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## 1. Introduction

'The development of people's power has caught the imagination of our people', proclaimed Zwelakhe Sisulu in Durban in March 1986. During March, April and May 1986 extra-parliamentary political networks in South Africa were dominated by discussion of 'people's power'. Sisulu used a common formulation in his explanation that the state had lost control of many townships in the face of popular protest and 'ungovernability', and now the people were beginning to exercise control themselves through the 'democratic organs of people's power'.<sup>1</sup> This was no idle speculation. One month before, a Conservative Party Member of Parliament claimed that the African National Congress (ANC) and United Democratic Front (UDF) had already taken over twenty-seven townships in the Eastern Cape.<sup>2</sup> In these and other parts of the country, street and area committees were formed, people's courts and other anti-crime initiatives proliferated, and 'people's education' surfaced in schools. By April/May 1986, these were conscious elements in the broader phenomenon of 'people's power'.

The period of 'people's power' has been the subject of a growing literature. This includes studies of Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage by Swilling<sup>3</sup>, Alexandra by Jochelson<sup>4</sup> and Carter<sup>5</sup>, and Mamelodi by Boraine.<sup>6</sup> Shubane and others have begun to sketch the belated emergence of street committees in Soweto.<sup>7</sup> A number of other studies focus on 'people's courts' in particular, including Scharf and his co-authors' detailed studies of Guguletu in Cape Town.<sup>8</sup> 'People's education' has also been scrutinised, although through overviews rather than case-studies.<sup>9</sup> There is a clear need for a synthesis of these studies, as well as for further research (especially in the townships of the Eastern Cape and Border hinterland, including Cradock). But this is not the concern of this paper. Here I simply try to assess the role of the UDF in the development of 'people's power'. This paper focuses not so much on the structures of 'people's power' on the ground, but rather on the changing nature of 'people's power' as a concept and a strategy, as reflected in UDF media and documentation. I do not discuss perceived strategies at the township level.

Whilst 'people's power' were central to the township revolt of 1985-86, it meant different things to different people and at different times. In this paper I try to identify and periodise some of the leading conceptions of 'people's power', focusing on those which predominated within the UDF at national and regional levels. The UDF played an

important role in the conceptual development of 'people's power' as well as in the inter-organisational co-ordination and networking that facilitated the growth of the phenomenon. As other studies of the UDF have emphasised, the UDF served as a 'political and ideological centre' providing organisational and ideological (or conceptual) links between disparate localised struggles and the 'overall' struggle for national political change. The period of 'people's power' represented a key moment in the history of the UDF, and particularly the UDF's engagement with township protests.

The concept of 'people's power' seems to have been employed first by the ANC, in the late 1970s. 'People's power' was contrasted with state power, as the intended outcome of the struggle for liberation. The ANC understood the struggle itself in primarily military terms, with Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) sparking and leading popular insurrections. During the mid-1980s, however, the escalation of protest and resistance within the country generated an alternative logic of struggle. In a growing number of townships organisations aligned to the UDF and ANC won a measure of control, with state authority limited to the deployment of military or para-military units. Grass-roots level structures which had initially been formed to circumvent state restrictions on extra-parliamentary organisation began to take on a wider range of functions, such as alternative (or 'popular') policing, dispute settlement and justice, representation, and even service provision. Many activists inside the country saw their grass-roots structures as expressing 'people's power' in the present. The development of 'people's power' as a strategic priority by the ANC and UDF in early 1986 represented a somewhat makeshift marriage of the external dynamic of insurrection with the internal dynamic of organisation-building.

This paper draws on two major sources. First, and most extensively, it analyses the portrayal and interpretation of civic struggles in the pages of the UDF's own and UDF-linked media. The UDF itself produced pamphlets, stickers and posters, newsletters (UDF News at the regional level, and UDF Update at the national level from July 1985) and, from late 1985, a 'theoretical journal' (Isizwe). The UDF-linked press included newspapers such as the student-produced SASPU National and State of the Nation, Cape Town's Grassroots and Pretoria's The Eye. These newspapers were independent of the UDF, and indeed predated the UDF. But they had close links, and provided a key medium for the propagation of the UDF's views on struggle and organisation. Secondly, and still inadequately, this paper draws on interviews and documentary evidence, particularly to chart the growth of organisational coordination.



## 2. Outside and inside: the ANC, people's war, and internal organisation

The concept of 'people's power' seems to have been introduced to the South African political lexicon by the ANC. I am unsure precisely when the concept came into use, but Barrell's account first uses the term in the context of the ANC's strategic rethinking in 1979. Through the 1960s and 70s ANC strategy had revolved around the armed struggle, focused on rural areas, and typically 'commanded, controlled and supplied from abroad'. Only in the late 1970s did the ANC begin to shift away from what Barrell terms its 'militarist vanguardism'. The first factor in this was the student-led uprising of 1976.

'The 1976 events challenged three strands of strategic thinking within the ANC and SACP: that armed struggle was a necessary "detonator" of, or precondition for, popular upsurge; that armed struggle should be primarily rurally based; and that armed combat in South Africa should be a distinct and separate specialisation in parallel to political forms of popular mobilisation'.<sup>10</sup>

The ANC began to speak of a 'people's war'. In 1978 a top-level ANC delegation toured Vietnam. On its return a Politico-Military Strategy Commission was appointed to rethink ANC strategy, learning from the events of 1976 as well as the Vietnamese experience.

The Strategy Commission recommended a 'turn to the masses', with increased importance attached to political struggles to build urban revolutionary bases. Shifting from its earlier belief that armed struggle would detonate popular insurrection, the ANC saw its armed wing (Umkhonto we Sizwe, MK) playing a central role in a broader armed struggle, sustained and fuelled by political struggles.

'...people's power in South Africa would be won by revolutionary violence in a protracted armed struggle which must involve the whole people and in which partial and general mass uprisings would play a vital role.'<sup>11</sup>

'People's power', as the antithesis of state power, would be achieved through 'people's war', led by MK.

From 1979 the ANC strongly promoted organisation-building inside the country, and encouraged moves towards the formation of a broad front. But its understanding of 'people's power' seems to have remained based in and essentially limited to a strategic vision which saw change coming through armed struggle and insurrection. The chronic fragmentation and other weaknesses of the ANC's internal structures impeded the development of a political rather than just military conception of 'people's power'. This was evident in key ANC literature in 1985. In its January 8 anniversary statement the ANC called: 'Forward with the Year of the Cadre! Mobilise and March Forward to People's Power'. The statement was addressed to 'a fighting people', who had 'planted the seeds of people's war'. Supporters were called upon to strengthen the ANC's underground

cadres and MK's armed struggle, and to seize control of areas so that they could provide revolutionary bases for the 'people's army'. The statement was published in March in the ANC mouthpiece, *Sechaba*, under the title 'Render South Africa Ungovernable'.<sup>12</sup>

'People's power' was seen as the goal, to be achieved through armed insurrection. Other ANC literature in 1985 emphasised similar themes. Barrell writes of an ANC pamphlet, widely distributed inside South Africa in April 1985. The pamphlet, entitled 'ANC call to the nation: The future is within our grasp!', presented what Barrell terms 'a clear insurrectionary perspective':

'A long-lasting national work stoppage, backed by our oppressed communities and supported by armed activity, can break the backbone of the apartheid system and bring the regime to its knees.'<sup>13</sup>

There was a second understanding of 'people's power'. In the January issue of *Sechaba*, the recently exiled ANC thinker Mzala had already referred to 'organs of people's power'. In zones liberated by either armed or mass struggles, 'organs of people's power' would emerge, forming the nucleus of a new state.<sup>14</sup> But this prefigurative and organisational understanding of 'people's power' seems to have remained marginal to ANC strategy during most of 1985. The April 1985 pamphlet referred to 'people's committees in every block which could become the embryo of people's power', but - as Barrell interprets - these were seen in insurrectionary terms as 'mass revolutionary bases' for waging people's war. Moreover, these could only be fully consolidated with successful national insurrection.<sup>15</sup>

The ANC's emphasis on armed struggle was often somewhat at odds with political developments inside the country. Whilst the ANC itself had been a contributing factor to the formation and proliferation of above-ground organisations from 1979, this very process of organisation-building developed a logic which did not revolve around armed struggle. Many internal ANC-aligned activists did continue to attach primary importance to the armed struggle, but others were developing alternative (but complementary) strategies which attached secondary or no importance to armed struggle. The premise of these other strategies was that above-ground organisation, built through mass action around people's day-to-day issues, could defeat the state's reform initiatives. The state would thus be forced to make fundamental concessions.

