

THE UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT

There is a dispute about the origin of the United Democratic Front. The State alleges that it was formed on the instructions or at least at the instigation of Oliver Tambo, the leader of the ANC, who in his New Year's message on 8 January 1983 named 1983 the year of united action and issued a call that "the people" be organised "into strong mass democratic organisation" and that "all democratic forces" be organised "into one front for national liberation".

Exhs AAH.2, ABA.33, AAH.1.

The accused on the other hand allege that the UDF had its origin in a call by Dr Alan Boesak at the anti-S.A. Indian Council meeting on 23 January 1983. The accused say that this was not the first call for a front of anti-Government organisations. They deny that the ANC had anything to do with it.

We will revert to this dispute about the origin of the UDF later.

At the anti-SAIC meeting which was held in Johannesburg it was resolved to form a United Democratic Front to oppose the Government's "constitutional and reform proposals". Exh C.49. A consultative committee was formed to propagate the idea and it was widely debated in the Black, Coloured and Indian communities.

Amongst Blacks it was felt that the new constitution would cause a rift between these three communities of which the latter two now were to get representation in Parliament and the Blacks not. Black interests were to be represented in the Black local authorities which were to be linked to the homelands and in that way urban Blacks would obtain a vote, though not in central Parliament. The new constitution came at the time of the Koornhoff Bills. The Black Local Authorities Act we have mentioned. The Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill which used employment and approved accommodation as criteria for the right of urban residence was seen as creating division between urban and rural Blacks.

Those Blacks who were politically aware felt left out and the Black local authorities were seen as a token vote handed down to compensate for lack of Parliamentary representation.

The Coloured community was also in a state of heightened political awareness. They would again be represented in Parliament but in a separate chamber. The Labour Party which had for years refused to work within "the system" on 4 January 1983 decided to participate in the Tri-cameral Parliament.

The Indian community was also activated. The Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) was resurrected and at its anti-SAIC conference the idea of a United Front was propounded.

The seed of a United Front fell on fertile soil. The time was ripe.

As stated before, in May 1983 UDF Transvaal and UDF Natal were formed. The Front of the Western Cape followed in July 1983. After the national launch on 20 August 1983 the UDF Eastern Cape, Border, West Coast and South Cape regions were launched in December 1983 and January, April and July 1984 respectively.

The front consisted of a wide assortment of organisations with different interests. There were students and youth organisations, trade unions, civic associations, women's organisations, political organisations, the media and some religious, sports and social organisations. In the Transvaal each organisation was represented by two delegates while observers were also allowed to attend the regional general council. Though it was formed in May 1983 its executive was only appointed on 6 August 1983. Meanwhile a steering committee had been in charge.

On 30 and 31 July 1983 at Johannesburg representatives of the three then existing regions met and finalised plans for the national launch of the UDF on 20 August 1983. This group became known as the UDF National Interim Committee. It had to arrange the national launch in Cape Town and contact organisations in parts of South Africa falling outside the three existing regions and persuade them to attend the launch and to create regions.

The founding meeting of the UDF National (hereafter called the launch) consisted of two parts. First a conference was held which allegedly consisted of 2 000 delegates and observers from more than 500 organisations. This conference adopted a declaration, working principles and a number of resolutions.

The main policy of the UDF is set out in the declaration and that is also reflected in the objects clause of the working principles, but on a large number of ancillary matters the policy of the UDF was laid down in the resolutions.

The conference was followed by a mass rally said to have been attended by 12 000 people.

The proceedings of the conference and the rally were published in a booklet within some two months of the launch. This was widely distributed. It is exh A.1. The most important parts thereof are the declaration, working principles and resolutions.

The UDF is a front - as its name indicates - not a political party. It aims to join together a number of organisations for a specific purpose without thereby eliminating the individuality of each organisation. The organisations which join are called affiliates. They join the regions but the working principles provide for membership of national organisations which are not affiliated to regions. The working principles in clause 5.2 provide:

" All organisations which are prepared to commit themselves to the declaration policy and to the programme of action will be eligible to make an application for affiliation through the regional councils. "

No programme of action was adopted by that name at the launch and it must therefore refer to any action taken by the UDF within the ambit of its declaration and resolutions.

The autonomy of the affiliates is entrenched in clause 6.1 of the working principles:

" All regional formations and member organisations shall have complete independence within the umbrella of the United Democratic Front, provided that actions and policies of members are not inconsistent with the policy of the UDF. "

The autonomy is therefore limited to actions and policies that do not conflict with those of the UDF.

The front has patrons who do not have policy making or executive powers but are appointed to add lustre to the front. The supreme body of the UDF is the National General Council (NGC). It comprises all affiliated organisations and regions. Voting rights and

representation at National General Councils are however determined by the National Executive Committee (NEC) in consultation with the Regional Councils. The National General Council meets at least once per year.

The NEC comprises:

1. the presidency consisting of three presidents;
2. an executive chair person appointed by the NEC from time to time;
3. two vice-presidents appointed by each duly constituted region;
4. the two secretaries of each constituted region;
5. two executive members elected by each constituent region;
6. two national treasurers;
7. the general secretary;
8. the publicity secretary.

The working principles further provide that:

" The NEC shall carry out the policy and programme of the UDF as determined by the NEC from time to time. "

The objects of the UDF are succinctly set out in the working principles par. 3.1:

" To oppose the constitutional and Koornhoff Bills as decided at the first national conference held in Cape Town on 20 August 1983 and any future conference. "

That is also the gist of the declaration which, however, further elaborates on the credo of the UDF and the reasons for their opposition.

The UDF was therefore a loose association of organisations which worked together with a common object.

It is important to bear this in mind, for it follows that an organisation which affiliated to the UDF cannot be held to have ascribed to statements and actions by other affiliates nor can it be held responsible for what the executives said and did outside the policy of the UDF.

All this does not mean that the UDF was a headless body. Its National Executive Committee and Regional Executive Committees (REC) were actively directing and co-ordinating and assisting the activities of its regions and affiliates sometimes directly in the name of the UDF and sometimes in the name of an affiliate but always "under the umbrella of the UDF".

This was already stated in the introduction of the booklet on the national launch exh A.1:

" The UDF campaign will be conducted on a number of levels.

On a national level, the UDF will challenge the new constitution through meetings, rallies and media, drawing together as many different organisations as possible in a campaign to demonstrate the overwhelming rejection of all forms of apartheid, both old and new.

The main focus of the UDF campaign however will be at the local and regional levels. Organisations affiliated to the UDF will run campaigns around certain aspects of the new constitution that affect their membership in a direct way.



" This is to ensure that the UDF does not simply become a political protest group, but is able to build and strengthen non-racial democratic organisations as an alternative to apartheid itself.

Thus, for example, campaigns have already been planned against Community Councils and Black Local Authorities in all African townships. These institutions are a particular example of the way in which the Nationalist Government's 'new deal' will adversely affect the majority of South Africans.

Other local campaigns involve organisation against removals in the Northern Cape, the incorporation of Lamontville and other Durban townships into KwaZulu, the removal of the people of Crossroads to Khayelitsha, low wages, high rents, inadequate public transport, gutter education, lack of child care facilities - in fact around any aspect of apartheid that affects people's daily lives.

Part of these local campaigns have already included solidarity meetings with the people of Mdantsane and East London, as well as with the South African Allied Worker's Union (SAAWU) in their fight against Ciskei 'Government' terror. Speakers at these meetings pointed

" out that the 'homelands' were regarded as the constitutional 'solution' for most South Africans by the Nationalist Government and that the UDF's rejection of these 'homelands' goes hand in hand with the campaign against the new constitution.

