The United Democratic Front’s legacy in South Africa: Mission accomplished or vision betrayed?

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The United Democratic Front, formed in South Africa in 1983 to coordinate protest against a new constitution that co-opted Coloureds and Indians but excluded Africans from political representation, has been lauded as a model of a successful social movement. The UDF served as an umbrella forum for hundreds of organisations, including student movements, youth, women, churches, trade unions as well as community based organisations. While the affiliates pursued their own agenda, the UDF infused these struggles with a broader meaning. The UDF’s vision of a new society was not limited to ‘one man, one vote’ and legal equality: it aspired to an egalitarian, non-racial society in which participation would be more important than the political pluralism of liberal democracy.

South Africa’s post-apartheid constitution has been praised worldwide as a state-of-the-art model of liberal democracy, but it is quite remote from the grassroots democracy envisaged in the 1980s. Inequality has increased post-1994, in spite of considerable accomplishments in sectors such as infrastructure, housing, water and electricity and social welfare. Did the leaders of the UDF and the ANC betray the goals of the liberation struggle when they joined the comfortable life of the middle class and the business elite? Or did South Africa realistically have no other options available amidst the triumphant neo-liberalism of a rapidly globalizing world? This chapter explores the legacy of the UDF: how do former activists make sense of present-day South African society?
Introduction

The United Democratic Front, formed in South Africa in 1983 to coordinate protest against a new constitution that co-opted Coloureds and Indians but excluded Africans from political representation, was the most inclusive social movement in South African history. The UDF served as an umbrella forum for hundreds of organizations involving youth, women, churches and trade unions, community-based organizations and student movements. These organizations each pursued their own agenda, ranging from free text books in schools to liberation theology and campaigns for lower rents and safer streets, but affiliation with the UDF infused these issues with a broader meaning. While tackling bread-and-butter matters, millions of South Africans felt themselves part of the liberation movement against apartheid. The UDF’s vision of a just society was not limited to ‘one man, one vote’ and legal equality but aspired to a non-racial, egalitarian society in which participation and communalism would be the key values rather than the political pluralism and free-market principles of liberal democracy.

The UDF leadership emphasized that the Front was not a substitute for the banned liberation movements but it would hold the fort until the African National Congress could resume its rightful position. The ANC leadership in exile had given its blessing to the formation of the UDF as a broad front to coordinate the anti-apartheid struggle inside South Africa, while the ANC continued its underground activities as well as the armed struggle. However during the 1980s, the UDF developed its own distinct political culture. Its major goals were shared by all affiliates but modes of expression and political action varied considerably between affiliates as well as between the different geographical regions.

The ban on the African National Congress was lifted in 1990 and the UDF was disbanded in the following year. Its activists joined the scramble for positions within the ANC and subsequently in the government of the post-apartheid South Africa, at national, provincial and local level. While their primary goal – the abolition of apartheid – has been accomplished, post-apartheid South Africa is a far cry from the erstwhile ideal of an egalitarian non-racial society. The 1996 constitution has been praised worldwide as a state-of-the-art model of liberal democracy, but it is quite remote from the egalitarian grassroots democracy envisaged in the 1980s. Inequality has increased since 1994 in spite of considerable accomplishments in areas such as infrastructure, housing, water, electricity and social welfare.

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