

UDF 40-YEAR ANNIVERSARY NATIONAL CELEBRATION

SUNDAY 20TH AUGUST 2023
JOHANNESBURG CITY HALL | 13:00 - 17:00

UDF LEGACY & REFLECTIONS | POPO MOLEFE

Programme Directors,
Honourable President of the Republic of South Africa,
Former President Thabo Mbeki,
Former President Kgalema Motlanthe,
Premier Panyaza Lesufi,
Mma Sophy De Bruyn,
Audrey Coleman,
Cde Smangaliso Mkatshwa - Remaining Patron of the UDF,
Cde Solly Mapaila - General Secretary,
Cde Zingiswa Losi - President of COSATU
Members of the UDF 40 National Steering Committee,
Veterans of the UDF and our Liberation Struggle,
Traditional Leaders,
Religious Leaders,
Leaders of various organisations, comrades and friends.

**Re-ignite the UDF
spirit of active citizenry
for transformation and
accountability.**



On this day, Forty Years ago, the freedom-loving South Africans, black and white, rural and urban, young and old, working class and business, art workers and professionals from all sectors, determined that they shall not continue to carry the yoke of oppression and exploitation, came from all corners of our country and converged at the Rocklands Civic Centre Mitchells Plain. United by a common purpose to defeat the so-called constitutional reforms of the Apartheid Government that sought to consign Africans to the backyards of apartheid called Homelands and turn Coloured and Indian compatriots into junior partners in the Tri-Cameral Parliament controlled by whites. They were guided by the vision of a United, Non-Racial, Non-Sexist, Democratic South Africa in which all will be equal before the law.

In a massive show of strength, they gathered in the biggest conference since the Congress of the People that adopted the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in 1955 and established the United Democratic Front, a broad front of social forces of some Five Hundred and Seventy-Eight (578) people's organisations. The unity in diversity demonstrated by political, women, youth, student, religious, cultural, arts, workers, business and professional organisations, was unprecedented in the annals of the freedom struggle of the people of South Africa. The launch of the UDF was a seminal moment that signalled the beginning of the end of the Apartheid Government and its replacement by a popular government of the people.

The birth of the UDF, with its new forms and method of grassroot-oriented organisation heralded a new era in the South African political struggle. It channelled into common struggles, the resurgence of mass organisation and mobilisation. For the first time after periods of lull that were followed by the brutal repression of the Nineteen Sixties (1960s) and the Nineteen Seventies (1970s), which destroyed the organisations of the people, the UDF reasserted the voice and agency of the people. It built and enhanced the mass pillar of the freedom struggle in the tradition of the Alexandra and Evaton bus boycotts of 1943, 1955, 1957, and the Bethal potato boycott in 1959, in protest against the ill-treatment of farm workers. The emergence of the UDF represented the revival of the mass struggles that came before it.

In less than a year of its formation, sustained mass campaigns of the UDF demonstrated its capacity to frustrate the implementation of the racially segregated three-chamber Parliament each for whites, Coloureds and Indians, and the "Koornhof Bills" (named after Minister Koornhof, who piloted them). The boycott of the then Community Councils Elections in the Vaal during 1983 (less than 15% of the eligible voters voted) and the subsequent rental increases pioneered the building of the tomb of the Koornhof Bills. The UDF Million Signature Campaign launched at the beginning of 1984 under the slogan "Make your mark against Apartheid", and the election boycott campaign; "Don't Vote in Apartheid Elections" boycott campaign were the most powerful tools of mass mobilisation and unity of the national groups of the oppressed.

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Thousands of activists, young and old, from across the length and breadth of our country heeded the call. Through personal contact of door-to-door visits, we mounted successful boycotts. With no more than 10% of the eligible voters for the Coloured House of Representatives and Indian House of Delegates voting country-wide, the Constitutional Reform of PW Botha was stillborn.

Our white compatriots intensified the campaign against the mandatory military conscription of young white South Africans, which had started in the 1970s. They organised and mobilised on a non-racial principle for solidarity with all communities fighting to end apartheid. Taken together, these mass actions epitomised unity in action of all the democratic forces. Very early in its life, the UDF signalled to the Apartheid government that it was not business as usual and the people of South Africa would not carry submissively the burden of Apartheid oppression and exploitation.

Hardly a year after its formation, the Apartheid Police State unleashed repressive measures on the UDF. Several leaders were detained in terms of Section 28 of the Internal Security Act of 1982. The Minister of Police capriciously invoked his powers of detention without trial to isolate the UDF leaders from the masses and stem the growing wave of resistance. When these initial repressive measures failed, the regime became more desperate and vicious. In 1985 it swooped up the homes and offices of known activists of the UDF and its affiliates country-wide, and confiscated publications, audio and video recordings. Out of all of these, the regime preferred against the UDF leaders trumped up charges of High Treason which led to trials at Pietermaritzburg and Delmas. Simultaneously the regime detained in terms of section 29 of (ISA) activists and leaders estimated at 40 000 and unleashed on the UDF its assassination squads which murdered some of our finest revolutionaries.