The different emphases of these strategies was reflected in debates within the country over the relative importance of confrontation, mobilisation and organisation. Many of the leaders of the United Democratic Front favoured a cautious process of patient organisation-building, and were wary of generalised confrontation. This reflected in part their concern during 1983-84 with the direction and co-ordination of struggles against the proposed Tricameral Parliament, which meant prioritising campaigns in relatively conservative coloured and Indian areas. At this time the UDF was only



tenuously linked to the protests which were escalating in African townships in the Orange Free State, PWV and Eastern Cape. But the township protest spurred other Charterist leaders, mostly based in youth congresses and the Transvaal Release Mandela Committee but marginalised within the UDF, to call for more confrontational tactics. These included, from late 1984, the use of extended general strikes, as advocated in the ANC pamphlet distributed in April 1985 and quoted above but prioritised by few senior UDF leaders. Whilst there was extensive liaison between the UDF and ANC, the latter's insurrectionary emphasis was probably strengthened in 1984 and early 1985 by the flight into exile of some leading confrontationists - including, for example, Oupa Monareng and Thami Mali from Soweto.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Moving towards 'people's power': grass-roots organisation, 1984-85

The township protests of 1984 were the product of a complex set of local and national factors. The protests were rooted in, on the one hand, local material grievances (especially rent increases), the delegitimation of conservative township leaders, and the rising legitimacy and authority of radical civic organisations. On the other hand, the protests reflected the national political context, including discontent with the state's reform initiatives and the rising prominence of the UDF and ANC. It was their multi-faceted character that rendered the protests particularly powerful, posing difficulties not only for the state (concerned to suppress them) but also for national organisations like the ANC and UDF (concerned to harness or direct them).

During 1983-84 the UDF's national and regional structures were primarily concerned with campaigns and organisation-building in coloured and Indian areas, and remained somewhat cut-off from the developing situation in the townships. The UDF had opposed elections to Black Local Authorities (BLAs) in late 1983, but had left the campaigning to its affiliates. The UDF, increasingly beset by the detention of its leadership, failed to build on the anti-BLAs campaign. In the words of Popo Molefe, the UDF's national general-secretary, the UDF was 'trailing behind the masses'. In late 1984 the UDF's Transvaal leadership noted that: 'The masses expected UDF to give direction, UDF was not there to give direction, opportunists were there to seize the opportunity.' In early 1985 the UDF's National Secretariat warned that 'the UDF must work out an approach that will ensure that the UDF does not trail behind the masses but lead them.' Leading the masses meant promoting discipline and building strong local-level organisation, as well as intensifying pressure on the state through the use of a wider range of tactics.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst the ANC saw the eruption of protest as planting the 'seeds of people's war, and envisaged simply incorporating internal struggles into its own, primarily military, strategic perspective,<sup>18</sup> the UDF attached greater importance to organisation-building. To

be sure, many UDF leaders were active in the ANC underground, and some (such as Arnold Stofile in the Border region) were deeply involved in facilitating military underground structures and activities. But the UDF was nonetheless much more than a mere appendage of the ANC, and had its own distinct if complementary strategies. From early 1985, the UDF shifted its primary focus onto the increasingly confrontational struggles sweeping through townships countrywide. Its response involved three broad elements: promoting the ANC, both covertly and through campaigns such as the celebration of the Freedom Charter; exposing the brutality of state repression; and strengthening organisation. In April 1985 the UDF held a National General Council, in Azaadville on the West Rand, around the theme of 'From Protest to Challenge, from Mobilisation to Organisation.'

The UDF's emphasis on organisation-building reflected processes which were already underway on the ground. Political developments at the township level were throwing up new problems, dilemmas and opportunities. This was particularly pronounced in the small Eastern Cape town of Cradock, where Matthew Goniwe and others had developed strong local civic and other organisation. Whilst other civic activists had talked of the need for grass-roots structures, and had promoted house visits and meetings, a system of street committees had actually been implemented in Cradock. Goniwe was an important member of the ANC underground, charged with establishing an Area Political Command in the Karoo region. As such he led moves to form youth and civic structures (CRADOYA and CRADORA).<sup>18</sup> But organising on the ground soon took on a dynamic which could not be reduced to the needs of advancing towards a 'people's war'. Local level organisational development had other purposes, empowering local people and overcoming their deep-rooted fear and passivity, and enabling organisation to continue amidst state repression including the prohibition of public meetings.

The success of CRADORA's campaign against the township councillors - who resigned in November 1984 (and were accepted back into the 'community') - raised new dilemmas for the civic. An anonymous article in *Work in Progress*, written shortly after Goniwe's death in mid-1985, probably reflects the dilemma as seen by Cradock civic leaders:

'Following the resignation of the Village Council, CRADORA found itself performing a dual function. It operated as a pressure group, and found itself taking over some of the state's administrative roles, such as supervising the payment of pensions. ... CRADORA set up an advice centre, a literacy programme and revived the Child and Family Welfare Centre. ... Township authorities ... told [residents] to take their problems to Goniwe or Calata. ... CRADORA's dilemma is one which more and more community organisations will face in the future. The question is whether civics should act as administrative bodies where community councils collapse, and townships become more and more "ungovernable" by the state. Increasingly, CRADORA must ask itself what the limits of such action are, and how great the danger of co-option is.'<sup>19</sup>



In fact, there had already been some debate over these issues, particularly around the civic's involvement in a creche. Goniwe had consulted Stofile and other ANC underground leaders on this question before his death. Stofile advised him against getting involved in such activities.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of CRADORA and the creche raised the central dilemma of civic activity in an insurrectionary context. When was such an initiative 'reformist', retarding insurrectionary potential, and when did it provide a stronger base for insurrection? The issue was raised at the UDF's National General Council in April 1985. In his secretarial report to the NGC, Popo Molefe noted that:

'In the townships, the Black Local Authorities are inoperative. They are no longer able to dictate to the masses, and already over fifty of the councillors have resigned country wide. Some townships like Cradock and Uitenhage have no local government structures. Now our task is to extend our struggle beyond these apartheid structures and set up our alternative structures which will force the authorities to heed the popular demands of the people. We must set up projects to meet some of the practical needs of our people without compromising our principles. For example, advice offices, mobile clinics, etc, could be set up.'<sup>21</sup>

This formulation was entirely compatible with the ANC strategy: strengthening popular pressures for short-term gains could mobilise people and hence strengthen a revolutionary base. But I am not aware of any comparable discussion of 'practical' struggles within ANC documents from the time. In other words, the emphasis on organisation-building and thereby applying pressure on the state to meet popular demands seems to have arisen from within the country rather than outside. Indeed, this discussion was taking place in the same month as the ANC's pamphlet calling for general and indefinite general strikes was circulated.

The UDF's concern with 'alternative structures' does not seem to have involved an explicit commitment to civic organisations. The formulation is perhaps surprisingly vague. According to one set of minutes from the NGC, an Eastern Cape delegate asked Molefe to clarify what he meant.

'The general secretary explained these structures were democratic organisations operating outside of the government framework and needed to become the organisations of the people through which they could determine their own lives. The delegate accepted the clarification.'<sup>22</sup>

At the NGC there does not seem to have been much discussion of civics as part of the formal agenda. One commission, on the BLAs, raised the issue of community organisations replacing BLAs but reported that 'a fuller concept of community organisation must be developed'.<sup>23</sup> Overall, it seems that little importance was attached to

civics by some of the national UDF leadership. Goniwe, who was particularly aware of the potential strengths and pitfalls in a more assertive civic strategy, convened an informal meeting around the issue of civics, but it is unclear what was discussed.<sup>24</sup>

Following the NGC there was more widespread discussion of the scope and need for civic organisation. Besides the impetus from the NGC itself, the discussion reflected factors such as the deepening crisis and collapse of the BLAs, rising repression, and important local strategic initiatives. The collapse of the BLAs was the most conspicuous of these factors. In late April, the UDF Eastern Cape publicity secretary, Stone Sizani, claimed that civic organisations had taken control of Cradock and Uitenhage. PE would follow soon, he said, addressing 50 000 mourners at a funeral in Zwide township. 'As the government-created town councils crumble, our civic bodies are growing.'<sup>25</sup> In May SASPU National asked 'Who rules the townships?', answering 'Definitely not the councils'. Since September 1984, it reported, 147 councillors had resigned, 5 had been killed, 109 had been attacked, and 66 had had their houses burnt down.<sup>26</sup>

The second new impetus to developing organisation arose from intensified confrontation, including problems posed by both state repression and popular protest. In many areas public meetings were banned. 'There are problems in keeping people informed', Sizani said in May. 'It is difficult to operate from the street and the graveyard.' But at this stage Sizani did not refer to street committees.<sup>27</sup> The following issue of SASPU National, however, reported on the building of grass-roots organisation in Cradock and the East Rand township of Duduza.

'Cradock residents have set up street committees which meet weekly to discuss the grievances of people in that particular street. From there programmes of action can be developed.'<sup>28</sup>

In Duduza, area committees had been formed.<sup>29</sup> Reports of developments in Duduza apparently had an important impact elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> This probably reflected the combination of dramatic 'ungovernability' style protests (including violent direct action against councillors and other 'collaborators') with alternative organisation-building.

Thirdly, civics were being accorded increased importance in the Transvaal. Media such as SASPU National repeatedly emphasised the importance of organisation:

'Frequent spontaneous mass action can make it hard to maintain programmes of action and operate strategically and tactically. But the high level of confrontation at the moment demands more organisation, education and training, not less. The greatest gains are usually made from well thought out programmes of action and creative tactics.'<sup>31</sup>

In April 1985 the Soweto Civic hosted a workshop to discuss civic organisation. SCA activist Vincent Mogane had already been employed in a Johannesburg service organisation, the Labour Research Committee, which was then renamed Community



Education and Information (CEI) and restructured into, de facto, a UDF structure. Mogane's brief was to assist in building civics and civic networks in the Transvaal.<sup>32</sup> From May 1985 the UDF NEC began to prepare for a national civic conference.<sup>33</sup>

The slowly rising importance attached to grass-roots organisation was not articulated in terms of 'people's power', however. There does not seem to have been any public discussion, or even mention, of 'people's power' through mid-1985. At this time 'people's power' was still understood in terms of military rather than civic struggles, and as the outcome rather than the process of struggle. Thus there was no mention of people's power in a report published in UDF Update in July 1985, summarising a discussion paper prepared to explain the NGC's theme,<sup>34</sup> nor in any of the reports in SASPU National in mid-1985. Furthermore, whilst reports in the alternative media increasingly mentioned Cradock as a some kind of a model for grassroots civic organisation, it was not until the end of the year that the Eastern Cape experience seems to have been fully appreciated by the national leadership and alternative media based in Johannesburg.

The October/November issue of SASPU's State of the Nation (together with a supplement on the Eastern Cape and East Rand) represented a breakthrough in the analysis of popular organisation and struggle. The supplement was entitled 'Building People's Power'. Although 'people's power' was only mentioned once in the entire issue, the various constitutive elements of a new understanding of 'people's power' were being brought together for the first time. At this stage the concept of 'people's power' seem to have been vaguely understood in terms of a 'new phase of struggle', rather than being associated with particular types of structures. But grass-roots structures were being understood in new ways.

The issue discussed at length the ways in which activists had 'started to look at how to build democratic structures that could become organs of people's representation in the townships.' The impetus to this was seen as arising primarily from repression, which had become more thorough under the State of Emergency imposed in the Eastern Cape and PWV in July 1985. Public meetings were ruled out, and it was difficult to distribute pamphlets. Leaders needed new ways to communicate with the grass-roots, and to organise activities. State of the Nation provided the following account:

'... each township is broken down into areas, and the areas into streets. In each street one or two people take responsibility for calling house meetings to discuss issues and problems. The street rep sits on an area committee, which co-ordinates people's actions against whatever common problems there are. There is also an elected executive committee of that area committee. The street committee structures have particular advantages for organising in the current climate... They can withstand the most repression. Street reps can be low-profile and will be protected by the people in the street. If the street rep is detained, the street can appoint a new rep. In other words, since the community organisation is run at a mass level - rather than being an 'executive

organisation' - there will always be people to take over leadership responsibilities. And street committees provide a structure for training. ... [and] also a structure through which communication can reach every house within a short space of time."<sup>35</sup>

For the first time the Cradock experience was explicitly identified as a model and discussed at length.

'CRADORA has become something of a model as well. Its system of street committees and house meetings has inspired other areas to find ways of including their supporters in planning and decision-making under any circumstances. In Cradock this has not only ensured democracy, but has also developed the organisational and leadership skills of the rank and file. As a result, the organisation has been able to continue with its programme, in spite of killings and crackdowns on elected office-bearers and key figures. ... In many ways Goniwe's major achievement was his ability to develop viable and appropriate forms of organisation which ensured programmatic activity and made it possible to consolidate mobilisation into organisation."<sup>36</sup>

Tragically, it was only after his death that Goniwe's efforts were appreciated outside of the Eastern Cape.

Another article in the same issue draws on a speech given by Eastern Cape UDF regional secretary Derek Swartz as early as July. Swartz discusses the Cradock experience, which provides a lead in challenging every aspect of the dominant and undemocratic relations of power, through establishing the basis for an alternative society:

'We want genuine people's power, and that's why our slogan is indeed "amandla ngawethu". It means genuinely exercising people's power."<sup>37</sup>

This is the first reference I can find to 'exercising people's power', as a present reality rather than a future goal. But it is the only mention of 'people's power' in the issue, notwithstanding the title. In a long interview with SASPU, neither Sizani nor Swartz refer to 'people's power'.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, a headline in the December issue of SASPU National referred to 'Building people's power despite repression', but without any other mention of 'people's power' in the entire issue.<sup>39</sup>

The use of 'people's power' more as a slogan than as a description of the current phase of struggle was repeated in the first issue of the UDF's new theoretical journal, Isizwe, published in November 1985. The introduction to the first issue concluded with the call: 'THE UDF LIVES! FORWARD TO PEOPLE'S POWER!' Apart from this, however, there was no explicit reference to people's power as such in the issue. As in the recent State of the Nation, some of the themes which were to be central to the concept and strategy of people's power were discussed. The first article concerned 'The tasks of the democratic movement in the State of Emergency', which were identified as further isolating 'the enemy' and strengthening organisation. 'Let us remind ourselves why such organisation is necessary', the article wrote:



'It is only through such organisation that ordinary working-class people can participate, take control and assume collective responsibility for the running of their lives. It is through such organisation that the working masses can develop leadership skills. Without organisation, our struggle will risk becoming chaotic, we will not be able to learn from our victories and from our mistakes. Every day will be a new day. But above all, we need to understand that mass-based democratic organisations are not a luxury, not something we can talk about because we think "democracy" is a nice word: It is an absolute necessity for the survival of our struggle, that we develop well-knit, cohesive mass organisations...' <sup>40</sup>

Only with such organisation could the movement continue in the face of the detention (or co-option) of leadership. The article continued to discuss 'leadership and accountability', themes which were complemented in another article in the same issue, entitled 'On discipline'.

This picture of local level organisation, based around street committees, which was not yet understood in terms of 'people's power' as a present reality (rather than a future goal) is supported by Swilling's studies of the Eastern Cape. Swilling writes that street committees were formed in some areas by mid-1985, and spread throughout the region during late 1985 (i.e. under the State of Emergency).<sup>41</sup> He argues - drawing on his research in PE and Uitenhage especially - that street committees were initially a 'defensive' response from activists 'caught between the militaristic voluntarism of the youth and the terror tactics of the security forces'. The youth were brought under control, and prohibitions on public meetings circumvented.<sup>42</sup> In the second half of 1985 activists began to think about using street committees more pro-actively, moving towards a form of self-government. On the one hand, civic structures were beginning to perform state functions anyway, following the collapse of township councils. On the other hand, consumer boycotts had thrown up a range of problems and opportunities promoting and requiring strengthened quasi-state structures in the townships which could engage in negotiations with state officials or businessmen.<sup>43</sup>

Swilling emphasises the logic of local political dynamics. What, however, was the role of the ANC or even of the UDF in the Eastern Cape in late 1985? Both of these topics remain largely unresearched. But there are indications that both UDF and ANC structures were in a weak conditions at this time. Many of the UDF's national and regional leaders were detained under the State of Emergency or the Internal Security Act.<sup>44</sup> In the Eastern Cape, the UDF had only really begun to build regional structures - i.e. extending outside of the PE/Uitenhage area - after March 1985, and was soon after hard hit by repression, with the killing of leaders including Goniwe and then the State of Emergency. Several regional UDF leaders had gone underground, but by October publicity secretary Stone Sizani and others was the only elected Eastern Cape UDF official alive and outside of detention.

In an interview, Sizani expressed the excitement and the difficulties of organising under the State of Emergency. He stressed that the government was unable to crush the UDF, but acknowledged that it was frustrating to be forced into hiding: '... you feel it is hard to go on. It is only because of the hope we have of achieving what we are fighting for, that one feels the strength to go on. Hope keeps us going.'<sup>45</sup> A rising regional leader, Gugile Nkwinti from Grahamstown and Port Alfred, recalls that during 1985-86 most meetings were underground, and involved small groups only. There was an attempt at holding a special UDF meeting, in PE in 1985 sometime, but it was raided by the police! Sizani used the press extensively to ensure that messages and statements were widely circulated.<sup>46</sup> In short, UDF regional co-ordinating structures struggled to remain operational.

