The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:
http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/

Available through a partnership with

Scroll down to read the article.
THE STRUGGLE WITHIN THE STRUGGLE: South African resistance strategies

Steven Friedman

The past few years have seen dramatic and unprecedented resistance to the South African government's apartheid policies by predominantly black opposition groups. But, while the scale of resistance is not in doubt, the nature of the challenge which it poses to white rule is the subject of heated debate. Some see it as a new and unprecedented threat to the apartheid order. Others see it merely as a repetition, albeit more dramatic, of earlier conflicts in which resistance grew sharply and then abated in the face of repression.

The present turmoil is, however, both a repetition of the old and yet something entirely new. The difference between this and previous waves of resistance lies less in its scale than in the nature of the tactics adopted by resistance groups. But the adoption of new modes of pursuing change is by no means uniform. Many tactics and strategies which appear new are merely more dramatic attempts to revive an earlier resistance tradition. The two approaches, the old and the new, exist side by side, often within the same organisations. At times they are complementary, but often they are in conflict. Where a battle between them rages, it could determine the immediate fate of internal anti-apartheid resistance.

MOBILISATION OR ORGANISATION: PROTEST OR POWER

The present wave of resistance is not, of course, the first to confront either white rule or the present National Party government. Previous waves were either crushed or ran out of steam. That the present one is more dramatic than its predecessors does not necessarily guarantee it any greater success. A resistance movement which repeats the weaknesses of earlier ones on a larger scale is unlikely to meet a different fate from them. The test of the present turmoil is not so much its scale but rather whether it has enabled resistance groups to build a more effective power base from which to challenge white rule.

Before the early 1980s black resistance relied on mobilisation rather than organisation, on rallying protest rather than wielding power. Successive resistance movements were often able to mobilise large numbers of people around specific issues or behind charismatic leaders but they did not weld this following into an organised and disciplined movement which could press for change. Numbers are no automatic guarantee of strength and

58
these movements were crushed when the government acted against their relatively small group of leaders. The failure to yield gains reinforced their followers' perception of their own powerlessness and their demise was followed by periods of relative quiescence.

A new approach began to emerge in the mid-1970s with the growth of the trade union movement, whose strategy was based on building tight grassroots and democratic organisation. It assumed that the collective strength of its members was a more effective guarantee of power than a charismatic leadership. The number of members a union had was less important than the degree of muscle they could wield and the unions eschewed mass mobilisation and high-profile campaigns in order to build a disciplined power base which could withstand repression and back demands for change with organised strength.

A key element in this strategy was the view that organisation was likely to endure only if it could be shown to deliver real gains to the powerless. The winning of short-term concessions which fell short of workers' ultimate demands was seen not as an unacceptable compromise but as a source of power since it enabled union members to experience the benefits of collective action and thus to develop confidence and skills which would enable them to fight more ambitious battles. Since these gains could be won only through negotiation, bargaining became a key weapon in the unions' attempt to wield collective power.

In the early 1980s, a renaissance among opposition groups prompted the formation of a host of grassroots civic, youth and student organisations. In 1983 these coalesced into two national movements, the United Democratic Front and the National Forum Committee. Many of these organisations were initially little more than small groups of activists and many favoured random mobilisation rather than patient organisation. But, as the new grassroots organisations began to take root in the townships many activists too began to seek ways of building an enduring power base through organisation around immediate, attainable goals.

It is this change, rather than the scale of township violence or the attendance of masses of residents at funerals, which differentiates the present wave of resistance from its predecessors. The key test is: has the ferment prompted more effective organisation among resistance groups?

AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESISTANCE TRENDS

Several features distinguish the current turmoil from previous waves of post-war resistance. It has, firstly, been marked by much higher levels of violence and counter-violence. The township 'comrades', chiefly the unemployed youth, have sought to neutralise state control of the townships by
attacking, and in some cases killing, local councillors and police who are seen to be enforcing apartheid on the state's behalf. This violence has not been restricted to these 'collaborators'. Activists have used it against other township residents to mobilise them by coercion as well as to secure the dominance of particular organisations and the past two years have been marked by violent clashes between members of rival anti-apartheid groups. The security forces responded by occupying the townships and violently attempting to crush resistance, while conservative black 'vigilantes' have been mobilised to attack activists.

