**Chapter Nine**

**The Mass Democratic Movement, Repression, and Negotiations:**

**The Internal Groups and the Struggle**

**The Mass Democratic Movement**

South Africa seemed to be caught between revolt and containment between 1976 and 1990. In spite of strong containment efforts on the part of the South African government, internal opposition to apartheid reached its peak in the period from 1984-1987 when South Africa's townships erupted in violence against segregated local governments and group based constitutional changes.

Internally, a combination of populism, liberals, and liberalism came to dominate much of the internal resistance to apartheid during the United Democratic Front (UDF) period (1983-1987) that ultimately caused the National Party to move towards negotiations, restoring, at least temporarily, a role for political liberalism in the South African debate. First, we will look at the various components of the internal struggle.

This chapter examines these internal movements that collectively came to be known as the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) after 1990 and their merger with or into the external movements, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-African Congress (PAC).

**Black Consciousness, The UDF, and External Movements**

Steve Biko, in the early 1970s, tried to stake out a position on Black Consciousness that advocated affirmative action but avoided accusations of racism, arguing that there was a distinctive African culture that blacks could identify with, without adopting racist assumptions that could prejudge other political cultures within South Africa (Biko 1987; Massie 1997). The use of the term "black", moreover, was meant to include Indian and Coloured South Africans who would not necessarily be part of that African culture.

Many Black Consciousness (BC) organizations talked about black capitalism as an alternative to apartheid. Others advocated a democratic socialism. However, there was a strong expression of anti-communism in the BC philosophy throughout the apartheid period. Much of this grassroots structure would fold into the UDF after 1983. Though during his lifetime Steve Biko rejected the political views of the ANC, after his death many of his followers, after stints in exile or on Robben Island, became influential in the UDF and the ANC. They would play a leading role in both the township revolts and the negotiations process in the 1980s and 1990s (Lester 1998).

In the 1970s, despite their earlier lack of influence in rural parts of South Africa, the ANC had concentrated its efforts on external infiltration in hit and run guerilla war fashion, ignoring events in the urban areas of South Africa. There was almost no penetration by ANC guerrillas into the urban arena throughout the 1970s. The role of the ANC's military arm, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in the townships changed after 1980, though in the early years of the township revolts MK remained murky to citizens and observers alike. One view was that the external leadership of the ANC both ordered the formation of the UDF and the township uprising itself.

A more traditional view of the gradual merger of the two organizations is that the ANC in exile responded to the upsurge in UDF mobilization in the townships by trying to tie into it. Reality probably lies somewhere between. By 1979, the ANC had decided that it needed to become involved in legal and illegal politics inside the country (Seekings 2000). What it is clear is that there was a conscious decision in the early 1980s to link up local level resistance with the ANC insurgency by setting up temporary training centers for the creation of an army of part-time guerrillas (Lodge 1986).

From the beginning, it was clear that there were strong potential ties between the ANC and the UDF and there was at least some evidence that the ANC leadership took a conscious decision to establish the UDF in the early 1980s. The idea that the ANC “founded” the UDF is the thesis presented by Govan Mbeki in his 1996 book (Mbeki 1996). Mbeki (1996) has argued that it was a decision of the National Executive of the ANC to establish an internal resistance organ. This decision (and the challenge to the regime which followed), he argues, led directly to the 1990 negotiations.

As early as 1953, the National Executive Committee of the ANC had established a plan to create community-based grassroots organizations which could be mobilized to resist apartheid structures. A ten-house cell system was seen as the base of the organizational structure. After the ANC went underground, there was discussion in the early 1960s of developing a system of resistance based on the M-Plan which would resist government repression. Township rebels and black militants explicitly referred to the 1984 M-plan, based on the 1960s Mandela strategy, throughout the 1980s.

The ANC M-plan called for active resistance to apartheid imposed local government, labeled Black Local Authorities (BLAs) and the destruction of local administration through grassroots counter-structures. The plan proposed the establishment of "street committees as an alternative to government-imposed administration to awaken residents' political consciousness and to make them more responsible for their own lives" (Leach 1986, p. 207). Youth leaders "aimed to set up small local structures to ensure full community participation in a larger organization, in a way not unlike the trade union model" (Webster[[1]](#footnote-1)& Friedman 1989, p. 154).

In 1979, the ANC, through its politico-military Strategic Position Committee, published a *Green Book* which defined a strategy for the ANC's re-entry into South Africa. It called for the infiltration of opposition groups and the development of a popular front to oppose the white ruled state. As early as 1982, the press discussed the possibility of a new political movement that would be civic based and would be formed to oppose the Botha political reforms (Battersby 1982). The civics, trade unions, and student bodies that later made up the UDF were almost all formed during the period 1977-1982. In the view of many in government and the police, it looked like the ANC was implementing Nelson Mandela's M-Plan based on the principle of a ten-cell urban underground unit based on civil society organizations.

The decision was taken in the early 1980s to create a broad democratic front of organizations inside the country. Once there was a measure of popular mobilization and an internal political organization was created, they would conduct a "people's war" in South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement would create "a broad democratic front of organizations inside SA" (Barrell 1990, p. 40). During the "people's war," Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cadres would "play a quasi-official role inside the country. They were to link up with and train elements among both the street committees...and the militant township youths” (Barrell 1990, p. 56).

The UDF itself was launched nationally on August 20, 1983, following six months of planning and consultation at the regional and local levels. For the first time since 1960, a new resistance organization was formed in South Africa, explicitly dedicated to the promotion of the Freedom Charter. The founding of the UDF was a turning point in South African history. A number of significant black unions affiliated with the UDF upon its formation in 1983.