The UDF, as part of its programme of action, will also focus attention on the housing crisis and the education crisis as well as on removals. "

That the UDF's National Executive Council and Regional Executive Councils were deeply involved in these issues can be seen from a number of exhibits:

Minutes NGC 5 November 1983 para 6.1.6.4 exh E.1;

Transvaal report to NEC 5 November 1983 paras 1, 2 and 7  
exh E.2;

Transvaal report to NEC 21 January 1984 para 2 exh T.3;

Transvaal secretarial report to AGM, Transvaal 9 March 1985  
exh T.25;

UDF pamphlet exh AN.7;

Minutes of NEC meeting 1 and 2 June 1984 paras 19, 20.2, 27.5  
exh G.1;

Report of plenary session of IYY 10 and 11 November 1984 p.2  
exhs J.5, J.7 and J.10;

Secretarial report to GCM 10 December 1983 paras 2 and 8  
exhs N.3 and T.17;

Secretarial report to NGC 5-7 April 1985 pp.3, 11 and 12  
exh C.102;

Memorandum by general secretary to all secretaries 13 February  
1985 exh C.83;

Minutes NEC 21 and 22 July 1984 paras 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8  
exh H.1;

Draft letter 16 July 1984 exh AM.27;

Circular letter 16 April 1984 exh T.27;

Report paras 4.4.1 and 4.4.2(x) exh C.53;

Secretarial report to PE conference of UDF December 1983 p.3  
exh C.9.

The new working principles adopted by the NGC of the UDF on 7  
April 1985 state in paras 3.2 and 3.3:

" The UDF shall ... act as a co-ordinating body for  
progressive community, social, educational, political  
and other such organisations which subscribe to

" democratic principles (and) articulate to the social and political aspirations of the affiliates of the UDF and their members. "

Exh C.102.

This is what the UDF had been doing all along as can be seen from the exhibits referred to.

It is not suggested that the NEC or REC's autocratically impose their will upon all affiliates. The composition of the National General Council and the Regional General Councils of necessity promote a wide consensus and the NEC or REC's would be unwise to create the impression of acting without consultation, especially as the front prided itself on being "democratic".

There is no evidence, however, from which it can be concluded that the NEC and REC's ever abdicated their leadership roles.

We are aware of the fact that one cannot impute to the UDF what affiliates write in their publications. Nor did the NEC or REC's have the power apart from moral coercion to force affiliates to carry out the programmes of the UDF. The strength of this coercion and the large measure of cohesion required from affiliates is evident from

proceedings of the NEC meeting in November 1984. Exhs J.1 para 5 and J.4 (C.5).

A decision by one or more affiliates not acting as a duly constituted body of the UDF could not be a declaration of UDF policy and could not be binding on the UDF.

This does, however, not mean that we should close our eyes to a pattern of thought and expression in the speeches and publications of the UDF and its affiliates on subjects falling within the ambit of the declaration and resolutions of the UDF.

The stated objective of the UDF at its launch was of necessity a short term one, opposition to the constitutional proposals and the Koornhoff Bills.

In a way the UDF was unsuccessful. The constitutional proposals became law and the Koornhoff Bills were also enacted with the exception of the Orderly Movement and Settlement of Black Persons Bill. In fact the Black Local Authorities Act had been enacted more than a year before the UDF was launched.

A debate ensued on the future of the front. The grievances remained. A vast mass organisation had been created and it would be unthinkable that the leaders thereof would let all this energy dissipate. The front decided to move from protest to challenge.

Already at an early stage, as early as December 1983, the secretariate in its report to the UDF National General Council (exh T.13) saw the objectives of the UDF as somewhat wider than merely opposing proposed legislation. Para 3 of the report reads:

" What were our objectives when we formed the UDF?