ANC structures in Lesotho (which were in charge of MK activities in the Western and Eastern Cape, Border, Transkei and Orange Free State) were also in a weak state through most of the mid-1980s. The ANC's Lesotho-based structures seem to have struggled after the departure of Chris Hani in 1982. In December 1982 forty-two people, including the ANC's chief representative in Lesotho, were killed in a SADF raid on Maseru. During 1983-85 tensions within MK and ANC structures in Lesotho (and in its underground structures inside South Africa) further weakened their effectiveness. In 1985 there was relatively little MK activity in the Eastern Cape, and MK was reluctant to intervene in the conflict between ANC/UDF supporters and 'AZAPO' in PE. In December 1985 the SADF again raided Maseru, killing six ANC cadres including the MK commander. Two weeks later South Africa closed their borders with Lesotho, precipitating (and aiding) a military coup in late January 1986. The new Lesotho military regime was hostile to a continued ANC presence.<sup>47</sup> The apparent weakness of ANC and MK organisation probably inhibited communication between the Eastern Cape and the ANC leadership in Lusaka. Perversely, in a region characterised by overwhelming identification with the ANC, local political developments may well have taken place in partial isolation from the strategies formulated in Lusaka.<sup>48</sup>

More broadly, it is unclear what kind of strategic thinking was being formulated in Lusaka. Barrells argues that the ANC did not have any clear strategy in this period. Its very success in promoting revolt inside the country had rendered its earlier strategic approach - essentially, of armed propaganda, with a rather vague account of subsequent insurrections and 'people's war' - largely obsolete. What was needed was something altogether more decisive and focused on how central state power would be seized. The absence of any clear strategic leadership led to dissent from a range of ANC operational officials in early 1985, and raised at the ANC's national conference in Kabwe (in Zambia) in June 1985. But the Kabwe conference failed to make any clear statement regarding strategy. It appointed a committee to reconsider strategy and tactics, but the committee did not submit its report until 1989!<sup>49</sup>



By the end of 1985 all the constitutive elements of 'people's power' were being developed and implemented on the ground, primarily in the Eastern Cape and Border regions. Local government structures had been ousted from many townships, both in terms of individual councillors and local government services. Alternative structures of street and area committees were being formed, linked to the direct action of the youth or *amabutho*, tactics such as consumer boycotts, and local level dispute settlement.<sup>30</sup> There seems to have been a sense of townships being 'liberated zones' where the people had won a large measure of 'power'.<sup>31</sup> But there is little indication that these initiatives were being conceptualised in terms of the implementation of 'people's power'.<sup>32</sup> Such a conceptualisation seems to date from late 1985 and early 1986, when the ANC in exile and the UDF inside the country began to link the ANC's existing strategic emphasis on insurrection with the reality of organisational initiatives inside the country.

#### 4. No longer just a slogan: 'People's power' as the marriage of insurrection and organisation

In January 1986 the ANC took heed of developments in the Eastern Cape and Border. It acknowledged, perhaps for the first time, that 'people's power' was actually being established in some areas. The ANC's insurrectionary perspective and the uneven but very real growth of grass-roots organisational structures combined in a reformulated understanding of 'people's power'. The marriage of insurrectionary struggle and organisational development within 'people's power' did not occur overnight, but seems to have gradually come together between late 1985 and early 1986 as the ANC incorporated developments inside the country into its strategic thinking. This theme was taken up by the UDF in February, and in March and April there was a proliferation of articles and discussion papers on the building of 'people's power'. 'People's power' had clearly emerged as a national organisational strategy, strongly promoted by the UDF.

One entire section of the ANC's annual January 8 statement was dedicated to 'building people's power'.

'In some parts of the country, having destroyed the puppet organs of government imposed on us by the apartheid regime, we have reached the situation where even the enemy has to deal with the democratic forces as the legitimate representatives of the people. The establishment of people's power in these areas, however rudimentary and precarious, is of great significance for the further advancement of our struggle.'

The ANC saw 'people's power' primarily in terms of resisting repression, and ultimately in military terms. Its statement was aggressively entitled 'Attack! Attack! Give the enemy no quarter', and 1986 was declared 'Year of MK'. Through 'people's war', the goal of

'people's power is within our grasp'. As the ANC made clear, it remained primarily concerned with central state power.

The ANC statement was echoed but adapted in a UDF 'secretarial report' in February 1986. The report described 1985 as 'the year of mass mobilisation' and of brutal repression, and repeated the need to develop organisation. According to this report, the UDF had adopted the slogan 'forward to people's power' during the State of Emergency.

'This decision was inspired by the rudimentary forms of people's power being exercised by our people in so many different ways. At the same time, the prospect of people's power on a wider scale was, and still is, looming on the horizon.'

The report noted that the UDF had produced stickers with the slogan 'Long live UDF ... Forward to people's power'.<sup>34</sup> It was not surprising that the UDF statement echoed the ANC's. Besides the usual communication that existed between the ANC and UDF, in January a top-level UDF delegation (led by Stofile, and including Mohamed Valli Moosa and Cheryl Carolus) had held several days of meetings with top ANC leaders in Sweden.<sup>35</sup>

The UDF's formulation of 'people's power' involved a slightly different emphasis to the ANC's. Whilst the ANC envisaged, rather vaguely, an armed seizure of state power, the UDF leadership by-and-large saw envisaged, equally vaguely, political change resulting from a range of pressures on an increasingly isolated state. Both views combined elements of realism and insight with idealistic or even millenarian features. The UDF's formulation of 'people's power' accommodated both views. In terms of the armed seizure of power, the organs of people's power could serve as revolutionary bases, providing Umkhonto we Sizwe with the political support-bases they had hitherto lacked. In terms of a Gramscian war of manoeuvre, 'people's power' promised to further push the National Party government into a corner, whilst combining the UDF's emphasis on organisation with the militancy of 'ungovernability'.

Developments in the Eastern Cape were perhaps not as rudimentary as the ANC and UDF thought. All over the region, street and area committees were formed. In mid-January UDF officials in the Eastern Cape were quoted as saying that street committees were the first step towards replacing official state structures. Whilst some activists emphasised their role in facilitating civic activity, explicit comparing them with the 'M-Plan' (drawn up by Mandela in 1953), others referred to 'liberated zones'.<sup>36</sup> The extent and ambitions of the Eastern Cape experience began to filter up to the Reef through other personal contacts over the Christmas and New Year period. Ex-Islander and Soweto activist Khehla Shubane visited the Eastern Cape to conduct research for a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, Mark Swilling. He returned to Soweto and argued that street committees should be set up there.<sup>37</sup> The wife of trade unionist and future Alexandra civic leader, Moses Mayekiso, returned to Alexandra after visiting relatives in



Queenstown with tales of the grass-roots structures there.<sup>58</sup> The national press published reports from journalists such as Mono Badela on people's power in the Eastern Cape.<sup>59</sup> In February *SASPU National* provided its fullest account yet of how street committees in Cradock operated (although the report did not refer to 'people's power').<sup>60</sup>

The spread of street committees was also promoted by the revival, in late January, of moves towards forming a national civic co-ordinating forum. A series of meetings, regional conferences, and finally a national conference (in Cape Town in May/June) was held, which allowed for the rapid and widespread dissemination of organisational and strategic initiatives. The first of these meetings was held in PE, in PE civic (and veteran ANC) leader Henry Fazzie's house, on 1 February. There is some dispute over the relationship between the UDF and this civic initiative. UDF national leaders knew about the meeting beforehand and seem to have supported the initiative, but did not attend themselves. One of the participants recalls that it was seen as an initiative from civic activists in the Eastern and Western Cape who saw civics as moving beyond the UDF, which was insufficiently militant. Whatever the initial impetus, UDF leaders were centrally involved in the following meetings.<sup>61</sup>

Alexandra was one of the townships outside of the Eastern Cape where street committee-type structures began to be formed in February 1986. In Alexandra the township council had not yet collapsed, and there had been less protest and confrontation than in many other townships on the Reef. Drawing on the experience of trade unions as well as the Eastern Cape/Border, and reacting against the existing top-down civic organisation, Moses Mayekiso and other activists began to build grassroots structures. According to the minutes of a meeting in early February:

'The purpose of introducing street or avenue committees in Alex is to unite the people of Alexandra and to look at people's problems in order that they might be solved. The struggle in Alex is backward and therefore the street committees is a step towards conscientising and building unity among residents, to fight their problems. Further it is to encourage discipline in our society conscientising people of the struggle, to ensure mass control of the struggle and proper democracy. The street committees is a common thing in other townships in the Cape, e.g. Queenstown and this has helped to unite people.'<sup>62</sup>

Street committees would unite residents, including the 'reluctant parents' who were the reason why the struggle in Alex remained 'backward'. The duties of local committees in each yard were set out:

'To unite people in the yard, to encourage comradeship, brotherhood and working together as one family... For people to help each other financially, physically, morally and otherwise. To defend each other against enemy attacks. To look to the cleanliness, to clean the yard of dirt and crime.'<sup>63</sup>

The escalation of confrontation in February provided further impetus to the formation of street or yard committees, although these were only established on a general basis in May.<sup>64</sup>

In the midst of this organisational ferment, why did the ANC and UDF see 'people's power' as rudimentary? One answer was surely that the ANC continued to hold to a vision of change through armed insurrection. But if further change was to come about through political struggle in urban areas, then this required extending the struggle out of the townships into the whole urban area. As the ANC argued in its January 8 statement:

'In the past, as part of our rejection of the apartheid community councils, management and local affairs committees, we correctly put forward the demand for democratic, non-racial municipal councils. We must take up this demand once more. In many townships, we have abolished the puppet institutions through struggle. These victories must be consolidated by democratising the whole system of local government. For every town and every city, there must be one local authority, elected by all residents, both Black and White, on the basis of one person one vote. We shall have to engage in struggle to achieve this goal and will have to consider such actions as a national rent strike in our programme of action.'<sup>65</sup>

In fact, the demand for 'non-racial municipalities' had long been central to civic protests. In 1985 it had been given new importance through consumer boycotts. The growing willingness of business leaders and even some state officials to meet with opposition leaders, and the growing confidence and capacity of the township-based resistance, focused some attention on what was involved in the concept of the 'non-racial municipality' (or NRM). The ANC statement reflected a recognition of this. Following the ANC's public call for NRMs, the call was taken up all over the Eastern Cape and elsewhere.<sup>66</sup>

Whether rudimentary or not, experiences in the Eastern Cape began to combine with the advice of the ANC in promoting a reformulated understanding of 'people's power'. This combination does not seem to have born fruit in February, although the first mention of 'people's power' in the notebooks kept by de facto UDF general-secretary, Mohammed Valli Moosa, seems to have been in that month.<sup>67</sup> The February issue of *SASPU National* did not discuss 'people's power', although it reported on activities (in Kagiso, for example) which would later be analysed in those terms. Furthermore, reports of the emerging national educational initiative do not seem to have been primarily concerned with a discussion of 'people's education'.

