

Participatory democracy: the legacy of the UDF in the Eastern Cape?

It is tempting to idealize the days of struggle, and to remember uncritically our heroes and our organizations; to present MK, for example, as the 'glorious peoples' army' and to forget the frustrations endured and the mistakes made. Similarly, it is tempting to remember the UDF as a militant, mass-based front of organizations which made a decisive contribution to the ending of apartheid and the creation of a democratic society. The moments of terror and intolerance are easily forgotten. And yet, perhaps it is time for us to reflect critically – on this twentieth anniversary of the founding of the UDF – on the lessons we learnt through our experience of organization in the 1980s.

The African townships of the Eastern Cape had already built something of a tradition of close-knit, mass-based structures by the time the UDF was formed in 1983. Some argue that this tradition went back to the 1952-3 period, when the 'M-Plan' was implemented in New Brighton to ensure that the ANC survived the banning of public meetings. Others point to the importance of such street-level structures in enabling the ANC to survive after its banning in 1960, and during the time of the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the first sabotage campaigns, in the 1961-3 period. However, as with most other parts of the country, by the mid-1970s the apartheid state had succeeded in crushing effective organization and resistance to its rule. The 1976-7 uprising, which involved extensive rebellion and repression in the Eastern Cape, did not leave much of a legacy of tight-knit organization or of democratic participation. It was the late 1970s which saw the emergence of a new style of civic organization in the form of PEBCO, followed in the early 1980s by the emergence of militant and strongly organized youth and student organizations. It was these organizations that were to make up the core of the UDF in the region; and as the UDF grew, so the organizational network expanded until nearly every African community in every small rural town in the Eastern Cape was brought into the resistance movement.

While the UDF was formed as a broad front against the Tricameral Parliament, it really achieved resonance in the Eastern Cape and in African townships in Gauteng when its affiliates took up the campaign against the Black Local Authorities. These powerless institutions were meant to share the burden of administering the black townships, financing themselves through collecting rents, and struggling to deliver services to communities which had been systematically deprived of facilities for decades. Unsurprisingly, the councilors who took up positions in these BLAs became the targets of intense anger from local residents; campaigns against rent hikes or poor housing split over into anger against those individuals who were perceived as assisting in the administration of apartheid. As the BLAs came under pressure, they began to employ increasingly brutal municipal police to maintain their position; even so, community pressure led to the resignation of many councils and the de facto collapse of this system of local government. The employment of the consumer boycott strategy placed enormous pressure on local white-owned businessmen, and led in the case of Port Elizabeth to the head of the Chamber of Commerce taking a remarkably progressive stand in intervening to obtain the release of the leadership so that negotiations could proceed. The

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situation in the townships deteriorated as thousands of militant youth vented their anger against councilors, policemen, municipal infrastructure, bottlestores, schools and almost all symbols of authority. The ANC astutely assessed the situation and incorporated this collapse into its overall revolutionary strategy of 'protracted peoples war': calling on the militant youth to 'render the townships ungovernable and apartheid unworkable', they began to offer military training to select groups of youth.

Where was the UDF while all this was going on? Accused by the security forces as being the 'internal wing of the ANC', the leadership of the UDF and its affiliates became targets of extreme repression. The better organized the UDF was, the more dangerous it was, and the worse the repression. Thus in mid-1985, when the first, partial State of Emergency was declared, the key leaders of UDF affiliates in the Eastern Cape were detained and brutally tortured until the 'Wendy Orr interdict' posed – for a while- some limitations on security police activity.