The past two years have also seen unprecedented levels of mobilisation, as evidenced by large crowds at 'political' funerals and by repeated work boycotts by township residents which have been far more widely supported than their predecessors. Mass resistance tactics which were attempted with limited success in previous waves of unrest, such as consumer and school boycotts, have been revived and implemented far more effectively than in the past. In a growing number of townships, rent boycotts have emerged as a new and powerful weapon of resistance.

A further difference from the last wave of resistance - the pupil unrest of 1976 - has been the overt identification by activists with the banned African National Congress and in some cases with the Communist Party. This has given a powerful symbolic focus to the resistance and has been seen as a sign of growing black militancy. The ANC's symbolic influence on resistance politics is illustrated by the fact that even Inkatha, which has been locked in a bitter battle with the present ANC leadership, refuses to negotiate with the government until Nelson Mandela is released. A recently formed alliance of black town councillors - the United Municipalities of South Africa - has taken a similar stance. This has highlighted the ANC's indispensability to any national political settlement and heightened pressure for its unbanning.

However the violence has remained largely restricted to the townships and has not directly threatened white rule - virtually all its victims have been black. It has often done as much to dislocate black communities as to threaten the authorities. The inter-organisational violence has impaired organisation and the emergence of right-wing vigilante groups has shown that the violence of the marginalised can be used to impose state control as well as to erode it. Some townships were rendered 'ungovernable' but recent evidence suggests that 'ungovernability' has been largely 'rolled back' during the current state of emergency. The 1986 emergency has demonstrated again that the South African government is still able to contain any attempt to overthrow it by force.

The emergency has also highlighted the vulnerability of mass mobilisa-
tion. Severe clamps on funerals and other mass meetings have succeeded in closing this avenue off to activists, while attempts to call stay-aways in recent months have received only limited support. The consumer boycotts have collapsed in the wake of the emergency. Pupil militancy appears to have continued but here, too, mobilisation seems to have waned. Only the rent boycott appears to have proved relatively immune to repression, partly because township residents often simply do not have the money to pay their rent arrears.

Equally importantly, these tactics too cannot of themselves produce change; at most they can create a climate in which it is more likely. Short-term mobilisation is likely to pose an enduring threat to white rule only if it creates a space in which long-term organisation can emerge. Boycotts, stay-aways and similar actions are often the products of organisation, but many have been imposed by small groups of activists without thoroughly consulting their constituents. Besides prompting a backlash by some sections of black society - as evidenced by the emergence of the vigilantes - this makes them far more vulnerable in the face of tough security action.

Identification with the ANC is an equally ambiguous phenomenon. While the banned movement's symbolic appeal is clearly immense, it is not matched by a corresponding degree of internal organisation - ANC leaders themselves acknowledge that they are not in control of many of the activists who invoke its name. Purely symbolic support for an organisation which does not operate effectively within the country can, and has been, a recipe for passivity as well as militancy by prompting powerless communities to rely on the banned movement rather than their own efforts to achieve change. Indeed, in some areas, resistance politicians have invoked these symbols against groups who have sought to organise independently for change. In this sense the symbolic strength of the exile movement has often weakened attempts to build grassroots power within the country.

The present unrest has, however, also led to a less dramatic, but perhaps more significant, increase in organisation. In scores of townships, civic and youth organisations have established roots in their communities and begun to build a more lasting power base. In the Eastern Cape and parts of the Transvaal, activists have formed street and area committees which, consciously or unconsciously, imitate the shop steward structures which the unions have built in the factories. In several cases, these local structures have attempted to turn 'ungovernability' into a more enduring source of power by taking over key township functions which were once administered by the state such as refuse removal, the development of parks and, in some cases, crime prevention. 'People's courts' attempted to take over the
administration of justice and, responding to the school boycotts, 'people's education' emerged - an attempt to channel often unfocused pupil militancy into an enduring attempt to build an alternative education system.