For the UDF (and ANC underground) leaders in Johannesburg, as well as for the ANC leaders in exile, the period from late 1985 through to early 1986 represented an acknowledged period of learning from developments on the ground. As the experience of



townships in the Eastern Cape, and later elsewhere also, filtered through, it was combined with the ANC's broad strategic perspective (communicated in the January meeting in Sweden as well as through other channels). This learning experience was explicitly acknowledged in a paper written in early May by one of the UDF's leading education officers, Raymond Suttner, on popular justice. Suttner - an ANC underground member, former political prisoner, and law lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand - wrote of the changing understanding of 'people's power', and added:

'Until recently we have not clearly understood the relationship between the vision of a new society, as found for example in the Freedom Charter, and the possibility of starting to create that society now. In the past rather flimsy ideas for starting to implement the Freedom Charter were offered. People's power itself was generally conceived as something for the future. Now, in May 1986, we have a more dynamic conception. It is something we are learning from the creativity of the masses.'<sup>68</sup>

Suttner continued to observe that the rudimentary organs of people's power could contribute to change through either serving as the basis for a new state or further weakening the apartheid state.

From March the UDF dedicated its media to promoting 'people's power'. The second issue of the UDF's *Isizwe* opened with an article on 'Building People's Power'. This was, as far as I can tell, the first detailed written discussion inside the country of 'people's power' as a concrete organisational strategy. The article started with the Freedom Charter's call that 'the people shall govern', and continued to examine how this task can be realised even prior to the seizure of central state power.

'It is true that the fullest consolidation of people's power is still in the future. It is true that control over central state power is the key to many things. ... Nevertheless, the building of people's power is something that is already beginning to happen in the course of our struggle. It is not for us to sit back and merely dream of the day that the people shall govern. It is our task to realise that goal now.'<sup>69</sup>

The *Isizwe* article discussed street committees and people's courts - i.e. 'organs of people's power' - and activities such as street cleaning. These were compared with trade union shopfloor-based structures and activities (such as sit-ins). All of these helped to build a different kind of political system based on popular participation. *Isizwe* also argued against dismissing the structures and activities of people's as 'reformist'; they needed to be assessed in terms of their potential for 'advancing the struggle'. In certain circumstances, even running a soup kitchen could advance the struggle.

From the outset the UDF saw the new strategy of 'people's power' as a mechanism of promoting discipline and organisation, and not just confronting the state. In a section on 'lessons, problems and difficulties', *Isizwe* advised:

**'ORGANS OF PEOPLE'S POWER MUST BE DEMOCRATIC AND THEY MUST BE UNDER POLITICAL DISCIPLINE.'**

In several cases militant youth, or others, have taken the initiative and set up independent "people's courts". While the idea behind such independent attempts was well intended, the results have often been negative. Such courts must be rooted in organisation that enjoys the support of the great majority of the township, zone or street where the court is to operate. If this is not the case, such courts will be resented by the community. They will be imposing an external discipline. It is especially important to ensure that there are democratically elected persons in these courts, and that it is not just the youth who are represented in them. Where the level of organisation does not permit this, then it is an error to proceed with the formation of such courts... If these organs are not deeply-rooted in democratic, political organisation then they are open to corruption or hijacking by criminal elements.'<sup>70</sup>

The article also discussed the old problem of reformism and co-option. Civic activities should be viewed, it was argued, in terms of the political context. Thus rubbish collection or creating public parks - as happened in some Transvaal townships - was a progressive activity.

There followed a veritable flowering of discussion. Zwelakhe Sisulu took up the theme - no doubt after extensive discussion with other leading Charterists in Johannesburg - in his keynote address to the NECC conference in Durban on 29 March. 'We stand today', Sisulu told the assembled activists from all over the country, 'at a crossroads in our struggle for national liberation.' The state had lost the initiative to the people, and the ANC had come to be seen as 'the primary actor on the South African stage' by elements from the 'white ruling bloc' as well as 'the people'. But Sisulu immediately inserted a caveat:

'We are not poised for the immediate transfer of power to the people. The belief that this is so could lead to serious errors and defeats. We are however poised to enter a phase which can lead to transfer of power. What we are trying to do is to decisively shift the balance of forces in our favour.'<sup>71</sup>

Sisulu contrasted the situation of 'ungovernability' in mid-1985, in the Eastern Cape and East Rand, with that of early 1986 when 'the people had actually begun to govern themselves in a number of townships.'

'In a situation of ungovernability the government doesn't have control. But nor do the people. ... In a situation of people's power the people are starting to exercise control.'<sup>72</sup>

'People's power' involved the formation of structures 'which were controlled by, and accountable to, the masses of the people in each area.' This would dissolve the distinction between the people and their organisations, and hence would stop state repression rolling



back 'the gains made through ungovernability'. Sisulu continued to discuss the need for discipline and accountability, echoing Isizwe's concern about coercion in 'people's courts'. He discussed the struggle for people's education in some detail, and concluded with a call to broaden the struggle, reaching into unorganised areas and constituencies (including white South Africans, and teachers), as well as deepening organisation.

On 5 April a panel discussion on 'building people's power' was held in Cape Town, as part of the AGM of Grassroots. The participants included the UDF Western Cape regional secretary, Trevor Manuel, Western Cape UDF REC member Chris Nissen, and the general-secretary of the giant new Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Jay Naidoo.<sup>73</sup> Naidoo presented a paper on 'Building people's power: a working-class perspective'. With the formation of COSATU in December 1985, the bulk of the independent trade union movement moved into much closer alignment with township-based organisations and the ANC in exile (the COSATU and ANC leadership met outside of the country in March 1986<sup>74</sup>). In his address, Naidoo articulated the emerging mainstream position within the trade union movement: trade unions and workers need to be involved in the liberation struggle, but promoting working-class interests and the particular democratic forms of organisation developed within the trade unions. The trade unionists were particularly averse to youth-led ungovernability, and seem to have had strengthened the organisation-building focus of the new formulation of 'people's power'.<sup>75</sup>

Organisational and educational workshops had been a feature of extra-parliamentary movements inside the country in the early 1980s. After the State of Emergency was lifted in March, workshops were once again held in many townships. In Alexandra, for example, a workshop was held in mid-April. As in the Eastern Cape the previous year, Alexandra activists were worried about the indiscipline of the youth at the same time was seeking to broaden the scope of resistance. What was required was 'governability within ungovernability', and a wider range of protest tactics (including boycotts and the isolation of 'collaborators'). There was also some debate at the workshop over whether Alexandra could become a 'liberated zone'.<sup>76</sup> Following the workshop protests intensified and the remaining councillors resigned. Moses Mayekiso told the press that his Alexandra Action Committee had taken control of the township.<sup>77</sup>

The theme of building 'people's power' was also taken up in a series of regional civic meetings held in April and May. In Cape Town, for example, the UDF convened a regional civic conference at the end of April. According to one of the 'input' papers:

'It is through civic struggles that we are going to establish people's power. It is through civic struggles that we are going to build structures that are deeply rooted in the community. Here we are going to challenge the authority of the state and provide the alternatives.'<sup>78</sup>

The papers pointed to the experience of Eastern Cape townships:

'In P.E., Cradock and elsewhere, our civics are built street by street and house by house so that nobody is excluded from the process. Today therefore, civics which are thus organised can implement important decisions like stayaways, rent boycotts and consumer boycotts within a matter of days... This is the road from mobilisation to organisation - our civics lead that road.'<sup>79</sup>

The UDF promoted the same message in its media. The April edition of UDF Update proclaimed that 'advancing people's power is no longer merely a slogan'. SASPU National discussed 'people's power' in detail, for the first time, in its April/May edition. Articles reported on Alexandra, Mamelodi, and the Eastern Cape, as well as on struggles elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> The articles from Isizwe and other discussion papers were widely circulated. Among the issues most often focused on were the range of functions of street committees, and the differences between the urban 'liberated zones' in South Africa and the rural zones which had characterised the liberation struggle in the frontline states.