The ANC, with the formation of the UDF, began to move away from an externally based armed struggle towards an internal underground political organization with close ties to the UDF (Lodge 1984). As a new multi-class democratic movement, the UDF shared goals and would have a close if undefined relationship with the ANC until February 2, 1990 when its leadership openly identified with and joined the leadership of the ANC. After 1984, the ANC operated increasingly in the open within South Africa, using the UDF as a vehicle for its activity.

What happened in the period 1984-1987 was that the township uprisings had become less than a full-blown revolution; however thee revolts had many of the characteristics of one. The township revolt, with its "comrades" and "necklacings" fundamentally changed the political dynamics of South Africa and was a corrosive but necessary precursor to the negotiations of the 1990s. As we will discuss, the thirty years between 1960 and 1990 also saw the escalation of demands for comprehensive economic sanctions against South Africa internationally.

If the ANC did not explicitly order the creation of the UDF, it did encourage the formation of an internal organization (Seekings 2000). In its planning the ANC developed a "deliberate strategy to form all kinds of mass-based political organisations [and among] other matters, it pointed to the formation of the United Democratic Front and stated the precise conditions under which a negotiated settlement might prove acceptable to the ANC" (Mbeki 1996, p. 42-44). As part of this process, the post-Soweto generation began to return to South Africa as trained cadres to fight apartheid. Between 1983 and 1991, virtually all of the leaders of the UDF were formally or informally members of the ANC underground (Seekings 2000).

**Black Consciousness and Christian Liberalism**

In the 1970s, it was part of BC ideology to deride liberalism. In one of his early essays, Steve Biko criticized white liberalism as having a debilitating effect upon black South Africans. Dr. Richard Turner, a political scientist at the University of Natal, criticized liberalism but advocated a form of Christian socialism that seemed to resemble social democracy of the Scandinavian type. An outspoken critic of the regime, Turner was first banned by the regime and then assassinated by the state security forces.

Despite elements of anti-liberalism, Rick Turner's group, and the Christian Institute to which he was linked, had strong links with the BC Groups. A number of liberals, including Rick Turner, Beyers Naude, and Donald Woods, would support Biko and the BC organizations. By 1976, BC organizations opposing government policy, such as the South African Students Organization (SASO) founded by Biko and the Black Peoples’ Congress (BPC), had well-staffed head offices and paid great attention to grassroots organizations within South Africa (Kotze 1975).

What became the UDF, at least in part, can trace its origins to the Christian liberal Durban group that was led by Rick Turner (Turner 1978). The Durban group had as its goal the creation of strong black trade unions and a process of change that was to be achieved through gradualism, flexibility, and compromise with authority (Boynton 1997). Many of the Durban group members later took active roles in the UDF in the 1980s.

Beyers Naude was an earnest but humorous man with a self-depreciating sense of humor; he was intelligent, quiet spoken, and fluent with a round open face (Drury 1968). Naude came from the Afrikaner establishment, was a minister in the Dutch Reform Church and for many years had been a member of the Broederbond (Brotherhood, the secret Afrikaner society which developed and supported apartheid).

In 1963, Naude broke with the National Party and resigned and left his white congregation. The same year, he became the Founder-Director of the Christian Institute, an anti-apartheid group that also developed close ties to Biko's Africanist organizations. His shift from the Broederbond to the head of the liberal Christian Institute represents the rare Afrikaner elite member who came to identify with the anti-apartheid movement. For several years the Christian Institute was harassed by the government and in 1977 the Institute was closed down; Naude was banned for five years.

In 1984, Naude was appointed Secretary-General of the South African Council of Churches and became active in the UDF. Speaking in 1990 of the impact of the Christian Institute, Naude said:

The most important contribution of the Christian Institute was that it was able to destroy the NGK's (Dutch Reform Church) biblical justification of apartheid. Second, it was able to build a concept of social justice with white involvement. Thirdly, it was able to create a measure of trust between the historical Christian churches and the Africanist independent churches. Finally, politically it accepted the black consciousness movement and made itself available to teach whites that their future role in South Africa would have to be a complicated one (Interview with Naude, 1990).

**The UDF as an Organization**

The United Democratic Front, functioned, "more in the fashion of a social movement than a deliberately contrived political machine” (Lodge 1989, p. 206). It was a coalition of trade unions, civic associations, and women's and student groups with a strong grass roots orientation. The UDF was entirely dependent upon grassroots initiatives and the stronger civic associations and youth organizations were led by trade unionists. There was an odd balance between liberalism and collectivism within the UDF that would carry over to the ANC after 1991.

Though there was much liberalism within the UDF value system, the UDF used the phrase "people's power" to describe "the process in which, after the collapse or abdication of local state authorities, civics and youth organizations assumed administrative, judicial, welfare, and cultural functions within their respective communities” (Lodge 1989, p. 220). After 1983, what came to be called the Charterist movement[[2]](#footnote-2)  led the anti-Apartheid struggle both internally and externally and tried to manage the ethnic balance that developed within the ANC.

The Charterists have long found it extremely difficult to deal with the issue of ethnicity in South Africa and ethnicity continues to be seen as a dangerous issue in the South African debate. Malan has pointed to the sensitivity of this issue and notes that "any acknowledgement of differing cultural values threatens to sound like an oblique argument in apartheid's favor" (Malan 1990, p. 187). The Charterist groups, the ANC, the UDF, its affiliates, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) have traditionally applied a Marxist analysis to the South African situation and regarded the internal conflict as one of class struggle rather than a racial or ethnic one, with the capitalist classes making exploitative use of the race factor.

The alliance between the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) was and is important since "it is to a handful of white communists who befriended Africans over the years that [accounts] to a large extent the refusal of so many African Leaders to turn racialist" (Benson 1966, p. 11). The Charterist movement's position was self-defined as non-racial and, among many in its leadership, broadly liberal, socially and politically. In this argument, race is discounted, and the battle for South Africa is cast as apartheid versus anti-apartheid, or, according to Malan, a struggle between good and evil and economically between the working and ruling classes.