An equally significant development has been the attempt to use local negotiation as a source of community power. This is particularly significant since a rejection of negotiation has been a key element in recent resistance tradition. In the earlier stages of the unrest, prominent activists had rejected negotiation and insisted on an immediate transfer of power to the majority - a demand which was clearly unattainable. However, in the militant Eastern Cape, activists increasingly turned to negotiation with local business leaders or government officials in an attempt to win lasting gains out of the consumer boycotts or the ungovernability of the townships. An oft-cited example is the small East Cape town of Port Alfred, whose civic association acquired effective control over township education and development through negotiation with local business and the authorities. The past year also saw a significant attempt to negotiate at national level - the National Education Crisis Committee's contact with the Department of Education and Training. Because the NECC represented a wide range of militant opposition groups, this attempt to make limited gains through negotiation backed by organisation represented a significant departure from traditional resistance strategies.

These trends were limited to a few areas and were often ambiguous. While some street committees appear to have enjoyed the support of residents, others seemed to have been imposed on them. While some 'people's courts' seemed to enjoy a high degree of legitimacy among residents, others were allegedly used to impose the will of small groups of unelected activists. The attempts at negotiation were limited by resistance by some activists and, in many cases, by the authorities' refusal to talk. In the absence of free political activity in the townships, there were also distinct limits to the ability of negotiators to seek a mandate from their constituents and this meant that negotiation was not necessarily backed by grassroots organisation. The NECC's negotiations with the government were hampered both by its inability to effectively control pupil action - an indication of the extent to which key opposition groups were unable to control random militancy - and the government's own retreat from negotiation which intensified after the 1986 emergency. But these embryonic attempts are nevertheless significant, for all indicated a qualitative increase in organised resistance rather than sporadic mobilisation.

It is significant that these developments occurred locally rather than nationally, accurately reflecting the present state of resistance and black organisation. While there has undoubtedly been a qualitative increase in
organisation, this has not yet translated into the building of an effective national power base.

THE KEY ORGANISATIONS - STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The movement which is often seen as the dominant force in resistance politics - and which has been the prime victim of arbitrary security action - is the United Democratic Front which owes its influence to two factors. Firstly, it is seen by both its supporters and opponents as the internal heir to the ANC tradition which, as we have noted, has a powerful symbolic appeal. It has successfully used the media and the symbols of the Congress tradition to project itself as the standard bearer of the nationalist movement and this has given it substantial domestic and international influence.

Secondly, while many of its national leadership have sought to perpetuate the high-profile protest politics of the earlier Congress tradition, it has also built an extensive network of civic, student and youth organisations which have usually been at the forefront of militant township resistance. Besides its support in key urban areas, it put down organised roots in many small towns which were politically dormant for decades. It is the dominant organisation in the Eastern Cape and some parts of the Transvaal and has scores of affiliates in the other provinces as well.

However, the UDF's organisation is often far weaker than it seems. Its national leadership is often not in control of events on the ground. Despite gains over the past three years, it is a long way from becoming a disciplined and organised national movement which could pose a direct threat to white rule. The current emergency has severely limited the UDF's ability to mobilise township residents and has also severely hampered its grassroots organisation. In most of Natal it is hardly a presence at all and in the Western Cape it vies for supremacy with several rivals. Its grassroots organisation is also often uneven. In some areas, its affiliates are well-organised and have deep roots in the townships - in others they are still little more than handfuls of activists.

The UDF's reliance on mobilisation and protest often conflicts with organisational requirements, and resources which could be devoted to organisation have been dissipated in attempts to mobilise dramatic local and regional campaigns. In some areas this has sapped the resources of its grassroots affiliates - they have been diverted into high-profile protest action which has prevented them from building organised strength. In others the tactics of some militant youth in UDF affiliates, relying on force rather than organisation to mobilise protest, have sparked violent reaction from vigilantes which have resulted in severe setbacks. Crossroads is the
A second strain in resistance politics is represented by the National Forum Committee. It is an alliance between two groupings who reject the tradition to which the UDF is heir: the black consciousness movement which was particularly influential in the 1970s and left-wing Western Cape groups who stress a rigid policy of non-collaboration. The two are united in their opposition to the ANC's Freedom Charter and both adopt a rigid stance of 'non-collaboration' which includes a rejection of tactical alliances with liberals and of negotiation as a strategy for change.