One of the discussion papers in circulation provided a list of suggested functions of 'organs of people's power':

- (a) ensuring food and medicines in townships during stayaways and boycotts
- (b) health care
- (c) organising funerals
- (d) organising meetings etc
- (e) defence
- (f) education and training programmes
- (g) handle publicity
- (h) administrative functions including services such as refuse-removal and house-building
- (i) projects to improve living conditions
- (j) fighting crime and other anti-social behaviour
- (k) run courts
- (l) help to build and co-ordinate specific organisations such as trade unions and youth organisations...<sup>81</sup>

One category of functions was accorded special attention - popular justice. Sisulu had himself referred to this in his speech in Durban at the end of March, emphasising the differences between (accountable and responsible) people's courts and (brutal and undemocratic) kangaroo courts. In the face of critical commentary in the press, as well as persistent complaints from township residents, UDF structures and affiliates examined the issue in some detail. Raymond Suttner wrote a paper on popular justice - or people's courts - which he presented at a conference in Cape Town in April and a seminar at the University of the Witwatersrand in early May.<sup>82</sup>

The ANC in exile had played an important role in reconceptualising and stimulating moves towards 'people's power', but there is some evidence that sections of the ANC were sceptical of internal developments, as well as remaining preoccupied with



armed struggle. In April, Sechaba ran an article under the name of Alex Mashinini. Mashinini took the analysis one step further by referring to 'dual power':

'In South Africa today, the enemy can no longer rule in the same old way. ... there has emerged (but not yet on a national scale) a peculiar form of dual power, not in an administrative, but in a political sense.

The thrust of Mashinini's article was that the 'embryonic' and 'incipient' structures ('organs') of people's power needed to be 'strengthened, consolidated and developed' into 'revolutionary people's committees' which would facilitate the seizure of central state power through armed insurrection and people's war.<sup>83</sup>

Aspects of Mashinini's argument were criticised by Mzala in a later issue of Sechaba. Mzala emphasised the current rather than future role of 'people's communes' (the term which he preferred to 'revolutionary people's committees'), stressing the democratic and participatory aspect of people's power as much as their strategic role in terms of the armed struggle. Mzala wrote:

'Our whole conception of People's Power at this stage is decentralised and autonomous nation-wide People's Communes, where the people implement the Freedom Charter's principle: The People Shall Govern.'<sup>84</sup>

Contradicting Mashinini, Mzala pointed to the seizure of administrative power in townships across the country. Mzala's view seems to have been more in line with the conception of people's power emerging from inside the country.

Mzala's article referred to Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape as a leading example of the current state of people's power. From April/May 1986 this small holiday resort slowly replaced Cradock as the role model for people's power. Around March (the precise date is uncertain), two civic organisers from the Johannesburg-based CEI visited Port Alfred. According to one of them (Barbara Creecey):

'I remember it being the most mind-blowing experience I have ever had, and likely to have... [Nkwinti] took us around and showed us everything, and he also explained what they were doing and why they were doing what they were doing. And if you can imagine coming from the Transvaal where ... we weren't organising civics, we were really providing crisis support for the uprising. ... We went down into this place [Port Alfred] and it was absolutely unbelievable. I mean they moved the state out of those areas, I mean they were controlling them and running them. But they also had a concept of organisation that was far in advance of anything that we had ever thought of or heard up here. ... The issue they were addressing when I was there was basically starting to say, "can you have a liberated zone when you don't control production, when you don't have a viable economic base?" So they were actually starting to discuss the question of economic production when I was there. And they were in the process of meeting with farmers in the Eastern Cape, in the surrounding areas, ... and they were starting to negotiate with them over land issues and over control of the produce

from those farms and the marketing of the produce. It was fascinating stuff. Absolutely fascinating stuff.'<sup>85</sup>

Port Alfred also began to feature in press reports,<sup>86</sup> although the first detailed account of Port Alfred in SASPU National was only published one year later.<sup>87</sup> At a UDF National Working Committee meeting, held in Johannesburg in late May, great interest was shown in the Port Alfred experience.<sup>88</sup>

One of the key issues confronting activists in townships like Port Alfred at this time was the continuing question of relationships with local state structures. As Swilling and others have shown, many civic structures entered into negotiations with state structures over administration and development.<sup>89</sup> Civics were faced with a difficult problem: how to build 'people's power' without running townships for the apartheid government. The emphasis on non-racial municipalities was a response to this. In the Eastern Cape, a conference was organised on 'NRMs' in Grahamstown in mid-April, although I am unclear what came of it.<sup>90</sup>

Although the UDF strongly promoted 'people's power', including in Isizwe, the UDF's national leadership does not seem to have been as focused on 'people's power' as either a number of other senior Charterist activists or most of the media. This was a time when the UDF's national leadership was in a state of flux, which might have shaped their response. The national general-secretary and publicity-secretary were on trial, and had not officially been replaced. Mohammed Valli Moosa, the Transvaal regional secretary, was serving as a kind of de facto national secretary, only being appointed formally as acting national secretary in May 1986. He was assisted by Trevor Manuel, the Western Cape secretary, especially. During the first State of Emergency many UDF leaders had been detained, and others (including Valli Moosa) forced to operate out of hiding. Channels of communication were forever being disrupted.

More importantly, I suspect, the UDF leadership was more concerned with organisational development and various protest tactics in areas which were some way short of 'people's power'. The UDF had originally been formed to build a broad alliance, focussing more on building support in weaker areas than simply riding the militancy of the strongest areas. In the first instance this had meant opposing the state's constitutional reforms through campaigns in Indian and coloured areas primarily. The adjustment to the township revolt and the primacy of township political dynamics was not easy for the UDF, which had developed its own organisational structures and approaches better suited to the earlier period and focus. Through much of 1985 the UDF national leadership, disrupted by repression, lacked clear direction in terms of their engagement with township politics. Only in early 1986 did the UDF regain a clear sense of direction, combining a promotion of 'people's power' through the media with efforts to deepen organisation and broaden resistance in weaker areas and constituencies.



The UDF's concern with weaker areas and constituencies, both in 1983-85 and early 1986, together with the repression of its leadership, prompted changes in the relative importance of different sections of the internal Charterist movement. From mid-1985 some of the national roles of the UDF had been transferred to informal grouping of national Charterist activists. From the end of 1985 the Charterist movement inside the country was further strengthened and transformed with the formation of COSATU. Increasingly, the focus of the Charterist movement lay outside of the UDF, rather than within it. This was recognised by some of the participants in the initiatives to form a national civic movement. For some civic activists, the UDF as a front had become obsolete. What was needed was a more integrated organisational structure, more akin to a party than a front, more closely linked to the ANC and prepared to adopt a revolutionary position, constructed out of the civics. As civic structures were developed at regional and national levels, the role of the UDF would diminish. Indeed, in the Western Cape there seems to have been some tension between the UDF REC and a number of civic activists, who were engaging in regional and national initiatives almost independently of each other. Overall, the development of the civic movement was slowed by a lack of clarity over whether the movement was sectoral (i.e. equivalent to the student or youth movements) or more comprehensive in scope.

Between March and June 1986 the UDF national leadership energetically sought to broaden the scope of resistance. They seem to have been very aware of the unevenness of development around the country. This was important given that the discussion of 'people's power' was generally focused on areas where it was strongest (the Eastern Cape and individual townships elsewhere). In other words, 'people's power' remained an objective, albeit in the short to medium-term rather than the long-term, in many areas. In places where organisation was weak and protest patchy, broader protest was seen as a prerequisite for radicalising consciousness and strengthening grass-roots organisation. In practice, therefore, the approach of the UDF national leadership remained cautious, rather than ambitiously seeking to implement people's power everywhere and immediately.

The UDF's approach in practice was reflected in discussions in two national conferences held at the end of May. The first of these was a UDF National Working Committee meeting in Johannesburg. The following week a national civic conference was held in Cape Town. These were the first major UDF national meetings since the Azaadville conference in April 1985 (although many UDF activists had attended the NECC meeting in Durban in March, and the UDF had held regional civic conferences in several regions in April and May). They provided an opportunity for taking stock - through reports from the regions as well as the national leadership - and for charting new direction. Taking stock was clearly necessary, as it exposed the lack of any common understanding of, for example, the role of civics or how to approach the issue of

restructuring local government. It also exposed the great variation in levels of organisation.

