



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Seekings J. : The UDF: a history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991

Kessel, W.M.J.van

Citation

Kessel, W. M. Jvan. (2000). Review of Seekings J. : The UDF: a history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983-1991. *H-Safrica*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4720>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4720>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeremy Seekings. *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991.* Copublished with David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, and James Currey Publishers, Oxford. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000. xiii + 371 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 0-8214-1336-8.

Reviewed by Ineke van Kessel, African Studies Centre, Leiden, Netherlands.
Published by H-SAfrica (December, 2000)

'An Organisational History of the United Democratic Front'

When the National Executive Committee of the United Democratic Front held its final meeting on 14 August 1991 to wrap up the process of disbanding the organisation, the last decision on the agenda was to commission a book on the history of the UDF, to be 'rigorously researched'. Thanks to this foresighted decision, inspired by an awareness of the historical significance of events in the 1980s, we now have Jeremy Seekings's book on the UDF.

Readers suspicious of historical works commissioned by organisations that are themselves the subject of the book can rest reassured. Seekings's history of the UDF is indeed rigorously researched and covers in detail all the disputes, quarrels, squabbles and confusions that marked the short but turbulent existence of the Front. This aspect of the work of the researcher has been facilitated by prominent figures in the UDF's leadership, who displayed an admirable quality of openness and self-critical reflection.

What was the UDF? The United Democratic Front was formed in early 1983 to contest the constitutional reforms proposed by the National Party government, which sought to co-opt coloured and Indian South Africans in a new political dispensation while maintaining white domination and racial segregation. In convenient shorthand, the Front consisted of some 600 affiliated organisations. Most organisations fitted into sectors which the UDF had identified as crucial forces for change: youth, civic organisations and women. Church-based groups and religious organisations were also prominent, but the major black trade unions kept some distance from the Front. In many respects, the UDF carried the traditions of the African National Congress. The apartheid state soon came to believe that the UDF was in fact the

internal wing of the ANC. Although the UDF acknowledged the primacy of the ANC as the 'authentic' national liberation movement and revered the ANC leadership in exile and in prison, it did have an identity of its own, with appropriate strategies and tactics. Among the innovations in the UDF style of anti-apartheid campaigning were the emphasis on local organisations built around bread-and-butter concerns of ordinary residents, its sophisticated public relations, its capacity to reach out to sectors of the South African population which were alienated by National Party politics but not ready to join the liberation movement (the 'middle ground') and its massive use of a wide array of media, ranging from community papers and posters to buttons and T-shirts.

Its first tour de force was a boycott campaign against the tricameral elections in August 1984. The low turn-out in the Coloured elections, followed by an even lower turn-out of Indian South Africans, was a resounding success for the UDF. This victory was followed by an episode of disorientation, in which the initiative passed from the arena of national politics to the African townships where discontent about living conditions and educational standards provided an explosive mix. The activists who had initiated the UDF had conceived of the Front as an ad hoc mechanism to coordinate the campaign against the tricameral elections. Now they were forced to come to terms with this groundswell of militancy from the townships. Seekings describes in detail how the UDF evolved from a front, charged with coordinating the activities of its affiliates, to an organisation which sought to initiate and to steer protest and resistance. The Front played a central role in the revolts of the 1980s, although, as Seekings rightly states, the UDF should not be regarded as coterminous with the entire Charterist (or ANC-aligned) movement inside the country.

The UDF has been variously described as the internal, aboveground wing of the ANC, as a front-type umbrella, as a social movement from below, and as a political organisation from above. These different perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can result in complementary studies, as Seekings states in his review of my book on the UDF. [1] In my own book, I have opted for a perspective on the UDF seen as a social movement from below, resulting in an emphasis on local affiliates.

In his book, Seekings presents an overall organisational history of the UDF, as seen 'from above'. He describes in detail the planning phase of the UDF and the various initiatives which resulted in a revival of Charterist activity around 1980. He unearths new information about the involvement of the ANC, particularly of ANC cadres and sympathizers operating underground inside South Africa. Many leading UDF personalities were in some way linked to the ANC, which is not to say that the UDF was directed by the ANC. The exiled ANC leadership tended to focus on military strategies, neglecting the political opportunities which opened up during the 1980s. Seekings provides some interesting details about the first formal contact between the UDF leadership and the ANC in exile, which took place only in January 1986 in Stockholm.

