women who followed me from the Black Sash meeting, together with a PFP parliamentarian, complied with the command, leaving the squatters even more vulnerable. Those who remained were teargassed. Because of the suffocation, we all scattered, and many injured themselves by running into the barbed wire. At that moment, I

understood the refusal of CAL to be part of a front that included ‘members of the White bourgeoisie’. That was the end of KTC.

Following an upsurge of violent and non-violent resistance across South Africa, the apartheid government, under PW Botha declared a [partial State of Emergency on 20 July 1985](#). Media coverage was restricted, curfew times and movement of citizens, meetings of anti-Apartheid organisations were imposed and the detentions of over 2500 UDF executive members, and other leaders under the Internal Security Act which provided for up to 180 days in solitary confinement. Under PW Botha, the apartheid regime would go on to use State of Emergencies as a normalised governing tactic as it allowed the state to ‘legitimately’ use not only the South African Police (SAP), but also the South African Defence Force (SADF), to violently repress any resistance against the state.

Media and ‘Hearts and Minds’

There was regular coverage of UDF activities in the Cape Times and the Cape Argus and intense coverage by *Grassroots* and, its rural sister, *Saamstaan* newspapers. So much so that, ‘It used to be said jokingly that the United Democratic Front in the Western Cape was more media than movement’ (van Kessel: 224)

Launched in 1980 as “the Peoples Paper”, *Grassroots* hit the streets regularly with articles about the everyday struggles of ordinary people and after the launch of the UDF, it carried news of the UDF. It, along with an in-depth journal, *New Era* as well as the *UDF News* and *UDF Update*, the official mouth pieces of the UDF, were important tools in the struggle against Apartheid. Their aim was to win the ‘common sense’ (Gramsci’s term for ‘ideological hegemony’, as set out by [Stuart Hall here](#) and [here](#)) of the Coloured working class. They achieved this by covering local issues, such as the rent increases, electricity, and water rates. van Kessel notes that the “Grassroots staff members did not perceive themselves primarily as journalists but as media workers with the mission to promote and sustain collective action”. She adds that “addressing community issues was not an end in itself” but, through engagement with communities on their local issues, “they awaken an interest in and commitment to the Freedom Charter or a Marxist revolutionary praxis” (van Kessel: 225).

However, while Grassroots did contribute to winning an ideological struggle against the Apartheid government’s attempt to co-opt Coloureds to its Tri-cameral parliament, by the admission of one of the workers,

In trying to guide its readership from Coloured consciousness to both non-racialism and worker consciousness, no concessions were made to accommodate Coloured identity. Many activists at the time would have been adamant that there was no such thing as ‘Coloured’ identity. In Grassroots mirrored the UDF Western Cape at large: it offered a political home for Coloured people, but at the price of denying or effacing their cultural baggage. (van Kessel: 253)

Interviewed in 1991, Jonathan de Vries, publicity secretary on the UDF Western Cape Regional Executive Committee, gave a related critical assessment of this class view of people and politics,

We were all Marxists, then. We were building the workers' revolution; we were going to perform the socialist transformation of South Africa. People were important only in so far as they were useful in this process. There was an enormous lack of humility. People were a means to an end ..the UDF became the playground for young people, many with a university education, many having cars so they were mobile; they became the operators of the UDF. (van Kessel: 259)

In spite of De Vries's criticism, his overall judgment of the UDF remained positive; for the first time it gave Coloureds a political home, "which they did not have before, it gave them a sense of belonging." Curiously, however, in this political home, De Vries notes "there was no place for 'coloureds' as such, but only for 'blacks.'" In order to be accepted as black, Coloured identity had to be forsworn.". De Vries later regretted his role in this, "I do believe that there is a 'Coloured identity,' and that the UDF should have tried to accommodate that identity, rather than denying it. But the liberation culture was an African culture; the songs were either military songs or church hymns. There was no incorporation of Coloured identity in the UDF. That could not even be discussed." (van Kessel: 256)

Van Kessel records that Wilfred Rhodes, CAHAC chair and one of the deputy chairs of the UDF (WC) executive, took a different position on the identity issue.