We recall and pay tribute to our countless Comrades who perished during and after the life of the UDF: Mathew Goniwe, Sparrow Mkonto, Fort Calata and Sicelo Mhlawuli (Cradock), Sipho Hashe, Champion Golozi (Gqeberha/ PE) Victoria Mxenge (Eti) Peter Nchabeleng (Sekhukhuni - Limpopo), Pharaphara Mothupi (North West/ Limpopo); David Webster (Johannesburg), Stanza Bopape (Mamelodi), Monamodi Sylveser Gasebue (popularly known as "Mr Ref") (Huhudi -North West), Zollie Malindi, Johnny Issel, Vivian Magdalene Sarah Daniels affectionately known as "Auntie Vivie". These and many more are the pride of the nation. They shall be etched in our memories to the end of time. There are thousands more surviving and continue to be an inspiration to us, and their names will surely inspire posterity. Even as our country experienced pervasive corruption of State Capture, we did not see them capture media headlines. We are eternally grateful to them for upholding the integrity of our freedom struggle and the good name of the UDF.

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Through our determination and courageous struggles, we demonstrated amply that the people united were invincible then, now and will still be in the future. The combined nationwide State of Emergency declared by PW Botha, the occupation by the soldiers and police of the black townships and the deployment of death squads could not stop the tide of our sustained mass action that spanned ten years. It was simply too high for the regime to stop. The organs of people's power and processes of self-empowerment through street committees, internal democracy and self-defence units represented concretely the people's power.

The power of the people in motion and united under the banner "UDF UNITES! APARTHEID DIVIDES!" created conditions that forced the regime to release political prisoners, the Rivonia Trialists, and, ultimately, Nelson Mandela, too. The unbanning of individuals and political organisations of the people was a direct result of the mass struggles led by the affiliates of the UDF. The masses of our people led and inspired by the UDF forced the regime to agree to the calling of the Constitutional Assembly - the demand of the UDF and the liberation movement. The current world-acclaimed Constitution of the Republic of South Africa that the elected Constitutional Assembly negotiated was made possible by the sustained united mass struggles led by the UDF. We are proud that, through our action, resilience and tenacity, we demonstrated that 'freedom in our lifetime' was possible.

Today, as we are gathered here to commemorate the UDF, born forty years ago, throughout South Africa, thousands of our compatriots are remembering and honouring the legacy of this gargantuan movement that they created. In commemorating the UDF, we are fundamentally celebrating its values of equality, justice, human dignity, and cultural diversity; and its principles of non-racialism, non-sexism, participatory democracy, and accountability - all of which are the hallmarks that defined the character of the UDF. We are celebrating the attainment of the vision of a democratic South Africa, united in its diversity in which all citizens have universal suffrage, for which the UDF and other liberatory forces fought. We are celebrating the attainment of the Constitution that enshrines universal principles of democracy and contains the Bill of Rights, which obliges the government to take steps to improve the lot of the citizens.

Our Constitution and its Bill of Rights are a concrete expression of the goal and vision of the UDF, and the legacy created by the generations that preceded its establishment. They are an embodiment of the collective yearning of generations of South Africans for the South Africa as it should be when apartheid ended. The nation that guarantees a better life for all citizens means, amongst others, access to clean drinking water where no one dies of cholera, where learners access quality basic education, communities' access primary health care, the maintenance of critical social and economic infrastructure, where venality is not a defining feature of our nation, and where the State uses its monopoly of violence to protect the citizens against marauding criminals.

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The democratic breakthrough of 1994 opened new vistas of freedom for South Africans to initiate programmes aimed at reversing the legacy of apartheid. Indeed, the first decade and a half of democracy witnessed progress that gave hope to the citizens and united them behind the government's transformation and service delivery agenda. The economy was growing. Municipalities prioritised the provision of services to the people. Most of the municipalities were functional. Public representatives across the three spheres of Government recognised that accounting to the voters was not an option but an obligation. Governance was defined by the politics of service delivery and accountability.

Sadly, that positive mood of the people and their hopes have, over time, been systematically dashed, and trust in politics and public representatives is eroding dramatically as the quality of services declines and local governance collapses like dominoes. Perhaps, it is apt at this point to paraphrase Chinua Achebe, from his widely studied, translated, and read African Novel "THINGS FALL APART". Indeed, things are falling apart in our country. To many political parties, the people ceased to matter. But the people must not be reduced to bystanders as those who occupy office in their name gamble with their lives. We must energise them through popular participation to hold leaders at all levels accountable and reassert the supremacy of the Constitution. We must reclaim and consolidate our hard-won democracy. There is a growing consensus that our democracy is in peril.