- (i) to take the ideological initiative out of the hands of the State;
- (ii) to unite our people across class, colour, ethnic and organisational lines to oppose the apartheid reform offensive of Botha;
- (iii) to co-ordinate the activities of all organisations opposed to apartheid;
- (iv) to advance the mobilisation and to deepen the organisation of our people;
- (v) to prevent the State from implementing its so-called reforms, or at least, to make it difficult for them to do so;
- (vi) to deepen the understanding of our people on issues affecting their lives, such as the P.C. Proposals

" and Koornhoff Bills, the Community Councils and Black Local Authorities, the Coloured Managing Committees and the new housing policy, etc;

(vii) to establish a broad front to serve as the voice of our people;

(viii) to link politics with the day to day experience of our people;

(ix) to draw into the front groupings operating outside the Government structures. "

Point (v) above left open the door to continued action even after the Bills became law. That is in fact what happened. The November 1983 elections under the Black Local Authorities Act were opposed and after the new constitution was enacted the elections for the Coloured House of Representatives and Indian House of Delegates were opposed.

That the UDF saw its task wider than the mere opposition to the proposed new constitution and the Koornhoff Bills appears from the said report where one of the "major successes in a number of campaigns over recent months" is claimed to have been "the UDF focus on the Ciskei" which "evoked national and international attention".

In any event the conference resolutions at the launch had in the view of the NEC indicated continuity of the UDF beyond its immediate short term objectives. This view was expressed at the NEC meeting of 21 and 22 July 1984 (exh H.1 para 4.1.1). The NEC held the view that the UDF should be retained as a front and that the focus thereof could change in accordance with "contradictions arising out of the so-called new deal". The NEC further noted that the front had to expand its operational areas and address more seriously the question of the youth and women with reference to the International Youth Year and the United Nations End of Women's Decade.

The UDF which strictly speaking should have disbanded before the Tri-cameral Parliament opened on 3 September 1984 had no intention of doing so. At this meeting the NEC set minimum demands:

" A non-racial democracy arising out of participation by all the people.

A society based on justice, equality for all, health, education, etc.

The release of all political prisoners.

The return of all exiles.

A national convention, disarming of the armed forces.

Scrapping of Bantustans and puppet local authorities.

Meeting of authentic leaders.

End to GST and removals and relocations."



Its methods were set out as follows:

- " - Through extra Parliamentary opposition.
- Mass mobilisation, mass action and building of organisation of people. "

.See exh H.1 para 10.1.

Thus a political programme and course of action was determined.

We bear in mind that it was decided to forward the NEC resolutions to regions as guidelines for discussion in order that firm decisions could be taken on the basis of the synthesized views of the regions. There is no indication that any materially divergent views were received. (The regions had to submit their views before 18 August 1984).

In fact it was stated by accused No 19 in evidence that initially the UDF's main focus was the constitution and the Koornhoff Bills. Once these were implemented the UDF became an anti-apartheid front and the focus broadened beyond the limited objectives to challenge apartheid in a much broader sense.

The theme "from protest to challenge" had been debated in the debate on the future of the UDF. It became the theme of the National

General Council of 5 April 1985 and it was discussed in its keynote address as follows:

" What do we mean by these words?

By protest we mean a state of affairs where one articulates disapproval of a particular issue or even a system. There is a proud tradition of protest in this country, going back to the end of the 19th century.

By challenge we mean a situation where one takes on the State in certain arenas, where one attempts, as far as possible to frustrate its efforts, prevent its advances, force it to retreat, and if possible, cut off all its lines of retreat. Recent examples are the anti-SAIC campaign, the anti-constitution campaign, the Soweto uprisings, the resistance in Langa, Crossroads, the Vaal, the boycott of gutter education.

Where that challenge has sometimes been spontaneous our job is to transform it into a conscious process, planned as part of coherent strategy. "

The secretarial report to this NGC stated in para 9 that the campaigns of the UDF over the last 19 months had shown very clearly that the conditions in South Africa demanded that the UDF deal with issues far beyond the limited objectives set out at the time of its formation. Exh C.102.

As we have seen, the front changed its tactics. What had been a movement for protest against proposed legislation became a force which challenged the state itself.

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