After more than ten years of involvement in organizing civic associations, Wilfred Rhodes, one of the civic activists who had a working-class background as a weaver in the textile industry, gave a mixed verdict. As he recalled, the initiative to build community organizations came from students at the University of the Western Cape and other postsecondary institutions: "The problem with the activists is that they did not take the people along with them. That is a problem when working with students, they want to be where the excitement is. When the activists moved on, they did not leave much behind. There were no people to take over the work. (van Kessel:247)

However, because of their activist orientation the *Grassroots* staff mixed in with the working classes and was therefore able to cover the actions of the Apartheid state in a way which the mainline newspapers were not able to do. An example of this was the cross racialised [linking of the struggles of the homeless](#).



The New Era front cover of 'Mama' Mildred Holo placed on the communist flag background, is an example of the Marxist ideology that the Grassroots staff referred to by Jonathan de Vries

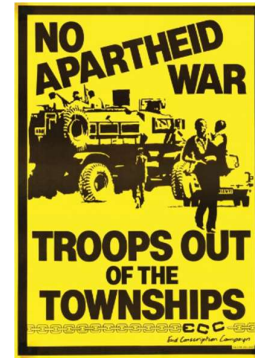
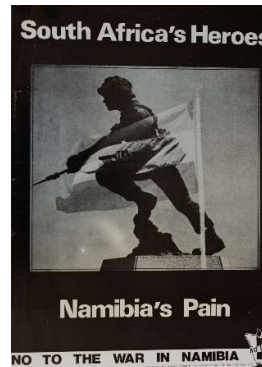
Nonetheless there is some legitimacy in the complaints by African comrades in the UDF executive that more could have been done to highlight the conditions in Crossroads and KTC, where major conflicts with the police and occupying SADF units were taking place. Throughout these conflicts, members of the UDF executive, who lived in the adjacent townships (Gugulethu and Nyanga) were present when the battles were most intense.

End Conscription Campaign

In reaction this violent repression, the resistance to military conscription by young Whites grew significantly. As a direct result of the SADF presence in the townships the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), an affiliate of the UDF, which was formed in 1983²⁰ to campaign against compulsory military service, held a "Troops Out of the Townships" rally. The rally was preceded by a three week fast by three young Capetonians, including Ivan Toms, who had established a clinic in Crossroads and witnessed first-hand the injuries deaths caused by the Witdoeke, supported by the SADF.

At the same time young men and women in the African townships and Coloured areas, staged spontaneous protests and the UDF leadership (now no longer able to act visibly) lost touch with these spontaneous developments. Because of the excessive violence used by the SAP and SADF forces, requests for Archbishop Tutu to 'lead' the protests were sent via the BSR.

²⁰ It was founded by the Black Sash in response to a motion by their then president, Sheenah Duncan condemning the South Africa's occupation of Namibia and the civil war that it was waging within the borders of South Africa



It was in this context that the Mass Democratic Movement was formed and launched a Defiance Campaign. This was shortly to be followed by the Churches' Standing for the Truth Campaign.

Mass Democratic Movement: June 1986 to 1990

After the banning of the UDF in 1987, the recently formed Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) worked with the remnants of the UDF member organisations to launch the Defiance Campaign

In the wake of the arrest and detention of almost the entire national and area UDF executive members during the first State of Emergency and the banning of the UDF, Colin Jones, Dean of St George's Cathedral, made the cathedral available as a home for resistance activities. Meetings were held there, and historic marches started there. The first was an all-women's march – the beating of the women with sjamboks by police exposed their violence to white Capetonians going about their usual city business²¹. This was followed by the '[Purple Rain Protest](#)', so-called because of the purple-coloured dye sprayed on thousands of protesters from a water cannon, as they emerged from the cathedral and other buildings in the vicinity.