The NF has pockets of organised support in the Western Cape, the Northern Transvaal and some other areas. However, both black consciousness and the 'non-collaboration' tradition have always relied far more on the support of small groups of intellectuals than on a mass following. While they have been sharply critical of some UDF strategies, arguing that they substitute mobilisation for organisation and seek to create a euphoria which over-estimates the ability of unorganised resistance to produce change, they have proved far less adept at translating theory into practice by building their own organised base. The NF is thus organisationally the weakest of the national groupings.

However, the NF does have an influence in resistance politics which exceeds its numerical support. Individual supporters hold key positions in trade unions, churches, educational and sports bodies and are able to exert influence over their direction. Because the NF's Western Cape affiliates, in particular, have an ideological coherence which the UDF lacks, they are sometimes able to influence the agenda of resistance movements even if they have little organised support. In the Western Cape, for example, the 'non-collaborationist' tradition is particularly deep-rooted. Many activists received their political education from its adherents and they have retained at least some allegiance to it even where they have gone on to ally themselves with groups such as the UDF. Some NF activists suggest that they don't need an organised base since many of their ideas, such as their rejection of a national convention, have been adopted by their rivals. This claim, while overstated, is not entirely inaccurate.

Both the UDF and NF are, of course, hostile to the third movement which lays claim to an organised national base, Inkatha. Hostility between Inkatha and both the UDF and the present ANC leadership has been particularly intense, spilling over into violence which has claimed scores of lives. Inkatha is particularly critical of 'protest politics' and of mass mobilisation without an organised base. It insists that blacks do not have the muscle to overthrow the government and argues that only patient organisation can produce change. It also stresses the virtues of negotiation and
has devoted much of its resources to attempts to wean whites away from apartheid. This, it argues, is more likely to erode white supremacy than confrontation.

Superficially there seem to be marked similarities between its approach and that which the unions developed - but they are illusory. The key difference is that, despite its rhetoric, Inkatha has not attempted to use the organised power of its members to press for change. While it endorses non-violent action such as strikes and consumer boycotts, it has rarely attempted to organise them and when it has, it has had very limited success. Inkatha's claim to command an organised mass following is therefore, at most, unproven and there is little evidence to suggest that it would be able to wield effective grassroots power should it choose to do so. Indeed, its strategy seems to rely on negotiation as a substitute for organised resistance rather than as a complement to it.

As the unrest has grown, Inkatha has sought to project itself to key white interest groups as the most effective vehicle of moderate black opinion; as the only group which is willing and able to protect free enterprise and liberal democratic values. Inkatha thereby hopes to erode apartheid by forming alliances with key sectors of white society such as business and some opposition parties which can then formulate non-racial alternatives to both apartheid and socialism and win increasing white acceptance for these alternatives. This approach is, of course, presently typified by its attempt to negotiate a regional multi-racial legislative alternative to apartheid in Natal. Inkatha would be almost certain to dominate this structure, which would give it a significantly enhanced power base and might also create momentum for similar experiments elsewhere.

Two factors, however, limit the likely success of this strategy. The first is the fact that Inkatha, despite its claims to a national base, does not have significant influence outside Natal. There are also severe doubts about Inkatha's claims to command an organised 'moderate' constituency even in its Natal stronghold. While its national leaders project themselves as sophisticated and articulate spokesmen for a conservative brand of liberalism, its local leadership have a different agenda. At the grassroots, its Natal structures are controlled by local councillors and small traders who seek to use it as a vehicle to impose control and to protect their fiefdoms by dispensing patronage. They have increasingly sought to entrench their position through violence and Inkatha may well have no more control over their actions than the UDF has over the 'comrades'. Authority imposed in this way has as much potential to generate continued conflict as to ensure stability and this may well limit Inkatha's ability to deliver on its
promise to ensure orderly change. In its attempt to project itself as a moderate alternative, Inkatha has also expended much effort in quelling militant action. Particularly in times of heightened resistance activity, this impairs its credibility by enabling its opponents to brand it as an ally of the status quo.

One other movement clearly has a claim to an organised national base - the trade unions. In the early 1980s they were clearly the best organised and most effective opposition movement, which repeatedly showed an ability to win gains through organisation which far exceeded that of any of the political movements. They have also had an impact on community resistance as organised workers have attempted to inject the strategies and principles of grassroots organisation into township politics. Their organised base and workplace bargaining rights make them far more resilient than most of the political movements, a point which has been demonstrated in the present state of emergency. Although union activity has been severely hampered, they have continued to act in the workplace and wield influence.