At the NWC meeting, 'people's power' was the first major item on the agenda, and was extensively discussed. But the Programme of Action adopted by the meeting highlighted a wider range of activities: organising the different sectors (youth, women, students, civics), organising in the bantustans, drawing in white South Africans who were disaffected from the government, and mobilising in the sport and culture sectors. Discussion at the national civics conference the following week was focused on practical steps: rent and consumer boycotts, improved civic co-ordination, and how to mobilise for non-racial municipalities and against the state's proposed Regional Service Councils. At both conferences, the need for much more political education was repeatedly emphasised.<sup>91</sup>

The need for improved co-ordination and political education was prominent in both conferences, reflecting limitations in the UDF's role and activities over the previous year. Notwithstanding the range of local studies of 'people's power', it remains unclear how the structures (or 'organs') of 'people's power', where they existed, were linked into regional structures. For example, how did the role and regional or sub-regional structures of the UDF evolve with the development of 'people's power'? In the Eastern Cape, Nkwinti recalls, most meetings were underground and involved small groups only. Nkwinti cannot recall any regional meeting in the March - June 1986 period. A planned regional civic conference was banned. Communication was generally through couriers, or via the new zonal structures (Nkwinti was himself elected chairperson of the Albany zone of the UDF, as well as being co-opted onto the REC), or the press.<sup>92</sup>

By mid-1986 'people's power' had taken on a new coherence, combining the ANC's concern with insurrection-based strategy with the internal concern to strategise around concrete organisational developments. 'People's power' had ceased to be a vision of the future, and had become something to be built in the present, indeed something which had already been built in a number of townships. For the ANC, 'building people's power' involved a strategy that accommodated internal developments and took the ANC's essentially insurrectionary approach beyond armed propaganda and ungovernability. For the UDF, the call for 'people's power' involved an emphasis on immediate and organisational components. 'People's power' encompassed responses to a range of very real problems which had arisen in the course of the township revolt, varying from the ungovernability of some of the 'youth' to negotiating around local government restructuring to providing essential services such as dispute settlement.



## 6. Conclusion

Between the early 1980s and mid-1986 both the state of organisation on the ground and the concept of 'people's power' were transformed, with changes in each informing the other. By mid-1986 'people's power' had become a catch-all concept encompassing a range of different components in a vaguely formulated strategy for change. Whilst grandiose in its stated ambitions, 'people's power' was primarily a concept which could reconcile concrete developments inside the country with the (overlapping) strategic concerns of both the ANC and the UDF. Its conceptual neatness was not matched by strategic viability, as a range of commentators noted.

The ANC's lack of a convincing strategic vision had given rise to internal dissent from early 1985. In mid-1986 this began to surface publicly, raised by senior ANC operatives such as Ronnie Kasrils. Later, as the ANC was beginning to reconsider its strategy in the light of the heavy repression under the State of Emergency, *Sechaba* published an article by Kasrils which contained a searing indictment of ANC strategy in the mid-1980s. In Kasrils' words, 'there are extremely few policy positions of either the ANC or SACP on how power is to be seized.' As Barrell puts it: 'There was just no real strategic plan at all.' Without a strategic plan, and despite 'endless discussions' among ANC leaders, the ANC was unable to develop appropriate structures inside the country. Without strategy or structures, the ANC was unable to substantially intensify its military operations and therefore, Kasrils argued, there was little prospect of seizing control of state power.<sup>93</sup>

Inside the country this had been recognised by some activists in 1986. As a Mamelodi leader had put it, in May:

'We are not speaking of revolution. We call it democratic change. Revolution implies armed struggle. That would be suicide for us at this stage - the police and the army are too strong. But the time will come when the people will say, "enough is enough".'<sup>94</sup>

Many other internal activists, however, incorporated 'people's power' into a theory of political change in terms of a situation of 'dual power', in which 'people's power' in the townships matched state power elsewhere. But, as several writers have argued, such theories of 'dual power' greatly underestimated the capacity of the state. Jochelson, for example, illustrates through a case-study of Alexandra how the state was not only able to mobilise massive coercive powers under the State of Emergency, but also implemented a pro-active reform programme based around township development.<sup>95</sup>

With hindsight, 'people's power' had considerable strategic potential - but not primarily in terms of either popular insurrection or dual power. Rather, as some UDF leaders seem to have envisaged, 'people's power' provided an effective basis and

conceptual framework for broadening further pressures on the state, pushing it close not to collapse but to negotiation with extra-parliamentary political leadership. In practice, however, the prospects for 'people's power' were slashed by the severe repression unleashed under the nationwide State of Emergency in mid-June 1986. Whilst resistance continued, in a variety of forms, repression forestalled townships either moving towards self-government or becoming mass revolutionary bases.

## Endnotes

- 1 Zwelakhe Sisulu, 'People's Education for People's Power', keynote address to the conference of the National Education Crisis Committee, Durban, 29 March 1986, published in *Transformation* 1 (1986).
- 2 Cited in Charles Carter, 'Community and Conflict: The Alexandra Rebellion of 1986', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18,1 (March 1992), fn.4.
- 3 Mark Swilling, 'An Analysis of the Dynamics of Local Politics in the Eastern Cape' (unpublished paper, 1986); 'Apartheid Local Government and the Emergence of "People's Power" in the Eastern Cape' (discussion paper, 1986); 'UDF Local Government in Port Elizabeth', *Monitor* 1,1 (October 1988); 'Beyond Ungovernability: Township Politics and Local Level Negotiations' (Centre for Policy Studies, 1988). But see the contrasting interpretation of politics in this area by Glenn Adler, 'The Season of Stayaways: Popular Protest in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage in 1985-1986' (unpublished paper, 1991). Our understanding of politics in the Eastern Cape will surely be transformed by research being undertaken by Janet Cherry (Rhodes University) in PE and Mike Tettelman (Northwestern University) and Cradock.
- 4 Karen Jochelson, 'Reform, Repression and Resistance in South Africa: A Case Study of Alexandra Township, 1979-1989', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 16,1 (March 1990).
- 5 Carter, 'The Alexandra Rebellion'.
- 6 Andrew Boraine, *Mamelodi: From Parks to People's Power*, Honours dissertation, University of Cape Town (January 1987).
- 7 Khehla Shubane, *The Soweto Rent Boycott*, Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand (February 1988).
- 8 Wilfried Scharf & Baba Ngcokoto, 'Images of Punishment in the People's Courts of Cape Town, 1985-7: From Prefigurative Justice to Populist Violence', in N.C. Manganyi & A. du Toit (eds), *Political Violence and the Struggle for South Africa* (London: Macmillan and Halfway House: Southern Books, 1990). See also: Raymond Suttner, 'Popular Justice in South Africa Today', unpublished paper presented to the Sociology Department seminar, University of the Witwatersrand (May 1986); Jeremy Seekings, 'People's Courts and Popular Politics', in *South African Review* 5 (Johannesburg: SARS/Ravan, 1989) and 'From "Quiescence" to "People's Power": Township Politics in Kagiso, 1985-86', *Social Dynamics* 18,1 (June 1992); John Allison, 'In Search of Revolutionary Justice in South Africa', *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 18 (1990); Jacobus Moses, *People's Courts and People's Justice: A Critical Review of the Current State of Knowledge of People's Courts*, LL.M dissertation, University of Cape Town (March 1990).



- 9 Johan Muller, 'People's Education and the National Education Crisis', South African Review 4 (Johannesburg: SARS/Ravan, 1987); Richard Levin, 'People's Education and the Politics of Negotiations in South Africa', Perspectives in Education 12,2 (Winter 1991); Helen Zille, 'People's Education: The Irony and the Tragedy', Sash 30,4 (February 1987).
- 10 Howard Barrell, 'The Turn to the Masses: the African National Congress' Strategic Review of 1978-79', Journal of Southern African Studies 18,1 (March 1992), p.72.
- 11 Quoted in ibid, pp.88-89.
- 12 'Render South Africa Ungovernable', Sechaba (March 1985).
- 13 Barrell, MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle (Johannesburg: Penguin, 1990), p.59.
- 14 Mzala, 'Cooking the Rice Inside the Pot', Sechaba (January 1985).
- 15 Barrell, 'The Necessary and the Possible': An Elementary Review of Publicly-Expressed ANC Insurrectionary Formulations, 1983-86' (paper presented at a Workshop on Contemporary South African Politics, Oxford, February 1989), pp.30-31.
- 16 Militancy was debated within the UDF from around November 1983 through to July 1984. I have begun to explore this in an unpublished paper, 'The Fragile Front: The UDF and the Referendum Issue, 1983-84' (June 1993).
- 17 See my "'Trailing Behind the Masses": The United Democratic Front and Township Politics in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal Region, 1983-84', Journal of Southern African Studies 18,1 (March 1992). The most important UDF assessment of this period is Popo Molefe's 'Secretarial report to the first Annual National Conference of the UDF held on 5 to 7 April 1985 at Azaadville, Krugersdorp'.
- 18 Arnold Stofile, interviewed 26 April 1993.
- 19 'Building a tradition of resistance', p.8.
- 20 Stofile, interview.
- 21 Popo Molefe, 'Secretarial report to the first Annual National Conference of the UDF', para 8.4.
- 22 'Minutes of the UDF National General Council, 6 and 7 April 1985', hand-written, p.6.
- 23 Ibid, p.10.
- 24 Pat Lephunya, interviewed 12 January 1993, p.3.
- 25 '15 laid to rest', Sowetan, 29 April 1985.
- 26 'Ruling the townships', SN State of the Nation (May 1985).
- 27 'Talking from the townships', SN State of the Nation (May 1985), p.8.
- 28 'Organisation is going on, left right and centre', SN 6,2 (June/July 1985), p.7.
- 29 'Organisation comes first in Duduza', SN 6,2 (June/July 1985), p.11.
- 30 Sizani, interviewed 27 April 1993.