Finally, the march of 35000 at the end of January 1990 was the 'last straw' that brought down the walls of Apartheid. The march was led by Archbishop Tutu and the Mayor of Cape Town from the top of Adderley Street and Greenmarket square to the City Hall under the banner of "Peace in Our City". Many of the marchers first attended a brief service in St George's Cathedral and were well-disciplined and peaceful. The march had been prohibited by the police²², in terms of the Internal Security Act, but because the mayor had agreed to co-lead the March, he needed the assurance from Cheryl Carolus and me, on behalf of Archbishop Tutu, that "every precaution shall be taken to ensure the safety and protection of the public, traffic and participants"²³. At the 11th hour the police backed off.

²¹ A businessman, seeing this, in a fit of outrage threw his briefcase at the police!

²² The office of the Regional Commissioner sent this letter to Mr Sidney Luckett, Church House dated the 29/01/1990: "It has come to my attention that mass gatherings are planned by the so-called "Mass Democratic Movement" to take place in the Central Cape Town Area ... and that you are involved in the organising of these gatherings etc

²³ A letter from the City Administrator addressed to Ms C Carolus and Mr S Luckett dated 30/1/1990 (private collection).

Standing for the Truth Campaign

In February 1988, following the banning of 17 anti-Apartheid organisations, church leaders led a march on parliament. This heralded a new phase in the Church's role in the struggle for a just and democratic South Africa. During that month Church leaders (of the SACC member churches as well as of the Catholic church) met to consider the deepening crisis and concluded that what was required was a concerted joint effort by the churches to develop effective non-violent strategies and actions to bring an end to Apartheid. In order to give effect to this decision the church leaders summoned an 'Emergency Convocation of Churches' (30-31 May 1988) attended by 230 delegates from 22 denominations, 21 regional councils of churches and 17 Christian organizations. The Convocation resolved to launch a national Standing for the Truth Campaign. However, it was not until the hunger strike by State of Emergency detainees on March 1989 and the subsequent launch of the Defiance Campaign that the SFT got off the ground in the Western Cape. A SFT forum was convened by the WPCC (5th August) consisting of the church and para-church structures such as TEAM, BSR, CJP, CCF, SUCA, and local church Social Action Groups. Together with the MDM, short-term goals were set which included 'breaking the 'fear of our people, with confidence to renew mass struggles' and 'securing the moral high ground by acting in a peaceful, non-violent way'.

The first act was defiance of the 'separate amenities' legislation, which prohibited 'non-whites' from using amenities set aside for 'whites only', was the beach defiance under the banner "All God's Beaches for All God's People". A Blouberg beach nonracial picnic was dispersed by police using batons beat the peaceful protesters. Because of the publicity about the beatings, Archbishop Tutu led a beach occupation at the Strand while the police lined up along the sand dunes and never interfered with the gathered picnickers.

This was followed by a placard demonstration and then as part for the MDM, the Purple Rain march, and the "Peace in our City March" described above.

The integration of the MDM, SFT as well as underground structures of the ANC is illustrated by a message from cadres of the underground units of the ANC to

...our sisters and brothers in the churches who have taken their place in the Defiance Campaign. Through the Standing for the Truth Campaign together with other organized forces within the churches you have made an important contribution to the Defiance Campaign...

- The spirit of active defiance of unjust laws has been legitimized within and spread throughout the churches.
- Not only has the Defiance Campaign unbanned the UDF, it has also begun the process of unbanning the ANC. Out. Flags and banners have been openly displayed and even Vlok has had to concede in parliament that the govt. cannot prevent this.
- ... De Klerk has freed some of our leaders, who on their release, held a press conference in the name of the ANC.

This spirit of defiance, accompanied by mass mobilisation, ... has considerably deepened the political crisis facing the apartheid regime ...²⁴

At the same time, it became clear to both the ANC and the apartheid regime that the armed conflict had reached a stalemate. Hence to avoid further bloodshed the issue of negotiation was put on the table with the release of Mandela and the unbanning of all anti-Apartheid political formations.