For the UDF and the ANC, the Freedom Charter and Charterism remained key components of both rhetoric and ideal. This would have long-term implications for the future of governance in South Africa after 1994. To the UDF and the MDM, the 1983 ethnically defined tricamerial constitution was "simply a mechanism for entrenching white power, with the coloureds and Indians co-opted for moral support while the blacks are fobbed off with dubious forms of local representation" (Leach 1987, p. 96). UDF mobilization centered on opposition to the creation of the racially defined tri-cameral parliament and on resistance to the creation of black local authorities in the township dormitory suburbs of South Africa's cities, the major target of the 1983 reforms. One close observer of South African politics described the UDF as a part of a mysterious South African trinity.The UDF, he said, “was the Holy Ghost of the MDM, unclear and little understood” (Picard, Research Diary, October 1990).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The UDF’s national presence was enormous, though its organized strength was difficult to identify since its strength lay in a linking together of grassroots civics associations. Except for areas where the trade union movement was strong, the UDF affiliates were often weak and ill organized. Their influence was specifically located in the neighborhood within the township. Links between civics were often limited and the impact of government security measures further weakened grassroots associations after 1986.

The goal of the UDF was to not merely coordinate the activities of various affiliated groups but to directly challenge the apartheid regime through direct confrontation. The UDF was not without its critics. To Rian Malan (1990, p. 268), "The UDF was a supposedly nonviolent, democratic movement, and a fount of hope and righteousness in the eyes of many reporters. It was inconceivable that such an organization would be implicated in a campaign of extermination [and violence], so the cutting questions went unasked, which was probably just as well."[[4]](#footnote-4) The Front focused on the "mobilization of collective action" in order to transform South Africa (Marx 1991, p. 317).

The UDF represented a broad spectrum of political and economic views, agreeing on little beyond a rejection of the sectionalism of the National Party. Though the UDF was Charterist, accepting the basic principles of the ANC, a clear distinction was made, for tactical reasons, between the ANC and the UDF prior to 1990. From the beginning, however, there was a clear overlap between the two organizations in terms of their leadership and ideology and a shared vision of a multi-class democratic movement. There was evidence of coordination between the internally based UDF and the ANC in exile. As an umbrella organization:

[t]he UDF proved to be a powerful force because it was so difficult for the Government to act against. Its member organisations had committees and many had premises: but the UDF had neither--nor did it have property or formal leaders for the police to seize (Hain 1996, p. 141).

As the UDF evolved, it used corporatist style sectors (of teachers, trade unions, craftsmen) to identify affiliates. While the UDF made rhetorical gestures towards rural South Africa, almost all of the UDF affiliates came from the five metropolitan areas of South Africa. The UDF, like the ANC before it, had problems organizing in the rural areas. Rural areas, particularly in the Northern Transvaal and the Eastern Cape, felt neglected by the urban-based organization (Seekings 2000).

It was difficult to talk about the UDF as a national movement since it was so localized in its power base (Mufson 1991b). Moving beyond the high levels of protest politics which characterized the ANC in the 1950s, the UDF leadership "built an extensive network of civic, student and youth organizations which [were] usually…in the forefront of militant township resistance" (Friedman 1987, p. 63). It was from these local institutions that the UDF/ANC alliance was able to gain political momentum after 1990 (Lodge 1991). On the left, there were many who felt that the UDF focused too much on political participation and too little on economic transformation.

Critics during this period of violence saw the UDF as a "stalking horse" for the ANC (Van Heerden 1990, p. 21). According to one close observer of the ANC, the liberation movement lacked an internal organizational structure which was strong enough to take advantage of its popularity when it was made legal (Holland 1990). The UDF was feared by some to be too independent to provide that internal structure. How much political control did the ANC have over the UDF in the 1980s? Many white South Africans saw no difference between the two prior to 1990. Others were not sure. According to one National Party administrator in 1990:

At the local level there are sometimes splits between the UDF and the ANC and I think they will remain as separate parties. The splits are ethnic with the ANC seen as Xhosa while the UDF is more representative of local ethnic groups in Mamalodi. The UDF are dominated by Pedi, Sotho and Tswana. Also the two organizations differ in that the ANC is top down while the UDF is bottom up. Thus it is possible to lead to an ethnic and an organizational division and the two groups could split (Interview with Nel, 1990).

The ANC leadership in the 1980s, defending themselves against criticism for the use of violence, argued that they were "not in control of many of the activists who invoke[d] its name. Purely symbolic support for an organization which [did] not operate effectively within the country…has been, a recipe for passivity"(Friedman 1987, p. 61). Prior to 1990, UDF leaders such as Mohammed Valli Moosa rejected the notion that the UDF accepted direction from the ANC. The realities were much more complex. There was without doubt a strong relationship between the ANC and the UDF, though there were differences between the two organizations. Links between the ANC and the UDF were multi-dimensional, many, and varied. According to an activist with ties to both the ANC and the UDF:

At that time we were not just left wing. We were looking at the creation of broad fronts linked through forum committees. After 1983, though my focus was on the UDF, I and many within the UDF were directed from the ANC. I was an operative and I submitted detailed reports to Botswana and took messages to the ANC in Botswana. Much of this focused on the possibility of talks about talks (Interview with De la Harpe, 1997).

Some within the MDM concluded that to many in the UDF, and “to me, the ANC have the idea that the UDF threatens the ANC" (Interview with Gumede, 1990). Despite the linkages between the two organizations, there were also significant differences between them in style and substance and by the end of the 1980s. Tension had developed within the UDF and the larger MDM over strategy, ideology, and the nature of racial representation.