The pattern of his book follows the organisational chart of the UDF: a National Executive Committee (NEC) with a National General Council (supposedly meeting on an annual basis, but in fact convening only twice) acting as overall structure. This structure was duplicated on the level of the UDF regions with Regional Executive Committees (REC's) and Regional General Councils (RGC's). The third level consisted of locally-based affiliates (such as civic associations) and local branches of sectoral organisations (such as the Congress of South African Students or the South African Youth Congress). Area committees or zonal committees were meant to liaise between the local and the regional level. Seekings focuses on the national and regional level. The local level, which he has explored in numerous other publications, remains largely outside the scope of this book. One result of this choice is a strong emphasis on urban opposition politics and a comparative neglect of resistance in the bantustans.

On the basis of a wide range of interviews and a thorough study of the vast archival collections, Seekings records in meticulous detail the business of the NEC, the UDF office in Johannesburg, and of the various REC's and RGC's. He analyses the distinct character of regions with vastly different political and demographic dynamics, such as Natal, the Western Cape and the urban conglomerate of Southern Transvaal (present-day Gauteng). Frictions and policy differences, arising from different backgrounds, ideological positions or personal jealousies make up much of the ongoing business. He rightly spends much time discussing the pro's and cons of strategies such as boycotts and stay-aways, which were central to the popular protests of the 1980s. The relationship between the UDF and the trade union movement, which gradually improved over the decade, is also well covered.

The last phase of the UDF, from the revival of popular protest in 1989 till the dissolution of the Front in 1991, is particularly well researched. These chapters are quite useful, as the final phase of the Front is rather neglected in much of the existing literature.

Yet, something is lacking. At times the reader tends to get lost in the maze of NEC, Working Committees, REC's and RGC's, losing sight of the political and social turbulence that transformed South African society. The structures at times obscure the substance: what did all these deliberations mean to the people involved, how were they understood on the ground, how did people try to make sense of their often bewildering experiences? What was at stake in the struggle of the 1980s? What kind of society was envisaged by the UDF leadership, and by their grassroots constituencies?

The author pays scant attention to the UDF's affiliates, as he himself readily admits. By "the UDF", he means the organisational structure in a geographical sense, of which he indeed provides a comprehensive and comprehensible history. But why did he choose to focus on formal bureaucratic organisation only, ignoring the role of the hundreds of affiliates who indeed constituted the UDF? Without these affiliated organisations, there would have been no UDF. If the NEC and REC's served as skeleton to give administrative structure to the UDF, the affiliates surely were the lifeblood of this dynamic movement. Towards the end of the 1980s, the UDF considered an organisational restructuring

in which the sectors (youth, civics and women) would be more central to the organisation than the geographical set-up. Women, incidentally, were in fact a marginal 'sector' in the UDF: while it was accepted that civics and student youth pursued their own agenda in addition to the national struggle, women were expected to subordinate women's concerns to the primary goal of national liberation.

On p. 163, COSAS is rightly labeled a "key UDF affiliate", but when this key affiliate is involved in organising stay-aways or school boycotts, these are not understood as UDF activities. To be sure, many campaigns were undertaken without the endorsement of the UDF's secretariat or NEC, but the activists involved saw themselves as belonging to nationwide mass movement. The fact of belonging to this broad movement gave a wider meaning to a chain of local protests, which otherwise would have remained parochial affairs. Through the UDF, rent boycotts, school protests, bus boycotts etc. became linked to a nationwide movement that struggled against apartheid and strived after a more just socio-economic order.

The limitations of this organisational history come out most clearly in the sections of the book dealing with the UDF's concept of "people's power":

The elaboration of the strategic framework of people's power was central to the nascent hegemony of the UDF. People's power was presented as a stage in the struggle for democracy and liberation beyond the stage of ungovernability. This, together with its explicit focus on power, made it attractive to insurrectionists on the streets. But its emphasis was very much on organisation and discipline -the priority of those sections of the Charterist movement inside the country which had come to the fore in the UDF. People's power required extending the social base of resistance beyond the youth, and indeed subordinating the militancy of the youth to the concerns of more cautious sections of the community. In the schools, people's power meant that the students should return to class; their role was to seize control of the classroom and appropriate this space for people's education, not to seize control of the streets. (193-194)

But these strategic considerations of the national leadership lent themselves to a wide range of interpretations. The concept of people's power

was indeed advocated by those hoping to promote organisation and discipline, but it could easily be appropriated by more impatient types who favoured insurrectionary strategies. People's power could just as easily be invoked as legitimisation for youth rebellion.