Nelson Mandela the morning after his release with Archbishop Tutu at Bishopscourt

To the dismay of many involved in the UDF, the regime and the ANC agreed to demobilise their respective armies; while for others, this was a welcome development. However, as a condition of the (premature) initiation of formal negotiations, the ANC also agreed to demobilise the mass civil disobedience actions of the MDM.²⁵

A Kairos moment for Southern Africa?

Is the present conjuncture of socio-political forces another Kairos moment? Described in the original Kairos document as,

[a] moment of grace and opportunity, the favourable time in which God issues a challenge to decisive action. It is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass by, the loss for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable.

This document was primarily a call to the churches of South Africa to take decisive action against Apartheid. However, as Gramsci noted and Stuart Hall highlighted in his piece '[Gramsci and Us](#)', "a crisis is not an immediate event but a process [that] can last for a long time." Hall also makes the important point that Gramsci does not provide doctrinal formulae to be followed (as do Marxist-Leninists such as the South African Communist Party, in a manner similar to the doctrinal creeds of fundamentalist religious believers). Instead Gramsci "directs our attention unswervingly ... to what is specific and different about this moment".

Following Gramsci then, the 'Kairos' demands that we consider the global conjuncture of the 'forces' that together constitute the this 'dangerous time' in the Southern African region.

²⁴ Pamphlet headed 'DEFIANCE CAMPAIGN AND "NEGOTIATION"' (undated, personal collection)

²⁵ It is significant to note that Chris Hani was not party to those talks since he, like other MK leaders, had not been given indemnity to enter South Africa.

There are many but, arguably, three forces that are critical for contemporary Southern Africa are: the destruction of ecosystems which sustain planetary life, the oppression of women, and ethno-nationalism²⁶. Locally extreme forms of these manifest as, '[climate change](#)', femicide and xenophobia.

Many ex-UDF activists, disillusioned by the corruption that has penetrated the ANC and seeped into all levels of government, clamour for the revival of the organs of governance that were initiated by the UDF (as articulated by Murphy Morobe)

rudimentary organs of people's power that have begun to emerge in South Africa, (street committees, defence committees, shop-steward structures, student representative councils, parent/teacher/student associations) represent the beginnings of the kind of democracy that we are striving for ... Without the fullest organisational democracy, we will never be able to achieve conscious, active and unified participation of the majority of the people, and in particular the working class, in our struggle. ²⁷

However, given the radically changed global conjuncture of forces referred to above, we should look not to the past, but to contemporary examples for inspiration; but not as models, because the contexts are so different.

Many South Africans, including some who were part of the UDF, point to the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, especially 'Occupy Wall Street', the [Spanish Indignadas](#), and the Lebanese '[Hela Ho Revolution](#)' as sources of inspiration. Common to all of these were large occupations or gatherings in significant public spaces and the use of social media for communication.

World-renowned sociologist, [Manuel Castells](#), who had joined the anti-Franco [Worker's Front of Catalonia](#) (itself inspired by liberation theology and the Cuban Revolution) initially embraced the use of social media in the Arab Spring and the other revolutions/uprisings as in his [Networks of Outrage and Hope](#). However he added a cautionary note, "...at the end of the day, the dreams of social change [through social movements] will have to be watered down, and channelled through the political institutions, either by reform or revolution". Of the above-mentioned movements it is only the Indignadas that have channelled the energy of the social movement into a political party, [Podemos](#) .

²⁶ Trump's 'Make America Great Again', Putinism in Russia, Hindutva-ism in India and Erdogan's Turkification are the most extreme forms.

