

## **The Changing Meaning of Change: The Legacy of the United Democratic Front in South Africa**

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The United Democratic Front (UDF) was easily the most representative social movement in the history of South Africa, spearheading internal resistance against apartheid in the 1980s. Although the UDF had a heterogeneous constituency, the dominant perspective envisaged post-apartheid South Africa as a colourblind, participative and egalitarian society. The UDF was broadly associated with the African National Congress in exile, but it did acquire an identity of its own. While the vision of a nonracial, egalitarian society was broadly shared across South Africa, different regional UDF organisations developed their own regionally flavoured character.

After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, the UDF disbanded as most of its activists flocked towards the ANC as the most likely instrument for changing South Africa as well as for advancing their individual careers. Only in the Western Cape was the dissolution of the UDF contested. Some the Front's constituent organisations (student organisations, trade unions, civic associations etc.) resumed their autonomous role as civil society organisations. This paper reflects on the legacy of the UDF in post-apartheid South Africa: mission accomplished or vision betrayed?

South Africa's 1996 constitution has been widely praised as a state-of-the-art model of liberal democracy, but it is quite removed from the egalitarian society envisaged by social movements in the 1980s. South Africa has become the world's most unequal society, having recently surpassed Brasil. Policies of Black Economic Empowerment have created a wealthy, politically well-connected black elite as well as a rapidly growing black middle class, while one third of black South Africans of working age remain unemployed. Mandela's celebrated 'rainbow nation' has been superseded by an exclusive brand of African nationalism that is at odds with the previous ideal of a non-racial society. How do former UDF activists deal with the dissonance between their previous ideals and contemporary reality? In this research project, I revisit people and places where I initially did research around 1990-1992. What has been the long-term impact of the UDF? How do former activists make sense of the changes in South African society? Does the legacy of the UDF serve as a source of inspiration for new social movements?