

The Legacies and Meanings of The Period of The United Democratic Front (Udf) for National Liberation and Democratisation in South Africa

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This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the United Democratic Front in South Africa. Formed as a front, which came to have some 600, affiliated organisations representing over two million people, the UDF played a significant if not decisive role in the defeat of apartheid and creating conditions for a negotiated settlement. The paper does not aim at an analysis of the UDF as a particular type of institution, relating to its affiliates in a specific manner. It intends, instead, to ask questions about the legacies and meanings of the period inaugurated with the front's formation. Amongst the significant components of this period was a mass upsurge of a character that had never previously been seen in the country, manifested particularly through the establishment of organs of people's power. The notion of people's power is interrogated, to establish the extent to which it extended previous notions of what democracy in South Africa should mean, including reinterpreting notions found in the Freedom Charter. It is also seen as entailing a variety of manifestations of popular self-empowerment, whose significance for contemporary South African democracy is examined.

The period of people's power also saw manifestations of undemocratic trends. The paper tries to identify what conditions promoted these 'deviations' and what conditions were most conducive to successful implementation of people's power.

The relationship between the ANC and the UDF is examined in order to address claims that the ANC set up and directed the UDF, whether from exile or from the underground.

Despite the gains and deepening of democracy entailed in the period, there were also weaknesses, particularly in terms of commitment to pluralism. The paper examines why this was the case and what this means in terms of the legacy that the front has left for contemporary South Africa.