²⁷ Murphy Morobe, Acting Publicity Secretary of the UDF. (1987) reported in New Frame (2/6/2020)

In [From one Arab Spring to another, Gilbert Achcar](#), is more sceptical in his assessment of the Arab Spring. He argues that it had “two counter-revolutionary deeply reactionary poles”, which marginalised the “revolutionary current”. However, he concludes his article with a more optimistic note on the Sudanese, Algerian and the [peaceful Lebanese revolution](#), in which women formed the core of the uprisings in Beirut and Tripoli.



Mother and daughter in Beirut



Martyrs Square draped with the photo of one of the martyrs of the uprising, Beirut



Addressing the crowd gathered at parliament in Beirut



Photos taken at night in the al-Nour Square, Tripoli Lebanon

Sadly, this hope has dissipated in Lebanon since the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic (February 2020 – February 2022) superseded only by the horrific [Beirut port explosion](#) in the middle of the pandemic (4th August 2020)

There are other sources of inspiration that are more deeply rooted organisationally than those mentioned above. The three that I have any knowledge of are the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), which has a [Facebook page](#) and its sister movement in the cities of Brazil, the [MTST](#); the coordinator of the latter is interviewed in [Struggles of the Roofless](#).

But I believe the standout inspiration, from which we in Southern Africa have much to learn, is the Kurdish Freedom Movement (KFM) in Kurdistan, an area which straddles four nation states; Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria

Rojava, the Kurdish area of northern Syria, caught the attention of major world news outlets when its defence units defeated ISIS (Daesh). Central to the KFM —an offspring of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK²⁸)— is Democratic Confederalism, a philosophy of governance that is practised both within, and across nation states combining direct (participatory) democracy

²⁸ There is much that has been written about the PKK but little is known about Mandela's support for it. In 1992, soon after he was released from Robben Island and before he was inaugurated as the first president of a democratic South Africa, he turned down the Atatürk Peace Prize that Turkey awarded him for his 'lifelong fight for freedom'. He said then that it was hypocritical of the Turkish regime to offer him this prize when it oppressed the Kurds, just as Africans had been oppressed under the Apartheid regime

(Öcalan, 2017, 2020; 2023) with women's freedom (Dirik, Öcalan, 2017) and ecological wholeness (Ayboga). The leader of the PKK, [Abdullah Öcalan](#), is languishing in solitary confinement in Imrali prison island, the Turkish equivalent of the Apartheid era's Robben Island.



Photos taken during the 'Long March Freedom for Öcalan, Luxembourg to Strasbourg, February 2019

Democratic Confederalism, is a networked form of local government that transcends national boundaries; it is based on the principles of direct democracy, women's freedom and ecological wholeness. The example of this organisational (networked) form of democracy together with the practice of KFM's foundational principles is an inspiration that could address the three intertwined forces I listed at the beginning of this concluding section: the destruction of ecosystems, the oppression of women, and ethno-nationalism.

The possibility of transcending the Southern African nation states with networks connecting towns and cities across the region, would defuse the xenophobia that is currently being stoked by South Africans who scapegoat 'amakwerekwere' (foreigners) as the cause of the destruction of their lives and livelihoods. It is such narrow ethno-nationalism that labels people as 'illegal' immigrants. Instead, following the arguments of David Graeber and David Wengrow on the [history of humanity](#), we should accept migration as a movement of humans that long preceded the establishment of (European imposed) nation states, and instead welcome [immigrants as co-creators in ecological and social solidarity](#).

Finally, regarding the oppression of women, [Dilar Dirik](#), a Kurdish feminist, argues, in her book [The Kurdish Women's Movement](#), that radical democracy, is "a praxis in which theory and the organisational manifestation unfold together". She argues that in the KFM, this praxis is led by women's creative struggles for autonomy (p.562).

Currently, in the wake of the murder of [Jina 'Mahsa' Amini](#), women across Iraq are mobilising against an oppressive regime. They are picking up the banner of freedom that the

[Kurdish Women's Protection Units \(YPJ\)](#) popularized in their defence of Rojava against ISIS:
Jin Jiyan Azadi (Woman, Life Freedom).

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