

THE UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT, 1983-1991: THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL

The United Democratic Front was a pre-eminent anti-apartheid organisation in South Africa during the 1980's. Formed at a mass rally in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town in August 1983, the UDF was an umbrella organisation comprised of, at its height, some 400 community, student, religious, academic based, and single-issue centred organisations. The organisation was formed with the knowledge of the ANC, and by 1986 the UDF and the ANC was in close contact. After the ANC and other political organisations were unbanned in 1990 and then reconstituted themselves in South Africa, the need UDF lapsed and the organisation was disbanded in 1991.

In recent years, as the ANC Alliance - of the ANC and the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions - pass from one crisis to another, the contests over policy direction seem never ending, and most recently with the clear evidence of a hidden state in thrall to very factional interests, a range of diverse commentators have looked to the memory of the UDF as a possible new political base for active citizenry. Much of this public discussion is idealised, as all too much of South Africa's loner anti-apartheid history is.

But to take the issue of the strengths and weaknesses of the UDF as a serious matter of public debate, lets attempt to conduct the debate in a reasoned fashion. So, before diving straight into what could be an unsatisfying but endless wrangle, lets begin by looking and the politics of historical source material on the UDF, 1983-1991.

1. State archive collections for the period are, obviously closed. In 2003 the then State Archivist offered all persons banned, detained, house arrested and otherwise restricted and `named` a full copy of their person Directorate of Security Legislation `personal file`. There is often very valuable information in such `personal files`. It is ot known how many people took up this offer, or how many of such files have reached public archival collections such as the Mayibuye Centre, the University of the Witwatersrand's Historical Papers, or the South African History Archive at Constitutional Hill. Only material from one such collection - Mewa Ramgobin's - appears to have been published.

What remains in state hands is however doubtful, as we now from various sources (the latest being Hennie van Vuuren in his *Apartheid, guns and money*, Jacana 2017) that the government trucked tons of archives to the furnaces at the state iron and steel mill at Vanderbyldpark, and to the atomic energy plant at Pelindaba.

From the mid-1950's onwards, as the state prepared for the epic Treason Trial, the state confiscated masses of material from individuals and organisations. So for examples, when the police served Rev Beyers Naudê with his banning order they took masses of records from the Christian Institute. They did the same when banning Mewa Ramgobin. So too with Allan Boesak and Amina Cachalia. Despite Ramgobin and my attempts to locate this material - via the Ministry of Arts and Culture, the parliamentary portfolio committee on Arts and Culture, and directly to the National Archives, there seems no political will to look into the fate of such confiscated material. So the only archivists which were permitted to search through the state archives for relevant material were those from the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Unfortunately families of now dead UDF leaders have donated their papers to the National Archives. These papers are now under the 30-year archival restrictions. Further, at least one family heavily redacted material before donating the father's papers to the state. Having looked at that material - following heavy pressure on the state from the family - this material is of doubtful value. This tragedy is further compounded because the persona concerned was in continual contact with Thabo Mbeki and the period covered was from the beginnings of political negotiations in around 1986 up until 1994. Such losses are irrecoverable.

2. The UDF

Many of the organisations affiliated to the UDF, such as the Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee, and the Detainee Support Committees, kept good records and these are now, thankfully, in accessible public archives. But all too much of the activities of the UDF affiliates is either lost, confiscated, or never existed in the first place. All too many UDF organisations and committees were such in name only - there were lots of `Memorial Committees`, or were more focused on action not

administration. The exigencies of the time made this a wise decision - the consequences of indiscreet documentary records could be very high.

3. International

The anti-apartheid struggle was the world's first global political movement. Many archives of international anti-apartheid support organisations - such as the British or Scandinavian ones, or Amnesty International have been properly curated, with some collections being available on-line. Yet, sadly in too many cases the file contents have been gutted of their institutional and personal dynamics and energies, with only press statements and ephemera remaining.

4. Private Papers

Fortunately a large number of persons active in UDF politics have deposited personal collections to publicly accessible archives. These include lawyers active in the many trials of the time, and these papers can include oral interviews with activists. Mewa Ramgobin is the only person to have allowed publication of an edited collection from his hugely important collection. Here is much information of the internal dynamics of the time, including huge conflicts over the relationships between the UDF and the ANC. Mewa's information relates specifically to the 'Cabal' issue in Natal, and - near uniquely - to the relationship between the returning ANC and the on the ground UDF-type organisations and interests.

5. Autobiographies, Memoirs, and Biographies

One would have assumed that life history accounts of anti-apartheid lives would have been a long dominant genre in South Africa publishing. It is, and continues to be, but in a significantly restricted sense. This concerns ANC life histories, particularly of the pre-1960 period and on lives spent in exile or prison. And this fits well into a public heritage and media-driven exultation and idealisation of the anti-apartheid past. Of course the stand-out example of this is the way in which the memory of Nelson Mandela has in all too many ways become sanctified with Mandela the man-god. Curiously there are very few autobiographies or memoirs of UDF activists. The most significant biography is that of Trevor Manuel

6. Oral Interview Collections

Oral interview records and transcripts of UDF activist exist in many collections throughout the country. In the most they appear to be one-off interviews, rather than indicating a concerted effort to obtain an oral history life history. The real stand-out collection is Pdraig O'Malley's collection of political interviews at the Nelson Mandela Foundation archives. The collection is available on-line. Sadly there never was a concerted effort by any public institution to undertake a more comprehensive and scholarly rigorous national oral history project on the UDF and other forms of internal struggle.

In a post-apartheid South African world where so much public discussion concerns 'history' in its various forms and with various meanings given to the word, the situation as outlined above might appear discordant. Sadly it is precisely the opposite. In South African public communication the word history does not refer to the rigorous and scholarly activity of collecting, creating - through say oral interviews - and researching, analysing, and enriching public discussion with such findings. The interpreters of the South African past are less historians that politicians and political commentators, and the media. A properly informed public discussion on the history of the UDF and the future characteristics of citizen's politics in South Africa cannot take place in such a present milieu.

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