However, the union movement's ability to determine the direction of resistance politics is severely limited by several factors. Firstly, unions are not in themselves appropriate bodies to lead a fight for political change. Their structures are anchored in the workplace and cannot simply be expanded into the wider community. Since they bring together workers with a variety of political allegiances, united only in a common desire for workplace rights, they lack the ideological coherence which a political party requires. Unions can influence the direction of political resistance, but cannot lead it.

Since the present turmoil began, union ability to exert an independent influence on resistance has also been limited. In a period of heightened mobilisation, their key strength - the insistence on acting only with a mandate from members - has also proved a weakness since it has forced them to react to events more slowly than the activist groups. Nor is there much scope for the democratic consultation on which mandate politics relies in townships whose residents have been denied the right to meet openly.

Union stress on mandate and negotiation implies a very different style to that which dominated previous resistance. This new style is of relatively recent vintage - most union members have been organised for a few years at most - and it has not had sufficient time to generate a political culture which could effectively challenge, or remould, the resistance tradition with its powerful symbolic appeal. Unions thus find themselves under considerable pressure to aid political mobilisation rather than organisation and to surrender their control over political action to nationalist movements which command the symbols of resistance. Organised workers...
who attempt to maintain the style which the unions have evolved are vulnerable to charges that they are 'betraying the struggle'. It seems that some members are reluctant to criticise the strategies of community activists because, as one COSATU unionist suggested to me, 'they say you are against Mandela and nobody wants to be accused of that'. Where unions have attempted to maintain an independent stance, they have often been outflanked by community groups. They have either lost influence or been forced to move closer to the traditional mobilisation style of resistance.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the development of COSATU, the largest union federation, whose national leadership has moved increasingly closer to the UDF and to mobilisation politics. This initially led to a decline in both democratic practices and organisational effectiveness within COSATU, although there are now signs of a reversal of this trend. It also played some role in prompting the formation of two rival groupings, allied to Inkatha and the black consciousness movement.

The unions' influence - and that of the style which they pioneered - has certainly not been eclipsed. In COSATU, as in the UDF, there is still substantial support for grassroots organisation and for the strategies which this implies. Tensions between the two approaches are likely to persist and the outcome may well be a style which falls somewhere between the two. However, there is little prospect that the union movement will emerge as the dominant focus of national resistance.

What of the exiled ANC? The powerful symbolic support for the ANC tradition, besides exerting influence over the direction of resistance politics, also rules out the prospect of a political settlement which excludes the banned movement. However, this symbolic support is not matched by internal organisation. Nor does the ANC's guerilla war pose a threat to state power and, for a variety of reasons which lie outside the scope of this paper, it is unlikely to do so. Symbolic support is no guarantee of power since symbols can be appropriated by a variety of actors - Inkatha regularly invokes the ANC tradition, despite its hostility to its current leadership. The ANC is no better able to force change than any of the internal groups - indeed, it is less able to do so, a reality which its leadership has acknowledged by increasingly stressing the primacy of internal resistance.

Thus, although all of the national movements have an influence on resistance politics, attempts to dismiss particular groups as 'irrelevant' or to identify a single one as the sole, or even the dominant, vehicle of black aspirations, are misleading. For internal resistance has not yet reached the stage where any of the movements are able to offer an organised national challenge to apartheid despite the ferment of the past two years.
THE IMMEDIATE PROSPECTS FOR ORGANISED RESISTANCE

The climate for organised resistance appears to be extremely hostile at present. The present state of emergency has weakened organisation and the authorities have used it to 'roll back' some of the gains which resistance made before it was declared. Forced removals in areas such as Brits and Uitenhage which were successfully resisted before the emergency are now again threatened or have already been implemented; the authorities now seem determined to use force rather than concessions to reimpose control over black schools; and the emergency has also snuffed out most attempts at local negotiation. Shortly before the emergency, the government appeared to be moving closer to an acceptance of local negotiation. Only days before it was declared, a senior official travelled to the Eastern Cape and offered to negotiate an ambitious township upgrading scheme with key UDF activists. The state now appears to have decided that negotiation can only take place on its terms and after grassroots organisation has been severely weakened. In many areas, particularly in smaller towns where organisation had begun to flourish, severe repression does appear to have succeeded in crippling resistance.