**Patriotic Front or Black Consciousness by Stealth**

The MDM usually included those elements of the anti-apartheid movement that were to the left of the ANC and have been influenced by Pan-Africanist or BC ideas. Despite the strength of the UDF, the influence of the BC movement remained strong throughout the 1980s. At question was the role that various left wing black organizations would play in the negotiations process after February 2, 1990.

As early as the late 1950s, The PAC had strong influence over the Eastern Cape region. From the beginning the PAC had an appealing and often misunderstood ideology based on the popular Pan-Africanism of Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. That ideology espoused an African nationalism and black consciousness that proponents said was not racist in the sense that it was inherently anti-white, though individual PAC or BC members might be, but that it viewed African affirmation as a pre-condition to liberation given the history of colonial and racial oppression in Africa (Interview with Disai, 1990). As Stephen Davis (1988, p. 13) points out, though the PAC was banned within a year of its creation, “Africanism as an ideology...would not whither with the PAC. Its popularity as an alternative to multiracialism was undiminished and was to manifest itself in later years through intermittent revivals of the PAC and through the rise of black consciousness.”

BC groups have also been important among the mixed-race community in the Western Cape. The Cape Province was an area of strength for Steve Biko prior to his death. After the death in detention of Biko in 1977, the government banned many BC organizations. In 1978, a new BC organization, the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) was formed. In 1983, it helped form the BC-dominated National Forum.

There were four components to AZAPO's manifesto. First, it was anti-racist and anti-imperialist. This meant it would not collaborate with what it saw as the forces of oppression. Because they were part of the oppressive system, whites were excluded from membership. Second, AZAPO identified with the class struggle and hoped to eradicate what it called racial capitalism. Third, through the National Forum, it saw itself in alliance with independent working-class organizations. Finally, it fought for the "establishment of a democratic, anti-racist, worker republic of Azania" (Leatt, Kneifel & Nurnberger 1986, p. 115).

The National Forum, established in 1983, brought together a number of BC groups in a loose national organization. It came to represent Africanist and BC views in confrontations with the Government. This group attacked the multi-class bourgeois leadership of the UDF and the ANC. While it never had the impact of the UDF on domestic South African politics, it did provide a platform for BC attacks on the National party government. Like the UDF, it was difficult to talk about the BC-oriented National Forum as a national movement.

It is important to remember that violence in the 1980s was not just between the ANC and Inkatha. During 1985 and 1986, at least thirty members of AZAPO and AZASM (the Azanian Student Movement) were killed by political opponents in Natal and on the Reef (local name for the Johannesburg area). The clashes in Langa in the Eastern Cape are graphically described by a South African journalist who was captured by an AZAPO gang. As he describes it, "I was nearly necklaced, you know. I was put in a small truck. There was a tire there... But they couldn't agree. The AZAPO chairman said no, we didn't take this guy to kill him... They took me back inside and beat me up.... Then they took [him] home” (Mufson 1991c p. 240). In Soweto during the mid-1980s, the worst fighting was between the Charterists (ANC/UDF) and AZASM/BC (Shubane 1991). Fighting was fierce between different gangs at the community level. As one observer pointed out, the conflict between rival groups of youths such as the Wararas and the Zim-Zims[[5]](#footnote-5)  was a conflict "between people who used to be friends and allies" (Mathiane 1991, p. 279).

With the legalization of the PAC in 1990, it began to find its internal strengths in a number of urban areas of the Eastern Cape and in Soweto. At the same time, PAC remained divided in its leadership and uncertain in its approach to negotiations. It refused to integrate with BC groups and they refused to join the PAC. There were specific disagreements between the PAC and AZAPO as to whether the latter should now disband and support the older organization, now that its "house sitting" function had been completed (Interview with Disai, 1990).

In August of 1991, the ANC and the PAC announced the formation of a Patriotic Front. However, the extent to which these two groups within the MDM could cooperate during the negotiations process quickly came into question. When the PAC walked out of the planning session of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, it pointed to collusion between the ANC and the National Party as a reason for its continued boycott of the negotiations. With the beginning of the negotiations, the BC movement had been dramatically weakened. In the end the Charterists would operate alone and BC political movements received almost no support during the 1994 elections.

**A Decade of Turbulence, 1980-1990**

**The Township Struggles and**

**Organized Resistance to Reform**

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a small group of radical, white South Africans that had called on the downtrodden to revolt. At the time of the Union, Olive Schreiner (1987, p. xv) put it this way, South Africans must rise up “a free, intelligent, harmonious nation, each part acting with and for the benefit of others, then we shall have played a part as great as that of any nation in the world's record.” The top down, controlled reforms of the 1980s finally resulted in the kind of revolt that Schreiner envisioned and feared some seventy-five years before.

The effect of the top-down reform strategy often adopted by the state was to place a depoliticized local government in the forefront of national political struggles. The Botha government often used commissions, which while sometimes providing needed information, could also be used to slow down, or stop demands for change and could also be used to “obfuscate and to mislead” (“SA Commission” 1990). This was certainly the case after 1983. The Riekert Commission of Inquiry set the stage for the drama of the 1980s in South Africa's townships. According to Bekker and Humphries (1985, p. 111),

...the [Riekert ]Commission's proposals affecting the Community Councils Act were a small part of a much larger attempt at achieving essentially political goals, even though the Commission [fell] shy of admitting to political considerations in its recommendations. These political considerations hinged on improving the quality of life of Section 19 qualifiers [legal urban residents], mainly by lifting bureaucratic regulations and restrictions on their movement and employment.

At the local level, under P.W. Botha, even critics of the government maintained that negotiations ultimately would have to be based on what already existed, a

...modified and equally non-racial version of the proposed Regional Services Councils; the lifting of the State of Emergency and the release of political prisoners; the elimination of remaining racist legislation in the form of the Group Areas, Land and Population Registration Acts -- then those government elements could create a powerful momentum among the remainder of representative black moderates for participation in negotiations concerning the design of political structures at the national level (Frankel 1988, p. 297).

Conflict increasingly shifted towards local authorities after 1984. After the introduction of the Tricameral Constitution and BLA elections, black councils became targets of the MDM because of their association with government and "discontent over local economic factors became a more general protest against the government's black administration and the entire constitutional system which offered the blacks nothing” (Leach 1987, p. 146).

Resistance to BLAs manifested itself during this period at two levels. Housing, education, transport, and employment were localized issues. At the more general level, resistance was politically based and directed at the town council system, the Tricameral Parliament, the role of the security forces in the townships, and, generally, the repression of the state. Schools and education were particular targets of resistance patterns after 1976, with educational reforms always falling short of demands (Zulu 1988).

The township revolution of the 1980s had significance far beyond the immediate challenge to the apartheid state. The long-term failure of BLAs and of black councillors, administrators, and policemen was structural and due to the fact that they "had no taxation authority to supply it [the BLAs] with funds, no moral authority to command compliance, not even the physical force [apart from vigilante groups] to protect itself" (Adam & Moodley 1986, p. 111). Between 1985 and 1987, the state lost effective control over the bulk of the black townships.

Local level disaffection led some black activists in South Africa to view segregated local elections scheduled in 1983 as creating some political "space." There were differences about how to respond to this situation (Mufson 1991a). Local leaders did not use the electoral space to try to gain influence in the townships and the townships eventually exploded in violence after 1984. The advocates of the Botha local government reforms had failed to gauge the political effects in the townships of the restructuring of third tier government and especially the transfer of political and financial responsibility for capital investment, maintenance, and service responsibilities to BLAs. The transition from passive to active resistance in the Transvaal townships and throughout the country was directly linked to the political non-viability of BLAs (Seekings 1988).

Black leaders in the UDF had feared that the creation of BLAs was the first stage in the creation of Bantustan style city-states, separate from the rest of South Africa. Within a short period of time, some local councillors, such as administrator Tom Boya of Daveyton, became almost as critical of the bodies as civic associations (Poto 1988). However, many councillors and mayors created patronage systems that were designed to deflate grassroots criticism. Political conflict occurred in almost all of the South Africa's urban townships between 1984 and 1987 and this period saw the collapse of the BLA system and the rise of an internal resistance movement, led by the UDF. Social upheaval defined political change in the 1980s and early 1990s (Moerdyk 1990).

Boycotts were fundamental tools of the urban revolt in the 1980s. Increasing the cost of rent, utilities, and services reached a point where the vast majority of the people in the townships could not afford them. The rent and services fee boycotts resulted. Beyond this, the fiscal and political framework at the local level contradicted "residents' ideas of political justice and legitimacy" (Chaskalson et al. 1987, p. 72). The result in many townships was deadlock between officials and the civic associations with the rent boycotts continuing into the 1990s.

Internal boycotts and non-payment of taxes were important in the destabilization of the townships. By 1988, black South Africans represented more than half of South Africa’s buying power (Van Rooyen 1994). Rents and educational grievances could not be challenged without provoking a repressive response, and so mobilization over these grievances led to challenges over the more fundamental issue of the power of the state; in other words, who should control township administration and the instruments of repression (Seekings 1988).

Too much involvement meant that a significant portion of South African military troops would be bogged down in small, isolated groups. Joint Management Centres were not able to directly address the civics-inspired boycotts. BLA officials wanted to see the boycotts end but feared that harsh treatment of boycotters would result in long-term economic penalties for township traders. Struggles against the local state in the 1980s were in large part based on material deprivation. Conflict within and between neighborhoods was materially rather than ethnically based, with certain groups feeling a sense of relative deprivation. The National Party government in 1985 saw the conflict within the urban black community as the major problem facing South Africa. Two inherited problems confronted local authorities, the legacy of the deep illegitimacy of apartheid based BLAs and the role that township administrations (the infamous Bantu Administration Boards) had played under apartheid (McIntosh, Vaughan & Xaba 1994).

Plans by the Provincial Administration and the state for commercialization and private sector development did little to address the problem of the townships. By 1990, the state and township civic associations and councils were negotiating a formula for a freeze of rent and services charges with arrears written off on a one-time basis. Non-payment continued into the negotiations period, however. Whether or not black township residents would accept payment for hard services now that a non-racial government was advocating payment remained uncertain well into Thabo Mbeki’s administration.

**Organizing the MDM**

During the 1980s, followers of the ANC and the UDF lived under a broad ideological tent. Rarely has a liberation movement made fewer demands, ideologically, on its supporters as did the UDF during this period. Liberals, Marxists, African Nationalists, and ethnic capitalists all lived under the same roof. In the 1980s, broad coalitions in civic associations coordinated street and area committees. One of the strongest components of the UDF was the well-organized trade union movement. They were supported by and linked to unions with many union leaders taking an active role in civics. However, the UDF had much on their agenda, which was different from the trade union movement (Beck 1991).

Over time, however, the UDF came to behave more like an organization and less like a front. By 1986, in the wake of the township revolt, the UDF had been transformed from a coalition of civic groups into a “more vanguardist, party-like organization” (Seekings 2000, p. 190). The UDF leadership, according to Seekings (2000), described themselves in terms of the “Gramscian” concept of hegemony, based on People’s power. The UDF’s emphasis in the late 1980s was on organization and discipline rather than liberalism and diversity.

The formation of an ANC controlled MDM in 1987, after the UDF was effectively banned, was an important step in bringing the ANC to power. The UDF in the 1980s provided the ANC with an intact internal popular support base and gave South African politics a culture of pluralism (Barrell 2000). At the same time, however, the UDF was not able to control grassroots organizations, especially during the township revolts.

Both the UDF and the ANC in the late 1980s had reached a strategic hiatus. They sought unity over each other, but in an authoritarian manner which caused disunity. Some within the UDF were particularly unhappy with the ANC’s romantic view of revolution. As Rian Malan (1990, p. 136) wryly noted, "All the anti-apartheid resistance organizations were essentially socialist in orientation, but it was the whites [in the movement] who were the most dogmatic, the most prone to dotting i's, crossing t's and enforcing doctrinal purity."

The 1987 MDM was defined as the UDF, COSATU, the exiled ANC, white anti-apartheid organizations (including the SACP and even some white parliamentarians), and progressive homeland leaders (Malan 1990). The SACP, and particularly white intellectuals in the party, had long been identified with the ideology of the MDM. In 1990, one ANC leader described the UDF, and by extension the MDM, as “the Vanguard of the national democratic revolution that nobody wanted” (Picard, Research Diary, June 6, 1996).[[6]](#footnote-6)

There was growing tension throughout the decade between the UDF and various Black Nationalist groups, including the AZAPO (Massie 1997). Conflict came from a "violent rivalry between political factions loyal to the PAC and those loyal to the ANC” (Goodman 1999, p. 66). This conflict occurred both inside and outside of South Africa. Conflict between UDF supporters and AZAPO and other BC groups was particularly common. In the late 1980s, a series of nasty, bloody conflicts occurred between the UDF and the BC Movement and AZAPO in the Eastern Cape and Soweto, with fighting between the UDF and the ANC on the one hand and Inkatha on the other in Natal.

The conflict between UDF supporters and BC groups was particularly bitter and involved "particularly vicious fighting" (Wentzel 1999, p. 486). Much is made of the ANC/UDF vs. Inkatha violence that had its origins in the 1985-1987 periods. However, it was quite common during this period for conflict between the ANC and BC groups to end as "UDF [and ANC] comrades burnt, stabbed and finally shot a 14 year old Black Consciousness Rival" (Gregor 1990, p. 237).

By the mid-1980s, the external resistance movement had its base in the unofficial civic associations that made up the UDF and the comrades who organized the street committees in the townships. Weapons and materials were purchased through "taxes" which were paid to civic associations and street committees rather than the government. The ANC’s role was recognized as a major force behind the resistance though the ANC could not claim to control all anti-apartheid activists or events in the country. The ANC took credit for maintaining an environment of militancy and imparting techniques of organizational survival and township revolt (Davis 1988). By 1986, underground resistance was supported and sometimes led by members of the underground ANC.

The ANC goal in the late 1980s was to continue to "drive out the township administrations set up under the Black Authorities Act and replace them with the UDF's own organizational structures" (Sparks 1990, p. 337). MK recruits were expected to become involved in community activities and township recruits received advanced training from externally based trainers. During the "people's war," MK would play a planning and organizational role within the country. MK cadres would link up with and train township youths and leaders of street committees (Seekings 2000).

The externally based MK troops quickly began to shift their focus to recruiting, training, and commanding units that were internally based within the townships. The ANC/UDF strategy was to avoid hitting soft targets (civilians). However, this policy goal was often violated between 1985 and 1988 and was linked to the partial loss of control, or at least the excuse of the loss of control, of the movement’s internal units. The ANC soldier was to be one of an elite corps of trainers capable of passing military skills on to homebound cell members in the ANC underground. By the end of 1986, the UDF/MK coaltion effectively controlled the townships.

What happened in the townships between 1984 and 1987 was "less than a full blown revolution yet it had many of its characteristics” (Sparks 1990, p. 340). Local level protest was often hidden beneath a rhetoric and appearance of national political protest. This was important in terms of linking local with national political objectives. It also contributed to the reshaping of local political consciousness and organization within the UDF. As black wrath in the townships grew, the government matched it, according to Sparks (1990, p. 348), "with a step-by-step escalation of repressive violence. Black anger met white fist until the country was in a virtual state of civil war." In the end, he goes on (1990, p. 368), "the country had become deadlocked in a violent equilibrium between a government that [could not] be overthrown and a spirit of mass resistance that [could not] be crushed."

By 1988, local authorities were in tatters, government policy makers had been weakened, and the UDF and its affiliates had proven extremely effective in pushing state authorities from the black townships. The township revolt was effectively over, and 97 townships were under military occupation. The National Party had won the battle, but was about to lose the war. Ultimately, the township disturbances from 1984-1987 led some in the National Party to conclude that it could not control the townships politically without the collaboration of the UDF/ANC alliance.

**The Townships Explode**

The Soweto experience was central to the township resistance given its visibility and significance to the international media. In many ways, Soweto was an unlikely source of opposition to the government. More than any other township, Soweto had an embryonic middle class and many people in the township were gainfully employed. Before the 1976 Soweto uprising, 40 men were enough to keep the peace in the whole Soweto area (Mufson 1991a). The Soweto uprising and its aftermath were to change all of that.

The explosions of violent resistance in Soweto and other black townships in 1976 were brutally repressed by the Vorster, and later the Botha, regimes. In the next few years, government repression, including assassination, the use of torture, and mysterious deaths, intensified. Steve Biko, in September of 1977, was the 46th person to die in prison. However, this repression only demonstrated the bankruptcy of the government's urban policy.

The initial response of the Soweto establishment (and middle class residents of other townships) toward urban resistance was mixed. In reaction to early unrest in Soweto, the black business community stressed the need "to build up a black middle class as a bulwark against revolutionary elements, and to provide a stable community with solid materialist values"(Sampson 1987, p. 153). At the same time, Soweto leaders represented the counter-elite of the banned ANC (represented in part during this period by Winnie Mandela) and many had become involved in the UDF. Middle class black leaders were at the forefront of the rent boycott issue that became symbolic of the protests of the period.

In 1960, the Sharpeville massacre had marked the change from passive resistance to active struggle. Sharpeville violence also marked the beginning of conflict in 1984. Massive resistance broke out in the black townships of the Vaal in September 1984. The Vaal Uprising of 1984-1985 began the most intensive wave of violence and unrest in South Africa. The Eastern Cape revolt soon followed and between February and May 1985 in this region, "[t]own councilors, their homes and businesses, became prime targets of attack. Several were killed and many went into hiding" (Grest 1988, p. 106). It was but a short step to the assassination of black local councilors and the declaration of the ANC’s long awaited "people's war."

The outburst became a bush fire across the country. Government introduced troops into the townships and the war was on. On March 21, 1985, (the 20th anniversary of Sharpeville) at Langa, outside the white town of Uitenhage, twenty black demonstrators were shot dead by the South African police. The impact of these events, through the medium of television, on international public opinion was immediate. For the first time, in the mid-1980s international television technology brought township poverty and repression to the people of Western Europe and North America.

In 1985, as the uprising reached Soweto, the government declared the first state of emergency (Interview with Coleman, 1990). The damage had been done. By April 1985, because of the mass resistance, there were only three BLAs still functioning in the country. Loss of control both prevented an upgrading of infrastructure in the townships and undermined the legitimacy of the BLAs and the Regional Service Councils that supported BLAs financially.

BLAs, verbally and physically, were attacked by resident associations, neighborhood groups, and civic associations throughout the period from 1985 to 1987 and effectively collapsed in the wake of the urban violence between 1984 and 1987. The crisis in local government garnered international attention with stories that elected black councillors had been repudiated or killed, often by the infamous necklace method. Newspaper stories identified the source of the problem as a lack of autonomy and insufficient financing and accountability within local administrative councils in African townships. More than anything else, it was violence and repression in the townships that led to the international sanctions and disinvestment which pressured the South African government to the bargaining table.

All of the resistance groups in the townships shared one over-arching principle during this period, non-collaboration with the state and with government-created institutions. This principle led to what Sparks (1990) calls the Khmer Rouge element of terror and virtue, characterized by the comrades and the gruesome necklace method of the 1985-87 period. Particular targets were black councillors in BLAs who were portrayed as collaborators with apartheid. Harassment, bomb attacks, and even death were meted out to township politicians during this period by peoples' courts. BLAs and paramilitary forces proved completely ineffective in controlling this conflict.

Direct action during this period often involved the killing of BLA councilors and the widespread destruction of property. With their little boxes of matches, to paraphrase Winnie Mandela, township youths took on the might of the apartheid regime. The sharpness of the animosity towards BLA councillors and others who collaborated with the state surprised many both within and outside of South Africa. It must be kept in mind, however, that the brunt of black anger was not toward the moderation of black councillors "in itself but that their moderation sustained the basics of a system whose basics [were] fundamentally unacceptable” (Beckett 1985, p. 30).

The clampdown was managed by the newly strengthened and military dominated state security system. The Botha government faced a number of dilemmas as it approached township resistance. Most important there was a saturation problem. The danger was clear. As one commentator noted, "If the government [didn’t] saturate every ghetto with troops and police, minimally-patrolled neighborhoods [might] at some point become what the comrades called ‘liberated zones.’ Saturation required focus on small isolated groups of people" (Gottschalk 1988, p. 497).

Although the government took drastic steps in 1987 and 1988 to repress the urban revolt ultimately they were not successful. Government policy makers became acutely aware of the implications of suppressing black political activity. In spite of the coercive mechanisms put in place, the potential for black resistance against apartheid remained high. The government's failure was that it believed that "by continuing to suppress black organizations it could effectively cripple anti-apartheid activity" (Meredith 1988, pp. 225-226). While the clampdown sometimes brought temporary calm to the townships, it gave the South African white electorate and its politicians a false sense of security which would be shattered two years later with the resignation of P.W. Botha and the dramatic announcements of February 2 by F.W. de Klerk.

In South Africa's urban areas, "[e]xtra-parliamentary, mainly black, political organizations--youth, student and pupil bodies, civic associations and black trade unions…demonstrated a remarkable capacity to veto state initiatives, especially those that affect[ed] the black community" (Glaser 1987b, p. 389). Rent boycotts became the primary weapon for the resistance movements (Poto 1988). In February of 1988, the South African government prohibited 17 prominent anti-apartheid organizations, including the UDF and AZAPO, from intervening in political processes, effectively banning them. Similar restrictions were imposed on the giant labor federation, COSATU. The effect of such restrictions was to drive political activity underground. Eighteen months later the apartheid government gave up, opened up negotiations with the ANC/UDF, unbanned all organizations, and released Nelson Mandela.

Township violence in its most protracted form lasted for almost three years. It was characterized by organized attacks on BLAs, the use of "necklacing" as a means of assassination, and violent clashes between gangs of township youths ("comrades") and the South African security forces. Resistance to the South African government reached a crescendo in 1987 when the government suddenly and decisively clamped down on the UDF and the civics association. As unrest developed, "blacks were quitting the...councils like conscripts deserting a retreating army" (Mufson 1991a, p. 105). Eighteen months later the move towards formal negotiations began

**The UDF and the ANC in the Townships**

Structural views of the violence suggested that the residents of the townships revolted because they were deprived of their status in the urban economy and because of material grievances. To government officials, conspiratorial theories of change explained urban violence in the 1980s and was linked to UDF and ANC agitation and outside intervention. Evidence suggests that the impact of national or external organizations on urban violence in the first half of the 1980s was at best indirect (Seekings 1991). Local forces were in many cases the primary motivations for urban revolt. The 1980s left a legacy of violence and "no-go" areas in South Africa's cities that would be felt in South Africa for a long time (Wentzel 1995, p. 7).