Moreover, people's power was not just about strategy and tactics. For many in the UDF, people's power prefigured their ideal of post apartheid society. In a society based on people's power, democracy would be defined by people's participation rather than by political pluralism. In the factories, workers would take control over the production process, abandoning the specialization which alienated workers from the products of their work. Everybody had to be involved in everything. In people's education, the emphasis would be on egalitarianism rather than on academic achievement, an aspiration well captured in COSAS's slogan "pass one, pass all".

The ideological contents of the UDF are consistently downplayed in the book. Yet, UDF activists did have visions of the new society they were hoping to build, visions which became increasingly radical as the decade progressed and repression mounted. Only in the concluding chapter does the author address the "elements of socialist rhetoric" (297) in the UDF, but he hastens to dismiss these as populist sentiments against capitalism, not based on any clear socialist vision. When the capitalist elites gave their guarded support to a process of political democratisation, socialist rhetoric was dropped. The UDF's goal was

This I find difficult to swallow, having myself interviewed hundreds of UDF activists and having digested substantial piles of UDF publications and records. Seekings refers to research conducted after the 1994 elections (!), which concludes that there is little evidence of revolutionary sentiments among African voters (p. 298). But it does not follow that these sentiments were also negligible a decade earlier, under vastly different conditions. Seekings is surely right to conclude that the 'moment' of the mid-1980s had much less revolutionary potential than is often imagined, but it does not follow that activists in the mid-1980s shared this assessment at that time. Much of the UDF publications and even more of the ANC propaganda sounds highly anachronistic on the threshold of the 21st century, but before the fall of the Berlin Wall (and some time after) many

in the UDF genuinely and fervently believed in some kind of socialist transformation. The dreaded label 'liberal' amounted to the ultimate abuse. Marxist-Leninist workshops were much en vogue, from Sekhukhuneland to Cape Town. Activists cherished their Marxist handbooks as fountains of wisdom. For quite a few of my interviewees, the Soviet Union epitomised the ideal of people's power. For a gerontocratic bureaucratic state tottering on the brink of collapse along ethnic lines, this surely was an incongruous label. But many of my informants did not want to hear the slightest critical note about their Soviet heroes: their image of Soviet society as a model of people's power was a tenet of faith. If many UDF activists did not manage to fully digest all Marxist classics, that does not mean that they were not fervent believers in a new, egalitarian order, which many of them understood as a socialist order. A possible explanation for these divergent assessments is that Seekings conducted most of his interviews in 1992, while most of my fieldwork was done in 1990.

Having captured state power, many in the ANC (which now had absorbed most of the UDF leadership and following) settled for political democracy and black advancement, concentrating on the consolidation of newly conquered power and privilege. But this outcome can not be projected on the struggles of the preceding decade: that amounts to writing history backwards. The almost instant conversion to economic and political liberalism after 1990 was dictated by the rapidly changing international environment and the collapse of socialist models, rather than based on previously held liberal convictions. Here, the strong focus on organisational history obscures the contents of the UDF: it was more than just a political organisation primarily concerned with strategy and tactics.

In terms of the UDF's organisational history, Seekings has written the definitive work. But as the author himself acknowledges, numerous aspects of resistance history in the 1980s remain to be covered: popular political culture in the 1980s, the role of youth and student movements, notably COSAS; the role of the South African Communist Party inside South Africa, the low profile of women. With his history of the United Democratic Front, Jeremy Seekings has provided a solid framework: future researchers can build on it, putting more flesh on the bones.

NOTES

[1]. Ineke van Kessel, *Beyond Charlottesville and London*: University Press of Virginia, 2000, reviewed by Jeremy Seekings on H-SAfrica, <h-africa@h-net.msu.edu>, 1 December 2000, archived at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~safrica/> [path: Discussion logs/View h-safrica logs by month/Dec 2000].

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu

Library of Congress call number: DT1963.S44 2000

Subjects:

- United Democratic Front
- South Africa -- Politics and government -- 1978-1989
- National liberation movements -- South Africa
- Self-determination, National -- South Africa

Citation: Ineke van Kessel. "Review of Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991*, H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews, December, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=22940981048096>.

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.