The present climate is not conducive to structured organisation for it has sharply limited the scope for open and democratic activity. Organisation needs space within which to operate - the trade unions' experience indicates that the freedom to hold meetings and to consult members is a crucial precondition for democratic organisation. The current state of emergency has therefore strengthened the hand of activists who favour random militancy at the expense of those who advocate strategic, organised and democratic resistance.

However, while the emergency has weakened resistance, it has not eliminated it. The education crisis and rent boycotts persist. Even if the authorities did smash resistance now, several structural factors suggest that it would re-emerge relatively quickly. A key motor to the present turmoil has been economic decline and the resultant pressure on black living standards. This prompted the rent protests which sparked the unrest and continues to fuel the current rent boycotts. It also created the 'comrades', unemployed youth whose militancy has fuelled the turmoil. There is no sign that the economy, within the constraints of present government policy, is capable of a broad recovery which would eliminate this source of unrest. The implications for future stability are particularly awesome if we consider that tens of thousands of politicised youth have now opted out of the school system and that there is no prospect of their being absorbed into the economy. The problem is compounded by the economy's increasing reliance on black manpower and on the failure of influx control to keep the
black poor out of the cities. It is becoming increasingly difficult to solve the problem by banishing the poor and the jobless to remote rural areas and this will ensure that black poverty will increasingly manifest itself in the cities, where it is both more visible and more of a threat to stability.

This suggests that the present emergency will not succeed in smashing resistance organisation to be followed by a decade of quiescence as the 1960 emergency did. Repression can, at most, offer the authorities only a short term solution and they will be forced to make further concessions to black aspirations in an attempt to ensure urban stability. Despite the severity of the emergency, there is evidence that the government recognises that it will have to supplement repression with further concessions.

It is unlikely to be able to do this without creating new space for resistance. Despite its weaknesses, the mobilisation of the past year has had one major success. It has severely undermined the legitimacy of reforms imposed by the government. While the authorities can impede change by force, they can no longer initiate it on their terms alone. To name but one example, the proposed regional services councils are unlikely to achieve significant legitimacy, regardless of the state of organised resistance. This means that any attempt to achieve stability in urban areas is doomed unless it offers black communities greater control over their destiny and thus presents them with new opportunities to wield power, albeit in limited areas. Since stability cannot be achieved without change, these opportunities are almost certain to emerge.

There is also a strong likelihood that this resistance will be more organised. Just as the emergency has not smashed all resistance, it has also not smashed all organisation. The trade unions continue to operate in the factories; in some areas, there is also evidence that grassroots community organisation has survived, albeit in weakened form. Both are likely to survive the current wave of repression and grow once space is again created for them to operate.

The outcome is, however, by no means automatic. In communities which have been denied any experience of democracy, and whose powerlessness militates against attempts to secure change through collective organised muscle, the appeals of mobilisation politics and of charismatic but demagogic leadership remain strong. Despite the advances organisation has made, the mobilisation tradition remains strong, perhaps dominant - as witnessed by the partial capitulation of the union movement to more traditional forms of resistance. The temptations of substituting anger for power, militancy for strategic resistance, remain powerful.

But recent events have emphasised that mobilisation and confrontation
alone cannot secure change and that resistance can only mount an effective challenge to apartheid if it is organised and if it seeks to build a power base by making incremental gains. The trend towards negotiation in the period immediately prior to the emergency suggests that community activists are becoming increasingly aware of this and that, despite the enduring influence of protest politics, this strategy has by no means been eclipsed and that its influence may well have increased. It will, of course, only begin to take root when freer political activity gives it the necessary space to emerge. While the prospects are at present bleak, the growing structural pressure on apartheid may force the authorities to concede that space sooner rather than later, whatever their current intentions. If it does, the prospects of an effective challenge to exclusive white rule will depend on the extent to which resistance movements, and those who support change, use the opportunities presented to them to build democratic grass-roots organisation within the country and to develop the strategies which could nurture it.