In most of South Africa’s townships, those involved in the conflict defined the struggle as bimodal soon after the beginning of the violence in 1985. Those opposing the state (the UDF and other organizations of the MDM) often labeled themselves as "comrades." On the other side, as we have seen, were those identified with the state (collaborators, in the UDF parlance). Such a bi-modality was carried into the negotiations after 1990.

For the township police protecting black councilors, the goal was to destroy the civics by attacking the organizational system of students and youths, the "comrades," who were challenging BLAs. In some places, the security police were initially successful. For example, in the squatter camps around Crossroads, "vigilantes… controlled by a long-established squatter boss, Johnson Ngxobongwana, succeeded in driving out comrades from their strongholds" (Meredith 1988, pp. 208-209). Vigilante groups and the violent paramilitary groups that surrounded township conservatives usually were supported by government or homeland authorities. They were often responsible for additional informal repression. Also identified as collaborators were Inkatha in Natal and the “*witdoeke*” in the Eastern and Western Cape.

At the bottom end of the control process were local security forces and municipal policemen with various township names, kitskonstabels, *Askaris*,[[7]](#footnote-7) or instant police (Schlemmer 1988). Township internal security was further strengthened in the late 1980s by the recruitment of thousands of black so called 'special constables' or kitskonstabels. These were tasked to augment police riot squads. The term *Askaris* was used in two senses. Loosely used by the South African security, it referred to the blacks serving in government auxiliary forces, "death squads" from an ANC/UDF perspective. More specifically, it referred to MK guerrillas who had been "turned" by the government and had been placed in government security units (Laurence 1990).

Township politicians who sided with the government were described by one journalist as "blacks who had a political or economic stake in the system, who disapproved of the comrades and who were prepared to do the government's dirty work for them" (Leach 1987, p. 208). According to an observer who closely watched the townships in the 1980s:

Those black mayors who yet survived had become virtual warlords, kept in power by "blackjacks" or "greenbeans" - young black men who were given guns, uniforms, and three weeks police training and sent in to shore up the collapsing structures of state. The slogan of the ANC and the United Democratic Front [after] 1985 was "render South Africa ungovernable," and it had come close to succeeding - in the townships, if nowhere else (Malan 1990, p. 217).

Communication between the ANC and the UDF became more difficult after 1987. Because of the government crackdown, structures in the country had broken down and messages became scrambled (Interview with De la Harpe, 1997). After 1987, though the state suppressed the legal anti-apartheid groups including the UDF and the renamed MDM, the front quickly reorganized. Suppression of the UDF increased the strategic importance of the exile bureaucratic structures of the ANC during the final stages of pre-negotiation before the unbanning of organizations in February of 1990.

The seizure of power in township after township in 1985 proceeded so rapidly that “it caught the ANC and UDF leadership unprepared" (Davis 1988, p. 13). Neither the UDF nor the ANC were ready for such a rapid collapse of urban BLAs. The period was characterized "by a marked increase in worker and community action on the one hand, and state repression on the other" (Stadler 1987, p. 1).

**Conclusion**

The relationship between P.W. Botha's reforms, the township revolts, and the securocrat response to the total onslaught was direct. The international response to the apartheid system grew out of the visual image of international conflict and repression that flashed across the world's television screens. The irony of the 1980s was that there had been a purposive and coherent reform effort, on the one hand, and there had been the capacity of a national liberation, trade union, and military movement, on the other, to sustain a level of activity effective enough to render the government reform movement in operable (Cobbett et al. 1988). Organized resistance between 1984 and 1987 would challenge the foundations of the South African state in a manner which had never occurred before.

Political resistance against the apartheid system and the striving for political change never became a full-fledged revolution. Rather, township resistance combined with international sanctions, low-level violence, and passive resistance against the apartheid bureaucracy and its authoritarian value system, influenced the two sides to negotiate. The focal point of resistance was in the streets and alleys of black townships of the apartheid city. In the end, the non-violent economic methods, both internally and externally were more important than violence (Zunes 1999).

The political collapse of the apartheid regime in 1990 was directly related to the challenges posed to the regime by the mass-based UDF. While the external challenges of the outlawed ANC and the impact of trade and financial sanctions were important subsidiary influences, it was the economic resistance and revolution in the streets and alleys in South Africa's black townships that provided the focal point of resistance and the *coup de grace* to the apartheid system. The approaching negotiations would be impacted by the nature of the internal organizations in South Africa. Both the BC group, the Black Forum and the UDF practiced internal democracy in their decision-making. Within the prison group, there was a great deal of toleration for different points of view on Robben Island (Gumede 2005).

1. Ironically and sadly, Webster became one of the well-known victims of repression with his assassination on May 1, 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Because of their adherence to the ANC Freedom Charter. This group broadly defined has also been called the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), though the latter term often is used to include the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The others were presumably the COSATU and the ANC/SACP alliance. Paulus Zulu of the University of Natal coined this phrase and used it in discussions with Picard, Research Diary, noted diary on August 6, 1992. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This comment no doubt relates to the necklacing and other acts of assassination perpetrated by UDF affiliated groups of "comrades." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Wararas are charterists/ANC and the Zim-Zims are BC/AZAPO. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with an ANC cadre who asked to remain anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Askari is the Swahili word for policeman or guard. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)