- 31 'Organisation is going on, left right and centre', SN 6,2 (June/July 1985), p.7.
- 32 Lephunya, interview; Mogane, interviewed 22 August 1993.
- 33 Minutes of UDF NEC meeting, 4 May 1985. See further my 'The Slow Growth of South Africa's National Civic Movement: Part 1, 1979-88' (unpublished paper, August 1993).
- 34 'From protest to challenge, from mobilisation to organisation', UDF Update 1,1 (July 1985), pp.8-9.
- 35 'Challenges of a new phase of struggle', State of the Nation (October/November 1985), p.13.
- 36 'Political comment', Building People's Power (supplement to State of the Nation, October/November 1985), pp.29,31.
- 37 'We must ensure Goniwe lives on', ibid, p.21.
- 38 'Crisis and struggle in E.Cape', ibid, pp.10-15.
- 39 '1985: Turmoil and Courage', SASPU National (December 1985).
- 40 'The tasks of the democratic movement in the state of emergency', Isizwe 1,1 (November 1985), p.16.
- 41 He is not entirely consistent on this. In one paper he writes that street committees were established in most townships by July 1985 ('The dynamics of local politics'); but in another he writes that street committees had only been formed in Cradock, Langa (Uitenhage) and PE by July, being formed elsewhere later ('Apartheid local government', p.15).
- 42 'The dynamics of local politics', p.4; 'UDF local government', p.47.
- 43 'Apartheid local government', pp.14-15; 'Dynamics of local politics', pp.6-7.
- 44 See Max Coleman & David Webster, 'Repression and Detentions in South Africa', in South African Review 3 (Johannesburg: SARS/Ravan, 1986).
- 45 'The last survivor: A UDF voice from hiding', Weekly Mail 25-31 Oct 1985.
- 46 Nkwinti interview.
- 47 Barrell, MK; Stephen Ellis & Tsepo Sechaba, Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile (London: James Currey, 1992).
- 48 For example, I wonder whether the weakness of MK activity may in fact have promoted locally-rooted responses to the youth, and a non-military conception of street committees. The ANC in Lesotho were apparently opposed to the tactical lifting of consumer boycotts in places like PE; but PE leaders do not seem to have followed the instructions sent by the ANC.
- 49 Barrell, 'The Necessary and the Possible', pp.46-49; Barrell, 'The Historicist Conspirator, His Detonators and Bellows: The ANC of South Africa and the Political-Military Relationship in Revolutionary Struggle' (paper presented at the Conference on Violence in Southern Africa, Oxford, June 1991), pp.28-29.
- 50 See the various works by Swilling, referenced in footnote 2 above.



- 51 See the interview with UDF Border president Steve Tshwete, who left the country in November 1985, published in Sechaba in April 1986. Tshwete's description of the situation when he left accords with other accounts. But I suspect that the discourse he uses reflects influences subsequent to his departure into exile. I myself have not yet interviewed Tshwete.
- 52 My sources are inadequate to make any strong claims about the understanding of 'people's power' in the Eastern Cape, but I assume that the accounts in the alternative media and the UDF's own media reflect the thinking of Johannesburg-based UDF leaders at least.
- 53 'Attack! Attack! Give the enemy no quarter', annual anniversary statement by the NEC of the ANC, 8 January 1986, published in Sechaba (March 1986), p.11.
- 54 UDF, 'Secretarial report as at February 1986', not dated.
- 55 Stofile, interview; M. Valli Moosa, interviewed 17 August 1993.
- 56 'Street committees aim to replace state bodies', Weekly Mail 17-23 January 1986.
- 57 Information from Khehla Shubane.
- 58 Carter, 'Alexandra rebellion', p.132. Mayekiso's wife had returned to Alexandra from Queenstown before early February.
- 59 I have not yet worked through the press for early 1989, but clearly need to - especially New Nation and City Press (which Badela wrote for).
- 60 'Street-style democracy', SASPU National (February 1986).
- 61 See further my 'The slow growth of South Africa's national civic movement'.
- 62 Minutes of meeting on 5 February 1986, by Richard Mdakane (later secretary of the Alexandra Action Committee), quoted in Judgement, State vs Mayekiso and 4 others, Supreme Court of SA, Witwatersrand Local Division case no 115/89, pp.29-30.
- 63 Ibid, p.30.
- 64 Carter, 'Alexandra rebellion', pp.120,124,137; Jochelson, 'Reform, repression and resistance', pp.7-8.
- 65 'Attack! Attack!'
- 66 Swilling, 'Dynamics of local politics'.
- 67 Valli Moosa kept brief minutes and other notes in his notebooks. At this time the UDF did not take formal minutes of most meetings, because of the repressive context.
- 68 Suttner, 'Popular justice'.
- 69 'Building people's power', Isizwe 1,2 (March 1986), p.2.
- 70 Ibid, pp.8-9.
- 71 Sisulu, 'People's education for people's power', p.98.
- 72 Ibid, p.105.
- 73 Grassroots 7,3 (May 1986).

- 74 Jeremy Baskin, Striking Back: A History of COSATU (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1991), p.94.
- 75 Rob Lambert, 'Trade unions, nationalism and the socialist project in South Africa', South African Review 4; Karl von Holdt, Trade Unions, Community Organisation and Politics (University of the Witwatersrand, Sociology of Work Programme, Labour Studies Research Report 3, 1989). Lambert misdates the Grassroots conference in May rather than April.
- 76 The April workshop was a key focus in the Mayekiso trial. See the 'Judgement' therein, pp.33-34,41,47-48; also Carter, 'Alexandra Rebellion', pp.125-7.
- 77 Carter, 'Alexandra Rebellion'.
- 78 'Input: Programme of Action', for UDF Western Cape Regional Civic Conference, 26-27 April 1986, p.2.
- 79 'Input: The Importance of Civic Organisation', for UDF Western Cape Regional Civic Conference, 26-27 April 1986, p.2.
- 80 'Port Alfred: Putting the People in Power', State of the Nation (April 1987), pp.18-19. Port Alfred was not discussed in a series of reports on 'people's democracy' - in Mamelodi, Duncan Village, and elsewhere - published in the November/December issue of SN.
- 81 'In discussing people's power...', untitled and unsigned document, April 1986.
- 82 Suttner, 'Popular justice'.
- 83 Alex Mashinini, 'Dual Power and the Creation of People's Committees', Sechaba (April 1986). Barrell records that an ANC pamphlet entitled 'ANC Call to the People: From Ungovernability to People's Power' was widely circulated in May 1986 (Barrell, 'The Necessary and the Possible', p.26); I have not seen this pamphlet and cannot comment on its contents.
- 84 Mzala, 'Building People's Power', Sechaba (September 1986).
- 85 Creecey, interviewed 23 March 1993, pp.11-13.
- 86 See City Press 27 April 1986 (is this the article referred to by Creecey in my interview?), also 7 April, and Weekly Mail 20 June.
- 87 'Port Alfred: Putting the People in Power', State of the Nation (April 1987), pp.18-19. Port Alfred was not discussed in a series of reports on 'people's democracy' - in Mamelodi, Duncan Village, and elsewhere - published in the November/December issue of SN.
- 88 Secretarial report to NWC, May 1986; hand-written notes of NWC meeting, in Valli Moosa notebook 2.
- 89 Swilling, 'Beyond Ungovernability'. Also, "Because Your Yard is too Big": Squatters, the Local State and Dual Power in Uitenhage, 1985-1986' (paper presented to the African Studies Institute seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, March 1988). See also: Frans Kruger, 'Village Talk: Local Negotiations in East London' (unpublished paper, 1991) and Doreen Atkinson, Local Government Restructuring: White Municipal Initiatives (Grahamstown, Rhodes University Institute of Social and Economic Research Working Paper no. 44, April 1989).



- 90 Letter of invitation, dated 25 March 1986, signed by Roland White (Grahamstown Democratic Action Committee); supporting letter, dated 24 March 1986, signed by Derek Swartz (UDF regional secretary).
- 91 UDF, 'Report of the National Working Committee Conference held on 24 and 25 May 1986'; notes on NWC in Mohammed Valli Moosa's notebook no. 3; notes on national civic conference, Hanover Park, by N.Jaffer?; interview, Noel Williams.
- 92 Nkwinti interview. At an NEC meeting in early May the Eastern Cape region reported that area committees had been established for civics - Hand-written notes of NEC meeting, 9 May 1986, Valli notebook 2.
- 93 Barrell, 'The Necessary and the Possible', pp.46-48.
- 94 'Street committees', Weekly Mail, 9 May 1986, p.9.
- 95 Jochelson, 'Reform, Repression and Resistance'. Jochelson blurs the boundaries between 'people's power' as a strategy, expressed in documents and articles, and organisational developments on the ground. I suspect that she underestimates the effort invested in organisation by a range of activists at the time, although she is surely correct to point to the limits of these.