Daily, we witness concerted efforts by anti-democratic forces to reverse the advance towards nation-building that we had begun making. The challenge of building a new society with values based on our Constitution is enormous. Shaping practically and genuinely, the new non-racial and non-sexist society envisioned by the UDF and our Constitution continues to elude us, and, in some respects, we regressed in this regard. Political Parties of all stripes are not helping the consolidation of our democracy, accountability and provision of sustainable basic services. Instead, they spend valuable time shouting at one another, neglecting their constitutional obligations. Lately, they are obsessed with sharing the spoils of coalition governance amongst themselves in a race to feed at the trough. They are yet to demonstrate their appetite and resolve to solve the myriad of challenges that communities and our country face.

The prevalent practices of political parties are increasingly sacrificing nation-building and social cohesion. The predominantly black political parties tend to institutionalise anti-white tendencies, whilst some of those that are mainly white reinforce anti-black attitudes amongst their supporters. We need to seriously recognise this threat to our democracy and provide leadership in urging for new styles of political communication that advance the values enshrined in the Constitution of our country. We must discourage the festering of political rhetoric which imperils our values, Constitution, and the sustainability of our democracy.

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The citizens are upset because the principle of accountability is being neglected to the point of near abandonment. They are upset because the country is moving in a negative direction, aided by some political leaders. They are upset because their experience is one of institutionalisation of incompetence and corruption. Where there is incompetence and corruption, the system of governance is bound to collapse, as is currently the order of the day in our country, especially at the local level.

One comrade observing what is happening in our Municipalities said: "The situation of leadership in our country is one of making NOVICES TEMPLE ABBOTS." He goes on to say, "All we need do is pause and look at our Metros, NOVICES HAVE BECOME TEMPLE ABBOTS." He then concludes, "This clearly is dishonouring, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Lilian Ngoyi, Chris Hani, Ruth Mompati, Albertina Sisulu, and many others.

I join him in asking the question- HOW DID WE GET HERE SO QUICKLY?

Our answer to this all-important question is the reason why our democracy is worth defending and fixing for the benefit of the entire citizenry with their active participation. The occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the UDF represents for us a sincere and genuine attempt to remind all South Africans of what we fought for and that under no circumstances should any of us tolerate any attempt at the deconstruction of our society and the emerging deliberate campaign that seeks to rubbish and undermine our Constitution by some in our society including those who have sworn allegiance to it - PLEDGING TO PROTECT AND DEFEND IT.

Building on the legacy of the UDF, the younger generation must "discover and fulfil its mission" rather than "betray it" (Franz Fanon). We hope that the legacy, meaning and impact of the formation of the UDF, its pursuit of non-racialism and non-sexism, its expansive organisation and mobilisation of South Africans, its ability to instill hope in the people, its internal democracy and accountability are values that we must propagate and embrace as a relatively new society and strive very hard to preserve, defend and protect, for they represent everything that we struggled for and lived for.

We are a constitutional democracy; its defence requires us to exercise the powers that it confers on us. Key amongst them is that of the "vote". Accordingly, on this day, we urge the 13.7 m unregistered voters to register and use their power the vote to defend our hard-won democracy.

The theme of the 40th Anniversary of the UDF and honouring its great legacy must be practically implemented. To this extent and on this day, we call on:

- All South Africans across the length and breadth of our country to actively and passionately engage in issues that affect them in society.

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- Communities and their organisations to ensure the tireless mobilisation of the citizenry to be the true agents of change, transformation and accountability.
 - Citizens to get out of their passive armchairs, social media activism, and be prepared to work for change.
 - Communities to take advantage of existing institutions of participatory democracy, such as the school governing bodies (SGBs), ward committees and community policing fora (CPFs) to ensure order and discipline, conditions conducive to teaching and learning.
 - Communities to collectively hold the public representatives accountable.
 - Activists to identify civil society and other organisations, support and strengthen them to become genuine organs of peoples' power.
 - Activists and organisations, regardless of party affiliation, to establish street committees and neighbourhood watches to support the police in the fight against all forms of crime and to hold them accountable.
 - Communities to work collectively to stop drug peddling and promote drug-free communities.

Beyond commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the UDF and in the spirit of its grassroots approach, activists in different localities, regions and provinces should initiate discussion fora to give practical meaning to active citizenry. In order to translate into a programme, the theme "ACTIVE CITIZENRY FOR TRANSFORMATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY."