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Edited Interview Transcript of Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 20th March 2003

TAPES 29,34 & 35

The Consulate sit-in

IAIN: Now, the Consulate issue.

MEWA: Sometime in September 1984¹, a day before P W Botha was installed as a new so-called President of the Republic of South Africa, my colleagues and I – we were all in hiding after we were released from jail and we had got wind that they wanted to re-detain us - made our appearance at the British Consulate. We wanted to internationalise the cause of the oppressed peoples, especially with respect to detention without trial. We were very well received by the receptionist, who from across the counter did not see our luggage in our hands. In introducing myself, she said, `Oh! Mr Ramgobin, we have read so much about you recently, it is so nice to see you.` Then I said `It very nice to see you too. We have come here to pay our respects to Mr Simon Davey. Would you please ensure that he sees us.` This was in 9 o'clock in the morning, without an appointment. She said to us `He is in, you are very lucky that he has no engagement, but in the meantime do come in and have a cup of tea.`²

We went in to a waiting room and she went to another room to bring us tea. She still had not seen our luggage, our bags. And she asked `Would you like some biscuits?` and I said `Yes that would be very nice`. I was not the spokesperson as such, but being the kind of person that I am, I did say to her, `Bring enough for the six of us`. And she literally did that. She still had not seen our luggage with us, unless she was deliberately trying not to see it. We were seated in a waiting room and then in came Mr Davey, who is a very tall man. He did not appear to see our luggage. As arranged I took over, to negotiate. I said to Mr Davey `Would you please identify yourself with the course of freedom in the spirit of British justice. We are here and we would like to use the typewriter, hold a press conference, and negotiate with the South African government from your office on the questions of detentions without trial.`

¹ The sit-in began on the morning of Thursday the 13th September 1984. The `Consulate Six` were Messrs Archie Gumede, the president of the UDF, Paul David, Billy Nair, M.J. Naidoo, Mewa Ramgobin, and George Sewpersahd. Ramgobin, Sewpersadh and Naidoo left in October, and were arrested as they left the building. Gumede, David and Nair left the consulate on 13 December. Gumede and David were arrested leaving the building. Nair, recently released from twenty years on Robben Island, went free.

² See Ramgobin, *Prisms*, `Sir Simon Davey`, pp. 166-169.

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It was then that he saw our luggage and for once British diplomacy, and British cool headedness - he was flustered. I had a hand-written statement which I wanted to type out and hand to the press because there was going to be a press conference immediately on our arrival.³ He said `No that I cannot allow.` By then at least half hour had passed and the press had arrived. And they were all knocking at the door. I appeared at the door below the huge emblem of the British Consulate. The photographers were there and I read out the statement to say why we were there.⁴

Rather ironically that press conference was the shortest one in my life. It didn't last for more than six minutes. But that act of entering the British Consulate and those six minutes provided for us as a democratic movement in South Africa with what in our view \$100 000 000 could not have provided in terms of highlighting the question of detention without trial and most importantly of all the upstaging of PW Botha's inauguration as State President.⁵ I think they never forgave us for that. But forgiveness or no forgiveness we had made our point. We had intended to stay just for the day, but there was no co-operation at that stage from the British Government, or at least from the Consul, to the extent that we required. But as the negotiations did not take place, we decided we would remain. Then we got news as to what had happened outside, with our colleagues outside. This was not only good but essential.⁶

But more essential than that was the call of nature for the six of us. It was now past midday. We said to him `Would you kindly hold our arms and take us to the toilets`, which were outside the Consulate along the passage, `because for as long as we are under your custody the South African Police will not be able to touch us.` On the seventh floor of the Barclays Bank Building, the toilet was on the other end of the floor, so we had to pass five or six offices. In those offices the security police could have just grabbed us in the corridor. So Simon Davey had to take each one of us to the toilet holding our hands. The he realised he was in trouble but he also realised that we were in trouble. But he realised that if he refused to take us we would have been forced to get out. I think this was a miscalculation on his part.

Late that afternoon and the following morning our families has started visiting us. We indicated to them as to what our problems were and they asked us what we required. In the circumstances I said `The only thing you can do is to bring something for us to attend to the calls of nature.` That same afternoon there was quite a crowd outside and from within them someone managed to

³ See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 2, Section 2, Document 2.

⁴ For images of this press conference, *Ibid*, Images 41-43.

⁵ At the time Nadine Gordimer was in New York, she writing excitedly to Ela Ramgobin enclosing a copy of an article in the *New York Times* of the 7th October 1984 discussing the Consulate sit-in. *Ibid*, Part 1, Section 4, Document 11.

⁶ Communication came, crucially, via letters to and from Ela Ramgobin. *Ibid*, Part 1, Section 4, Documents 4, 8, & 14.

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smuggle a plastic bucket in. But all the time you have to remove the lid to do what you want to do in it.

So we had to decide who is going to officially open the bucket. So whilst we were debating this I said `Look guys I have no time left to debate as to who is going to do it, I need to do it now.` I lifted the bucket.

IAIN: You were all in one room?

MEWA: All in one room not larger than this office; say approximately 5m x 7m. It was the Reading Room in the British Consulate. It is in the public area of the Consulate, not in the area for the Consulate staff only. Well I don't know. I hadn't realised I could have such a lousy stench in me. Suddenly the entire floor was seething with stench. And the lady assistant in that office, the poor lady was so kind to us with biscuit and tea had to literally run out of our office with her nose closed with her fingers. And then in came Mr Davey, into the contaminated air.

He was very upset, absolutely upset, fuming red and he asked us `What is this?`. We said `You are refusing to take us to the toilets. We are willing to go to the toilet, we are willing to keep the dignity of your office, we have not come here to undermine the dignity that your office holds. You must remember we are human beings. We need to do these things, as you need to do. And this might remind you Mr Davey that you can be the British Consulate here or Mr PW Botha can be the impending new State President of the Republic of South Africa and we might be so-called refugees in your Consulate but there is one thing in common. We all defecate. It all depends on the circumstances. I did it in your office. You had the choice, but I promise you one thing. I have defecated here but I will not defecate on the spiritual well-being of my entire country. My presence here is to remove all the shit apartheid has imposed on us.`

He left us. I don't know where he went. Within an hour or so he'd arranged for a mobile chemical toilet to be installed in the Reading Room. There were a few naughty leaders among us. When the chemical toilet came Professor Jerry Coovadia used a very small pocket camera which wasn't visible unless he was searched. Because by then all electronic gadgets were prohibited in the room: no TV cameras, tape recorders and all that sort of stuff had been prohibited by the Consulate staff because the media were on their throats all the time. They were being side-lined. So this chemical toilet was installed in the small Reading Room right next to the framed photograph of her Majesty the Queen. We had no choice. The question arose as to who does the official opening of the toilet. Jerry said to me, `Mewa just please see how it operates.` `What do

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you mean see how it operates, it must operate!` `No just try it out.` `With what?` `Piddle in it.` `No I don't have the urge to piddle in it, but okay, I have developed the urge.` I began piddling, and he said to me `Look at the photograph on your right.` So I turned round and I looked at the Queen's photograph. Lots of people would consider this to be deliberate. It was not deliberate. We didn't want to hurt the dignity of the Queen or the British Consul.

Very soon thereafter a British security detail was flown out from London. They slept in the next office. Simon Davey, I believe, slept in his own office, because he could not leave the office. Ironically we were all in a relative kind of prison and Mr Davey, the Consul, became a prisoner like my poem says: `To keep us here you got to be with us here.'⁷ Mentally and physically the person who is imprisoned and the warders are joined mentally and physically.

It was a stunning joke. For most of the people I think they took this very seriously. I know we took it very seriously. I ended up being there for seventeen or twenty days, and the three of us who remained there after us three left stayed there for over three months.

The irony of it all is this Simon Davey was subsequently rewarded by becoming Sir Simon Davey. We subsequently became friends, as did Sir Patrick Moberly.

IAIN: Sir Patrick Moberly, then British High Commissioner to South Africa.

MEWA: Sir Patrick tried to intervene whilst we were at the Consulate, but to no avail. And years later I was addressing the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London - early in 1990 - and chairing that meeting was Sir Patrick Moberly! Now in the sedate environment of the Royal Institute of International Affairs! How do you start such a meeting? How do I relate to him? I had the sense of character to say to him that `If I hadn't apologized to you then, I do so now. Whatever inconvenience, I apologise, but it was not my intention to use your Consulate offices as we did. And that we never did believe that in the spirit of justice and the rule of law your government would have handed us over to the police.`

IAIN: Which they did not do.

MEWA: Which they didn't. `And for that I salute you and I hope you will forgive me now, late as it is, for having done what I did in your Consulate.` Lots of the attendees didn't know what I had

⁷ The poem has not been published but is part of Ramgobin's unpublished private papers.

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done and they wanted to know more. So I had to explain. And by God that meeting started twenty minutes late. I didn't realise Sir Patrick could laugh like that.⁸

IAIN: And the other people there?

MEWA: They took turns. After it was officially opened, the toilet was used all the time.

IAIN: And the photograph?

MEWA: It was published. When I picked up the paper that weekend, I was so flustered. It was not proper for a person who has just come out of prison and being the UDF national co-treasurer to be seen, but it was done. It was published in the *Sunday Tribune*. It was very painful.⁹

Origins of the Consulate sit-in

EDWARDS: And the original motivation?

MEWA: The original motivation was made by me when we were in so-called hiding. I was at a doctor's - a friend's - house in La Mercy. The previous morning paper headlines referred to us as `refugees`. We were not refugees. We were not running away from the law. People who run away from the law are bandits. We were not bandits. We were free people at that stage. We were set free by the courts in South Africa. We were undoubtedly hiding away, being realistic. Because we wanted our publications: a series of publications on detention without trial, to come out in our names.

My host was the late Dr BV Naidoo and his wife. Dr BV Naidoo died in New Zealand fifteen years back, but his wife is still living there. They were listening to a conversation we were having over breakfast with the leadership of the UDF outside. Unfortunately we were not given sufficient information. The original formulation was that we should go to either the United States Embassy or the British High Commission in Pretoria. There we would be given immunity. If we went in separate cars taking different routes to Pretoria and converging in Pretoria at the same time was one factor. The long drive and the security factor was another. And the very fact that the distance would have meant that we would have lost momentum was another.

⁸ Under `Chatham House Rules` such seminar discussions are strictly of-the-record.

⁹ See *Sunday Tribune*, 16th September 1984.

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Then I suggested we take the risk and go to the British Consulate in Durban. Did they have immunity? I said to a colleague to find out because the law must also apply to the British Consul in Durban and to the American Consul office in Durban. There was another very serious problem: a subjective weakness amongst ourselves. Who was going to drive us? If whoever drove us was seen with us by the security police they would be in serious trouble. The moment this friend of mine Dr Naidoo realised that there was no volunteers from within the leadership, he said `I have two cars, my wife and I will do it.` By then we had spent two or three nights at his place. There were some beautiful moments, with his children where we could sing and pray together. And I think he noticed this, but what was most noticeable was his statement that `For as long as I am around I will not create the circumstance where Mewa Ramgobin will have to lie. There is nobody here who will stick his neck out to say who brought them to my house. I volunteered for them to stay in my house.` So the struggle continued.

And another thing: we were very, very close in the days when he was a student. He was one of those people who came to the Gandhi Clinic at Phoenix volunteering his service. He was one of those people who came to the Settlement to meet the patients. And here he comes to the rescue of the national president of the UDF, the national co-treasurer of the UDF, the president of the Natal Indian Congress and others. It is a fascinating experience.

TAPE 34: SIDE 1

Enter the `good cop`

IAIN: You were talking about MI5.¹⁰

MEWA: When we were in the British Consulate it might have become a bit too difficult for the British Consul to handle us. Perhaps it was not too difficult, but I think in terms of their own security and their own intelligence he seconded a very young gentlemen, who we later happened to name `MI5`. He spent incredible hours with us, short of sleeping with us in that same place, he did everything else. And there came a time, I guess because of our openness and declared course to highlight apartheid and detentions without trial in particular, that we had interesting discussions. . He was sandwiched in some ways, an officer of Her Majesty's government sitting with us in the British Consulate, but for all intents and purposes even though he had his freedom

¹⁰ As so often, Ramgobin doesn't pause to allow a cassette tape to be changed. Ramgobin's reference is most likely not MI 5 (Military Intelligence Section 5) which is the British government's domestic security service, but rather the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), commonly known as MI6 (Military Intelligence Section 6), which is the foreign intelligence service of the British government, tasked mainly with the covert collection and analysis of human intelligence outside Britain. The Chief of SIS is accountable to the Foreign Secretary.

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he was locked in with us. There came a time because - and I am saying this respectfully - because of our openness and sense of laughter: we were not angry, we were very angry with Botha, and we were concerned with the British. He asked us why we chose the British Consulate not the American Consulate or German Consulate which could have given an equal if not greater, in the case of the Americans, exposure to the international community.

IAIN: And you were considering the Americans anyway.

MEWA: We were considering them but it was my view that we shouldn't. And he asked me why, I was very frank with him and said 'Look we had a suspicion that had we gone to the American or German Consulates we would have been handed over to the security police within no time. 'And we believe' I told him 'and I still believe that you would not dare do that.' And then he responded 'How do I deal with you guys?' I said 'Well firstly tell yourself that you are MI5 and you will know exactly how to deal with us because our openness and frankness might be undermining your intelligence because you will have no role here.'

The sit-in plan unfolds

It was in that context that I personally took it upon myself not to be rude but give the Brits the benefit of the doubt. And I asked the question 'Will our presence here in any way facilitate the South African government to send the 'Coventry Four' back for trial in Britain. 'Pik' Botha had come out very strongly on this. The return of the 'Coventry Four' would have led to an expose of the South African government's connivance and clearly illegal arms dealing activities.¹¹ The British government has arrested these people and when 'Pik' Botha said that if the British government did not throw out the 'Consulate Six' - it was six of us - then they in turn would not send the 'Coventry Four' back to England to stand trial. And I asked the MI5 gentlemen 'Maybe you know more about international relations and international law than all of us put together do. Would the situation enhance the British attitude towards the rule of law? We are saying by our presence here we are demonstrating, and we are proclaiming to the world that detention without trial is in fundamental ways a negation of the rule of law.' That the British system of justice ensures that the rule of law dominates civil society, and that 'Pik' Botha's declaration was tantamount to blackmail. The MI5 man - I'm trying to recollect his words. He said 'This is a school!' We said 'No do not extend that kind of dignity to us, we are just here to expose the abrogation of the rule of law and that is why we chose the Brits - your Consulate.' For lurking at

¹¹ On the 'Coventry Four' see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coventry_Four and <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/government-forfeits-400000-pounds-sterling-bail-when-coventry-four-fails-appear-answer-a>.

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the back of my head - at least when I made the recommendation to occupy the British Consulate or the British High Commission in Pretoria - was the question of the `Coventry Four.` I said then `We have said to ourselves that here is an issue which can only put us into political orbit internationally and compromise the entire South African government. And I insisted that when we leave the British Consulate and subject ourselves to the laws in this country no matter how they behave to us, the South African government themselves must be compelled to send back the `Coventry Four` to stand trial in Britain. To stand trial in terms of laws which are accepted internationally. Because here we in South Africa are willing to leave the British Consulate provided the South African government subjected itself to the rule of law as operative in Britain at the time. Our laws were construed and constructed to be crimes against humanity - apartheid laws in South Africa - apartheid *per se* was construed and constructed to be a crime against humanity. And it was on that basis that George, and MJ and I left the Consulate some two weeks or so later. And three stayed behind on the understanding that we would wait and see what happened to us three.

IAIN: Be great to see the intelligence reports.¹²

MEWA: Yes, I don't know what waiting period they have: thirty years or twenty years. Because intelligence reports have a time span.

IAIN: Probably much longer for intelligence reports.

The state hits back

MEWA: Well I would be very intrigued to read their report, because the only law we broke was a law on hospitality - when we went in we knocked, when we entered but didn't tell them we might be staying. But the upshot of it was in fact treason charges. It was punitive to the extent that I think they wanted to keep us in jail for as long as they possibly could without charging us. I am convinced that they knew they didn't have substantial evidence to pin us down for treason.¹³

IAIN: There were political imperatives.

¹² The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office file sequences on the `Durban Six` are now open for public access in terms of the thirty-year closed archival policies.

¹³ This is corroborated by Mr Billy Nair, the only one of the Consulate Six not arrested and eventually charged on leaving the Consulate. See Interview with Mr Billy Nair by D. Shongwe, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, 12 July 2002. Nair spends but a few paragraphs dealing with the Consulate sit-in, with his main point being the farcical nature of the treason charges. For Nair's biography see <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/billy-nair>.

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The Pietermaritzburg Treason Trial

MEWA: Oh yes, there were as far as they are concerned, so they struggled. As a result it took them four to five months to frame a charge sheet. And they kept us detained during that time and even afterwards after charging us with treason. They only presented their charge sheet in May of 1985. It was really funny: between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. In May after we got charged with treason we were brought to Durban. We were charged with treason in the precincts of Pietermaritzburg but brought to Durban, detained here, and the trial was set to begin sometime in May or June, and the bail application was made in May in the College Road Court in Pietermaritzburg. And the funny part is this. We were all taken in one prison van, pushed in with our entire luggage at the back and all this mesh wire and all that stuff. But we didn't see any police escort in the truck.

IAIN: Were cars behind it?

MEWA: We didn't notice them. Maybe there were, maybe they had surveillance but we didn't notice them. It was not obvious. We spent the night in Pietermaritzburg New Prison, and the following day we were taken to court. And this is the irony. This time we were taken by bus - in a normal bus - with the man standing with a rifle or a short gun at the entrance of a bus guarding all sixteen of us. It is now so funny, but when you think back it was pretty serious. I reached out across the seating on one seat and across the passage. I reached out to say something to somebody and that man raised his rifle. It was very funny as to how human beings could react in such fear. As if we were going to run off. Maybe they thought that we will run off. I mean we have precedents to that. When we were first kept detained when there was just the three of us from the Consulate that afternoon in November of 1984 and I was taken to the doctor and to hospital. Shoving me in one car seated in between two policemen with one car with policemen in the front and another car with policemen at the back. And here we were now sixteen moving from Durban to Pietermaritzburg in one truck.

It became a notorious trial for them and unfortunately for them it didn't last five years as the first Treason Trial lasted. This one collapsed within months after laying charges against us. Within a year or two came to a general point that this was all just punitive.

I don't think you can run a country by being punitive. A country is comprised of citizens who have basically tacitly or explicitly entered into a covenant - without this there can be no legitimate law and order for all. And in our case there was no such covenant to. For vast majority of South

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Africans who happened to be black - and whites too - did not enter into a covenant with anybody historically to enter into apartheid and to make apartheid work. And I am beginning to wonder even then in those days how many people from the Tri-cameral system or the homeland system entered into a covenant to make apartheid work. So they were declaring a crime against humanity. I think many of them did regardless of race.

Therefore when we were trying to reach out, ours was not a racial course: black versus white or white versus black. Ours was a course which incorporated all South Africans. We illustrated this to them by this example. We did not have a covenant to build apartheid. And whether it was homeland politicians or Tri-cameral politicians, there was no moral basis for the existence or continuation of the system. Historically racial ideology has always been used in South Africa to promote the superiority of one particularly group, whether that was the imperialists, the *boers* - the Afrikaners - or whites in general. In my speeches I always told this history. It was these speeches which they used in the trial.¹⁴

This trial for us was not an eye opener. It was a mock trial. But we used it to re-emphasise the facts of what we were trying and actually accomplishing in the UDF. So the trial became a public exposé, from our part, on what we said and why we mobilised people around non-racial acts. And that trial became the catalyst as well, because it was the UDF on mock trial. So it became an exposé of apartheid.

The origins of the UDF

On a basis of non-racial mobilisation, 1983 heralded a new kind of intervention when at Mitchells Plain in Cape Town we said and demonstrated that the `United Democratic Front unites and apartheid divides`. We demonstrated this in deed and in action and we didn't forget to remind our captors - who had charged us for treason openly and publicly - privately in the cells or wherever else we were that this is what they were not able to comprehend. And in terms of mass mobilisation, masses of coloured people, masses of African people, masses of Indian people and masses of white people could converge and have a conference around the ideas that apartheid divides. There were different levels of intensity, in no doubt, but that one common commitment was an open declaration.

¹⁴ The NIC employed the services of a private company to provide public address and recording services at its meetings. MR's speeches at these meetings were covered by Security Police Major Benjamin. During the Pietermaritzburg Treason Trial the State included poorly transcribed transcripts of speeches by the accused, which were deemed inadmissible as evidence by virtue of their unreliability. Kajejes. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Introduction.

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IAIN: Where did that slogan come from?

MEWA: It came from a workshop that we had, and may I salute the young people who were part and parcel of this grouping. We were sitting at the preparatory meeting in Johannesburg in Fordsburg for the launch of the UDF. And we entrusted the responsibility to a group of young activists to do our media work and it was a very capable group of people. And one of the things that we required from the media group was high quality slogans to use. Slogans and ideas were very important for mass mobilisation. No just slogans to be propagandist; slogans must be an important component in presenting a course of action forward. And it must be positive. The Nazis and others on the other hand were doing it in negative terms, like the Afrikaner ruling class, and apartheid rulers equally did it in many other ways. In the emergence of the *Citizen* as a newspaper, the Muldergate Scandal, and whatever, they had the `red peril` and other enemies.¹⁵

This group of young people - no more than a half of dozen of them - were the people who put their brains together and they came up with alternatives. And the piece which they brought up to us was that `apartheid divides, the UDF unites`. That is how it was brought to us. We asked them to reflect on this. `Put it the other way round: `The UDF unites, apartheid divides`.`

IAIN: And the rest is history?

MEWA: And suddenly they said `Yes it's good.` Even though you were saying the same thing, you're saying it differently with the emphasis on `the UDF unites.` So that slogan was adopted by us. I don't like the use of the word `slogan` but the idea. This idea was accepted by us at that preparatory meeting in Fordsburg. I don't remember the exact date but I remember it was a Sunday afternoon.

IAIN: Who was there?

MEWA: People like Archie Gumede, *Mama* Sisulu, who later became national president. Oscar Mpetha was not there. Motlana was there, by the way.

IAIN: Ntatho?

¹⁵ On the Information Scandal see <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/information-scandal>.

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MEWA: Yes Ntatho Motlana was there. From the western Cape were Trevor Manuel, and Cheryl Carolus. From Natal myself, as I said Archie Gumede, and Yunus Mohamed. And people like `Terror` Lekota, and Popo Molefe who later became joint secretaries. Most of the people who became members of the executive, ultimately, were not there. But some of us were there. There were a select number of people from the different provinces – we had four provinces then. But these were the key people who were present there.

IAIN: It's a wonderful image.

MEWA: Image wise it was so good. It caught the imagination of people who were not even in any ways inclined towards resistance politics. Suddenly they realised that divisions that had existed, which they have taken for granted as the norm.

The UDF: contexts, debates and reflections

And when the schools rolled out activities, and when the Vaal Triangle started burning, and when the western Cape started burning. I don't recall at all in history whether the western Cape took to the streets as they did in that period after the launch of the UDF. If they did I don't recall. There was a march by Nkosana or somebody in the 1960s from Langa to Parliament.¹⁶ But that was not resistance - it was just demonstration. But to have that continuum and to have that intensity: we had different kinds of people, at different levels, mobilised to the extent that they were, which basically again culminated in 1989 when the original protests of the NIC and TIC became the Release Mandela Committee and transformed itself into challenge.

The UDF *per se* in its original form was protest, a protest to mobilise people against the Tri-cameral system, ostensibly. The Tri-cameral system and we were in pretty serious dilemmas. For us there was a slogan which was good: `The UDF unites, apartheid divides`. The methodology was correct. But it became very difficult to mobilise African people at that stage on the basis of opposition to the Tri-cameral system. Even though Koornhof, - also a member of cabinet – had been appointed by Botha to head a commission of enquiry to investigate constitutional alternatives, introduced what became known as the `Koornhof Bills` which sought to entrench and further isolate African people from the urban areas. And that vulgar process of creating surplus peoples, of the homelands as being dumping grounds of people emaciated by age and physical fatigue, and no longer economically beneficial to the mainland South Africa.

¹⁶ Philip Kgosana. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/philip-ata-kgosana>.

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Cosmetic changes to South Africa were not enough for us. We knew that that the Tri-cameral system was indeed an advance over the system of apartheid. It was some form of representation; a measure of influence; a facility to mobilise people even to oppose it. But that it was deficient was not enough for us. If it is not enough for us, then how much more so - on what basis did you mobilise African people? A large number of who were already subjects in Bantustans. Even though people like Chief Buthelezi had not accepted the so-called independence of KwaZulu, it was still called the KwaZulu government. And the Transkei, Ciskei and Bophuthatswana had accepted independence. There was a logical disjunction. People had subjected themselves to that system of governance, in these rural areas. Who and how were we going to mobilise them? I don't know if it was possible for us to come up and say `As part of our sloganeering and points of mobilisation you have to work against the Buthelezi's and the Mangope's and the Sebe's and the Matanzima's of this world. We could not personalise it because these were so-called *fait accompli*.

But `Koornhof Bills` was there dominating us all the time. I was in Pretoria for an executive meeting when we led a specific discussion on the `Koornhof Bills` to be linked as part of the massive mobilisation amongst African people. One, we lacked the space that the Tri-cameral system had afforded us. Two, there emerged a view amongst us in Port Elizabeth at our first conference after the launch for the UDF in August 1983. Sometime in late November or early December we met in Port Elizabeth and one of the issues that conference was seized with was whether the Indian and coloured community should accept a referendum to be held in these communities to decide support for the Tri-cameral system or a rejection of a Tri-cameral system?

I personally had no problem with going along with that referendum in order to mobilise against the Tri-cameral system.¹⁷ If we could establish that the vast majority of the Indian and coloured members of the community rejected it by a referendum, then the painful task of addressing the dividing of our society into the Tri-cam and Bantustans could have been defeated. But there was a school of thought, especially emanating from the eastern Cape, which said `No, we should not go that route.` And we went into a very serious debate, publicly, at this conference. We could not resolve the situation. Conference ultimately said that the executive should be seized with this responsibility. Then we met in Pretoria to discuss this issue. And it was at that time that we said we've got to have a slight refocus of the UDF. Or should I say we reinforced the progress of the

¹⁷ There was also an long-running argument for strategic entry-ism. For Ramgobin's interesting views see Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Document 114.

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UDF with the struggle against the `Koornhof Bills` to, because without the `Koornhof Bills` there will be no homelands.

IAIN: Because the `Koornhof Bills` were basically about consolidating ...

MEWA: The mass mobilisation that went on two levels was so unprecedented that it was easy for us to convert the politics of protest into the politics of challenge. Manifestations of this ...

IAIN: Because there is a difference there.

MEWA: Of course, fundamental differences. The highest manifestation of this was what happened in KwaZulu at the University of Zululand. The response, long before Inanda violence had occurred, long before any one of those things occurred, was when the assault was made on students at Ongoye. A number of students were killed - speared through their mattresses and blood stained walls and whatever. This was a response to the support given to the UDF by people across the country. The depth of the strength of the UDF must be measured by the kinds of responses by the state. And one needs to gauge the responses of the state. At that stage it would be not unfair to say ourselves that we pushed them to a situation in which people like Van Zyl Slabbert said in Parliament `You ignore the UDF` at your own peril.' I am not saying it. That is what Van Zyl Slabbert said. Simultaneously I am measuring the response.

IAIN: You know what Van Zyl has recently said in this memoirs about the UDF, the ANC and Inkatha and black politics in general? I interviewed him and he said

MEWA: It was my pleasure to meet with him at the University of Stellenbosch during the `Call for Clemency` in 1971. It was my pleasure to be introduced to him by Rick Turner, who said to me that `Here is a young lecturer from whom you could co-opt his entire cause and bring him further to our way of thinking.` I am not saying I converted him. I am not saying that at all. But I do know this: that in the same context and at the same visit in that same week I met with people like Professor Degenaar and Van Zyl Slabbert and a host of others at Stellenbosch. The *verligtes* were emerging.

IAIN: Mewa let us talk about this protest and the ...

MEWA: That is where I am going to now. Here was a culmination of efforts from different sides: the churches began taking stands against apartheid, religious institutions across the board,

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outside of the church, whether they were Hindus or Muslims - the muslim community in the western Cape for instance. There were different reasons but there was one thing that was very clear. People were going to resist apartheid. The very fact that the World Council of Churches had responded to this itself confirmed to us that we were correct in the first instance. And this correctness gave us a kind of confidence. So when the assaults took place at Ongoye where students were killed and within months of that happening violence in Inanda happened to break the solidarity between Indians and Africans. Where people of Indian origin were uprooted from Inanda by the forces of apartheid and the slogans of the *amabutho* - the slogans that Shabalala¹⁸ uses today - were painted virtually all over Inanda, including Phoenix Settlement; on the walls of the buildings at Phoenix Settlement. It became abundantly clear as to who the people were who were doing this.

IAIN: You were in jail at the time.

MEWA: I was, yes. From the time of when PW Botha was going to be installed as a president, there was a consolidation of our challenge to the state that forced the hand of the state to declare a State of Emergency in 1986. The declaration was an admission that the situation was beyond their control, and so these draconian laws were passed under the Emergency. My late son was one of the victims arrested during the Emergency.

IAIN: But the terms of political engagement were turning violent and you couldn't control this? And just after this you're a free man – the trial's collapsed.

MEWA: Which again consolidated the view we held that we have got to change methods, and we went on to consolidate the business sector, the international community, the churches - on different levels. And here you had the emergence of what I construed at the time as the `creative minority` outside of the representative majority, with a particular emphasis on business. This was because the business community, given the experience of the Good Hope and Carlton conferences, played critical roles in consolidating apartheid. In the aftermath of Soweto burning in 1976, it was the business community that came in for the state to redefine or refine the working relationship between itself and government. So came the Urban Foundation.

How else does one explain the interlocking relationships between the state and business? When you had directors of Barlow Rand, Anglo American, the Huletts group and a wide spectrum of

¹⁸ Thomas Shabalala was a notorious IFP politician and `warlord` in the shackland areas of Inanda. See <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv02426/05lv02651.htm>.

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people coming in to make Armscor a business enterprise? They had political motivations to make things more streamlined and workable. I have said this over and over again. The motivation is why? We were now left with the responsibility of how do we weaken that chain? How do we weaken that link? We cannot ask the business community to engage in armed insurrection, or to take to the streets. But between 1987 and early 1989 we changed course, and further consolidated the politics of challenge. We began challenging the state through the streets and defined for ourselves two limited objectives in rejecting apartheid: that we are going to break rules and regulations that would make apartheid hospitals and other places as open as possible. We are going to make all rules and regulations that made segregated beaches impossible. I do not have the local situation reports of all the marches throughout the country but I can talk about Durban in which I was directly involved.

IAIN: At South Beach.

MEWA: Near Addington Hospital, near the South Beach, where it was my historical privilege to wheel in the first black patient, in defiance of regulations, into the white sector of that hospital.

IAIN: And it wasn't a long time ago, was it? 1987.

MEWA: In that period throughout the country whether it was the western Cape, Gauteng or KwaZulu-Natal that was a point of no return for us.

SIDE 2

IAIN: We were talking about redefining the politics of challenge in the mid-to late 1980's.

MEWA: Leaving it at that is not enough. For me it meant one fundamental thing. We set the pattern and the pace of our struggle. When we took to the streets in defiance of apartheid and regulations, we had just come out of jail and from banning orders. I could be banned or jailed again. That is viewed from our side objectively but all objectivity becomes marred if one does not admit to evaluation. The challenge was the state itself. And what was the challenge of the state under the leadership of PW Botha and later of De Klerk?

And in 1989 as one individual being with others in the forefront we had to do our homework. Was the state going to allow us that space to demonstrate the extent of our support and mobilisation in a non-violent way of challenge? This was an indispensable component of our challenge. When

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we decided to engage in the politics of challenge, we did this in the full knowledge that there was the distinct possibility that the state was going to allow us to do it. To run the distance for them to evaluate what was the extent of the support we enjoyed. It meant that then we set the pace and the pattern of change; to challenge the *laissez-faire* status quo of the state and even our own people. Because there had emerged another phenomenon, and to what extent it was our subjective weaknesses only time will tell. To what extent had the state intervened within the ranks of the democratic movement is yet to be evaluated. Comrades began killing comrades: because of scarce resources, because of power in the democratic movement, and maybe for taking more radical stands on different levels.

In the 1990s when we were unbanned there were many schools of thought in terms of the transition. There was one school of thought of negotiations and reconciliation. Another thought was of the seizure of power and the transfer of power. If one were to do what we were doing against the background of what was happening within our own ranks it might present a bizarre picture to lots of observers. But for the participant observer there was no need for feeling great depression or a fear of a revolution going asunder.¹⁹ We knew that the vast majority of people would adhere to the leadership of the ANC, whose place the UDF had taken over in many ways within the country. For overt open politics that is.

IAIN: Where does un-governability come in?

MEWA: The opportunity was there for anybody to come in and not be trained in We contended that we were the internal wing of the liberation movement. For as long as we believed that we were the proponents of the politics of the Freedom Charter, and for as long as we believed that we were the fourth pillar for the resistance movement - and this was our mass mobilisation within the country - and for as long as we believed in the inextricable nature of the four pillars of the struggle: whether they be exile, isolation - in prisons - MK and the underground, and ourselves.

Now nobody needed to be reined in. All did their work in the full knowledge that this was what was expected of our history and of our responsibilities in that moment. So when the ANC got unbanned in 1990 there was no reining in to be done. And this over-simplification of our exiled leadership coming into the country and invading the leadership internally is cockeyed in my view. There was a poor relationship between the exiled leadership and ourselves. How else would one

¹⁹ Ramgobin often uses this term. For a detailed if meandering insight into his meaning, see Values-based Leadership Lunch Time Chat - Society and Business Panel Discussion, Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town, 21st April 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_i9l-YyJn4.

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construct the links that I had - the active links - that I could have the historical moment to address a full NEC, as an ordinary member of the ANC, in Lusaka? What did they recognise? On what basis was the leadership of Cosatu in consultation with the ANC between 1985 and 1990? On what basis did the internal movement have relationships with the ANC? What was the reason? We did not have to go and proclaim from the rooftops that we were Charterists. There was a tendency among us who said `We should not over emphasise the Charter or otherwise become identified with the ANC.` Of course there was a school of thought like that. At no stage could there have been a pure position either this or that.²⁰ There had to be a conference at most times.²¹

Therefore the question of reining in was not even considered. The concept of exercising our responsibilities to the extent that was needed had to be a consideration. An example would be when the executive of the NIC and the TIC met in Newcastle in 1990, after the unbanning of the ANC. And these two political organisations were formidable within the ranks of the UDF. I do not want to exaggerate their importance, but there are very few people within the movement of the UDF, including the president, who would deny that. When they said that `Our political role is now over and we have got to now begin the organisational mobilisation of our people into one common political body and that is the African National Congress`, it was in fact the position of the UDF, in many ways. Other organisations in the UDF did not have to redefine their roles like the NIC and the TIC, as they were racial in character.

Those of us who had those views moved into areas of activity making it possible for us to organise and mobilise for the ANC. It was not just a mere platitude.²² When I got back from Newcastle to Verulam I convened the first conference of the ANC in Verulam, where the ANC had a membership of around seven hundred people, essentially Indians.²³ Our commitment was that we are now going to build the ANC. So the ANC did not have rein us in. We went out and exercised our political responsibilities and became a formidable social base for the ANC. So if leaders emerge from there they were leaders for the ANC. When we went to conference in 1990; the first conference of the ANC Southern Natal Region, we agreed that only one Indian - and that was me - was elected to the regional executive. But the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal did not have to rein me in. I was there performing my functions and got to conference performing those functions.

²⁰ See Edwards *Faith & Courage*, Part 3, Section 2, Document 15: Report by Abdul (late 1988) for a good idea of how various political sides in this milieu were intent upon gauging their adversaries.

²¹ *Ibid.* See often dramatic examples of such conference minutes, Part 3, Section 2, Documents 10, 16, 17 & 18.

²² During the early 1990's Ramgobin was a key strategic thinker on the future of the NIC, which eventually disbanded in 1993. *Ibid.*, Part 3, Section 2, Documents 50, 51 & 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, for images 66-68 for photographs of the official launch of the ANC Verulam Branch on the 26th August 1990. The keynote speaker was Ahmed Kathrada, then ANC Media Director.

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IAIN: And the civil war? Was there any reining in there?

MEWA: The civil war in KwaZulu-Natal between 1983 and 1990 was between the IFP and the UDF. It manifested itself again after 1990 again, but then it ceased to be a war between the IFP and the UDF. It ceased to be a war between the IFP and the ANC in 1990. When De Klerk decided to unban the ANC suddenly the war shifted in character, but there was a continuation of the same aspirations on both sides.

The civil war in KwaZulu-Natal, ostensibly was – but never for me – black-on-black violence. It was not black-on-black violence. We knew this then. There was a third force involved. Like when the Nazi's used Jews against Jews. Or during the Partition when the British put Hindus against Hindus, and Muslims against Muslims. And it was not an easy task for us to rein in - using your word - those leaders who were more radical than us.

IAIN: Because they were.

MEWA: Of course they were. We had people like Harry Gwala who said it was a holy war. I am not going to pass moral judgement on him. Maybe there was some sense in what he was saying and doing.

IAIN: For example?

MEWA: I do not know because I did not belong to that grouping in the first instance. I was part of the group which believed that if you do not know how to negotiate, you do not know how to compromise. And if you do not know how to compromise you will not negotiate.

This given my own history of co-existence, and my own history of constantly saying that truth cannot be on our side alone: that we do not enjoy the monopoly of truth. The only monopoly of truth that we enjoyed was that South Africa belonged to all who lived in it, as the Charter says. Therefore this did involve reining in forces, that we had created, which were impediments to making South Africa liveable for all who live in it. We could not make South Africa liveable for as long as we continue to engage in acrimonious activities or for as long as we deepened or sharpened antagonisms between people and people.

IAIN: And hence the making of no-go areas for one side or the other in urban and rural areas.

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MEWA: The people who made no-go areas must admit to their own thought processes, and whether they are worthy or not. Because what they implied was a regimentation of thought. There was not community responsibility, but imposed authority. Where was the democratic process tested in these areas? What conflicting ideas were allowed to prevail? Especially at the behest of the IFP. Now whether it was the abuse of power or not is a different matter. But what I do know, no-go areas in essence presupposed imposing power relations in such an area.

In KwaZulu-Natal today there is a discernable shift away from abuse of power to a people-centred and a people-driven province, which means and must mean the introduction of a democratic process. And that democratic process must mean that that party which has a strongest support will govern that area.

The premier of KwaZulu-Natal Mr Mtshali of the IFP has invoked the concept of the *amabutho* already, and has negated the democratic process where it was agreed there would be an equitable number of MECs from the IFP and ANC. He's fired two ANC MECs. If that stand by Mtshali was taken at the national level then the concept of the government of national unity will be pushed down the drain conclusively. I would have to question my leadership on why they were retaining as Ministers Buthelezi, Ngubane, and Mathews and others in the government of national unity.

IAIN: How do protest, challenge, and un-governability relate to the wider aims of the struggle?

MEWA: I just want to go one step backwards. When we took on the dynamic of challenge, it was not a challenge only against the white person. It was challenge against those people who were participants in the Tri-cameral system: Indians and coloureds. It was those people who made the white parliament possible. It was again also the challenge to the African Bantustan leadership, and those who wanted the balkanisation and re-tribalization of Africans. So it was a challenge on many levels. And in the post-UDF era, this became a concerted challenge; this challenge was internal: we said we want the people's power in that the people shall govern. Put another way we didn't say we wanted black power, and we didn't say we wanted white power. We said we wanted people's power. To all those people mobilised against apartheid, who had fought apartheid: whether at school level, or factory level or in sugar cane farm levels, wherever they were, we wanted those people to determine their lives and their future.

IAIN: What were the options?

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MEWA: Power sharing was a concept introduced by the system on the basis of ethnicity. We considered Bantustans in power sharing as political bull dust. Nowhere in Codesa did we talk of power sharing. We talked of building up institutions to build a democratic South Africa. Representatives of every sector of the population besides the IFP and PAC and the extreme right of the white community were represented. So much so that at Codesa there was a particular kind of empathy between the right Afrikanerdom and Chief Gatsha Buthelezi's IFP: both were opposed to the concept of a people centred, people driven South Africa.

There were other options. I am not going to judge the vision of the ANC. I am pleased that changes are taking place. It's a bit too slow but can you imagine if there was a seizure of power. What would have been the situation then?

IAIN: What would it have looked like?

MEWA: Devastation. There would have been polarisation of the races, and there could have been a very ugly situation where the Bantustans could have join whites against the ANC. Therefore the ANC's responsibility was to reach out and say `Look we are going to take two steps backward today, so that the entire nation can go five steps forward tomorrow.` So this was the concept of negotiations: albeit that the National Party negotiated itself out of power, whilst we negotiated ourselves into power, and enjoyed a particular status in the minds of the international community when they referred to us as having created a miracle. It must have been a very awkward position for Mr Mandela to receive the Nobel Peace Prize with the De Klerk standing cheek by jowl. A couple of years before that I had personally refused to share a platform with De Klerk when he was president of this country. I didn't have the strength of character. He unveiled a plaque at the opening of the Mahatma Gandhi Hospital in Phoenix. But here was Mandela showing the manifestation of the non-seizure of power.

IAIN: FW laid a foundation stone?

MEWA: Yes at the Mahatma Gandhi Hospital in Phoenix.

IAIN: At Phoenix township. When was that?

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MEWA: In 1993, 1994 whatever.²⁴ But I don't know whether we had the capacity to seize power. Okay we had an army in MK, but I do not know whether we had the capacity to maintain law and order. I doubt it very much.²⁵

IAIN: There were certainly people who wanted it.

MEWA: Of course, in the ranks of the ANC: `No, there can't be negotiations.`

UDF political characteristics and dynamics

IAIN: Did the UDF and the ANC in the late 1990's and post-1990 period operate on democratic centralist lines?

MEWA: No. The power structure in the UDF was based not that notion, but on powers and strengths of its constituents parts. Decision had to be taken in the first instance by these constituent parts, and then by resolution of the UDF. Accountability was there, as was the assumption of responsibility.

TAPE 35: SIDE 1

MEWA: In some ways there could have been a contradiction in terms of the UDF and its constituent parts. But there was an intensive pride in the consolidation of the forces against apartheid. This kind of consolidation was manifested under the leadership of the UDF. There were some institutions, like the NIC and the TIC, which submerged their identities and allowed the UDF to run with it. But the churches for instance could not do that, and other social formations could not do that. But to proceed with the new political power basis that we created one had to concede the rights of the constituent parts to continue to enjoy their own power status, their own responsibilities and their own authority over their own constituencies. And herein lay another contradiction. So the Anglican Church is comprised of people common in faith, but it does not follow that they have a single common political agenda to fight apartheid. At Phoenix Settlement, which was an affiliate, but the settlement was comprised of people with diverse political affiliations. It is difficult to pronounce on the diversification of power on the one hand and the consolidation of power on the other hand. There was this difficult balance and the balance unfortunately went into the struggle for control of the UDF after 1985. And in some ways it

²⁴ The foundation stone of the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital, a 350-bedded District Hospital, was laid in early 1994, completed in 1995, and began operating in 1997. <http://www.kznhealth.gov.za/Mahatma/history.htm>.

²⁵ For Ramgobin's writings on this matter see Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 3, Section 2, Documents 19 & 26.

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disempowered the UDF itself, and it shifted the balance of power away from itself, and allowed constituent parts to grow and develop their own dynamic as well.

But it also established for us an ambiguity. When we sought to combine these contesting forces: the so-called neo-liberal capitalists of the time within the ranks of liberation politics and the ultra-leftists, because there was no Cosatu at that stage. And Fosatu was not an affiliate of the UDF, and did not publicly identify with the UDF. The question arose of when the constituent parts of Fosatu decided in a full conference not to be affiliated or identified with the UDF? And who in Fosatu took the decision to do so? Because as with the tendencies which exist in Cosatu today existed in Fosatu then: high levels of investment in authoritarian leadership. One cannot have an `either-or` situation in respect of undemocratic practices. I use the example of the Soviet Union. Instead, what are the nearest practical approximations to the ideal of democracy and our aspirations to the ideal of democracy? That was pretty evident to us in the UDF, unconsciously. In as much as we said the strength of the UDF lay in its constituent parts, there was to some extent indeed a subordination of the constituent parts to the hegemonic position of the UDF in the post-1985 period. This led in some ways to an informal weakening of the UDF as such. People in the Vaal Triangle or the Eastern Cape, or the Western Cape or even in KwaZulu-Natal took it upon themselves to initiate activities running across the very declared policies of the UDF.

IAIN: Examples?

MEWA: It was never the policy of the UDF to do those things that were done in the Vaal Triangle. Violence was never a UDF plan of action. But the subordination of some groupings led to the emergence of other groupings. We felt that those leaders should take responsibility. And the UDF leadership then went on trial at the Delmas treason trial, the longest trial ever. From 1985 to 1988. And the whole Transvaal UDF leadership went on trial and many were convicted of conspiring in violent acts. `Terror` Lekota, Popo Molefe, Moss Chikane and all the others were there. Their convictions were later set aside, but it damaged the UDF in a political heartland.

Vignette on beliefs and contextual wisdom

`Terror` Lekota and I were given the responsibility to mobilise the trade union movement in the Eastern Cape: Cosatu and Saawu. Saawu was not affiliated to Cosatu. Saawu's offices were in East London. Thozamile Gweta, Caesar Njikelana and all the guys were in their East London head office. I was handed a large network of contacts by them, and it was my responsibility to network amongst them before we launched the UDF.

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So `Terror` and I drove up in my car. In those days you had permits and passports to cross into the Transkei. I had my book of life which was good enough, being of Indian origin. `Terror` did not have his passbook nor did he have any other travelling document. We pitched up the border post at Fish River, and I went into the office and got approved and they ask me `Who is that in your car?` I said `He is my handyman, my assistant, my bag man. I am a traveller.` `Has he got papers?` `I don't know. I just employed him the other day. He didn't have a job.` By this time I'm back in the car.

IAIN: A white man?

MEWA: Yes, and this man checked `Terror`. `May I have your papers?` `Terror` said he didn't have any. `This is one country.` He was treating him with contempt. The policeman turned and said `Well you can go, this guy has to go back.` I said no you can't do that, he has made a mistake and I kicked `Terror's` knees and told him to shut up. I said `You know these guys. I just employed him last week. I felt sorry for him. I am a travelling salesman.` He said `No, no.` I said `Look please don't say no. You see these kaffirs, they still don't what they should be doing. I'll take responsibility, I'll bring him back.` He said `Are you sure you will do that?` I said `Don't worry boss, don't worry.` He said `Off you go.` So when you `Boss` people you can break the law. When you say to them like `Terror` did, `Why should I do this, this is one country`, then you are breaking the law. We laughed. But when we stopped laughing we got serious and we said to each other `For how long?` It further consolidated the view that the UDF had got to succeed no matter what it took.

So, we were trying to impress in the minds of constituent components within the UDF that freedom should not and could not be just be a political fact but that it must relate to a social reality. It has to be a social reality and that meant challenging the fundamentals of our society. There were lots of people in the church movement and the teaching fraternity who had become quite complacent and undoubtedly had the kind of social security we were threatening. But we were not threatening. We were saying that freedom requires the redefinition of relations between haves and have-nots. Freedom would have remained a mockery for as long as millions of our people were disposed, starving, unemployed, deceased, hungry and poverty stricken. People may have asked what were the programmes for the UDF to ensure this happened? But at all stages we were aware that we didn't have political power to change the contradictions in our society.

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IAIN: When the UDF executive met did you keep minutes?

MEWA: Very much so, but I do not know of any minutes after 1985. I don't know where they are. But between its launch in 1983 and - we refused to make any payment without a formal resolution in form a presentation of an invoice and those things had to be minuted and presented to conference and to the executive to be ratified. I was part of the secretariat: the four of us, two national treasurers, the organising secretary and the general secretary - Popo Molefe and `Terror` Lekota.

IAIN: So it was that organisational kind of operation?

MEWA: To the best of my knowledge for the period that I was there.

IAIN: Who is funding the logistics of this?

MEWA: In that period there were many trips. Meetings in Cape Town, Bloemfontein, and to the Transvaal. There were five of us from KwaZulu-Natal making these trips. The UDF treasury had an account to ensure that people were provided with the means to travel and move around. There were those of us amongst us who could afford it. For instance we travelled from Durban to Cape Town for one executive meeting. We as members of the executive paid for it ourselves. We shared the petrol cost in one member's car. It was a similar thing with our movement from different areas to a particular venue.

There was one mind blowing experience. Fort Calata and Matthews Goniwe came up to a meeting in Pretoria. They were a day and a half late. I was chairing that session. There was some presentation on the differences and similarities between alliance politics and front politics. Right in the middle of this in walk these two comrades. I stopped the meeting to welcome them and asked them how come they were so late. They said they'd hitchhiked from the eastern Cape. Popo Molefe was sitting just across from me. We just kept quiet. But on the heels of that incident we amended the meeting agenda to discuss resources for comrades who could not afford it. It was a problem then and it became a problem even later with the centralisation of all authority including funding. I am not going to contest or challenge anybody on this but what must be admitted is that the centralisation and management of all resources in the hands of two led to undemocratic practises.

Alliance and Front politics

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IAIN: This meeting in Pretoria. You were discussing the difference between alliance politics and front politics, at the UDF national executive level.

MEWA: That and more. Alliance politics was a given, from the congress alliance of 1955 onwards. But front politics was a new given beyond the ideological pegging of the congress tradition. Front politics requires us to get every or as many as we possible organisation and institutions, wherever they were, and individuals into a common allegiance. And that common allegiance was to fight the Tri-cameral system and the Koornhof bill. It stopped there. And yes we got into difficulties because those of us who had envisioned ourselves as the forth pillar amongst the four pillars of the ANC were being forced outside of that context.

There was not a polarisation but a difference. There was a meeting of the coloured community in Austerville, in a church. I used the concept of the Freedom Charter. Sharing the platform with me was Trevor Manuel, who didn't come from a Freedom Charter background. And in terms of front politics he resisted this and sent me a note and to say no we should not be discussing the Freedom Charter. I said I will and I gave...

IAIN: He was there at that meeting?

MEWA: He was there and was sharing the platform with me. I grabbed a Bible and read out extracts from chapters which consolidated my view on the Freedom Charter. Manuel was a Unity Movement man. However it was in the nature of the front politics of the time that we were required to discuss and listen to a whole host of complex political views and strategies. And naturally the ANC in exile was aware of these discussions. I am not saying that the UDF was an instrument for the ANC to change its character at Kabwe in 1985.

Non-racialism and the UDF and ANC

IAIN: But it did.

MEWA: Opening up membership of the executive to non-African people. The internal wing of mobilisation, the UDF, was non-racial. There was opposition to that view within the ranks of the ANC and it is public knowledge - I don't know who is the author of it - `comrades in arms` or

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`comrades in exile` has reflected on this.²⁶ But just as there was a dynamic and vibrant debate at Kabwe, there were similar discussions for us here. For us it was the interlinking of ideas amidst the negotiation process which had already started. It was known that Kobbie Coetzee's was doing whatever he could under PW Botha. And the trek of business people to Lusaka led by Gavin Relly, and meetings with the ANC in London. I am not saying the UDF should be taking total credit for this but besides the UDF there was little left inside South Africa besides underground activities.

Reflections and hindsight

But I've thought that in 1983 we made a mistake, and this mistake was only discovered to be an error - at least I did - very late. If we had brought Buthelezi into the UDF and perhaps even given him a leadership position, we would have in some ways made it easier for the ANC to have established a government of national unity in-waiting. But, some would say, by 1979 there was an altercation at best or a very serious tension at worst between the leadership of the ANC abroad and Chief Buthelezi himself. Some would say, `Yes, so heal it.` There was that notion held by some people that Chief Buthelezi was not going to keep the seat warm for Oliver Tambo or Nelson Mandela. Now to be fair to him maybe it was his first choice to aspire to that. Maybe he realised that it was too late to prune the profile of Mandela or Tambo. We were subtle on this issue, but in 1986 I did not hesitate to author an article where I noted that in order to keep the nation together Mandela and Tambo combined would have to do a deal with Buthelezi. This was the original phrase I used but in consultation with colleagues at the time we thought this was a very provocative statement. So I reconstructed that sentence to say that in order to keep the nation together Mandela and Tambo combined would be forced by the state to do a deal with Buthelezi. All these things would have been unnecessary had we in the UDF decided in 1983 to take Buthelezi on board and make him a leader.

IAIN: It was considered?

MEWA: Yes it was but considered to the extent that it was debated.

IAIN: At the national level?

MEWA: I don't know that it was done at national level. I know that the consideration of the debate came whilst I was banned in 1983, before I went to the UDF. At which time I'd also done another

²⁶ Ellis, S. *Comrades against apartheid*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

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document which was used as evidence against me at the treason trial. I wrote that irrespective of whether one was a student, a religious organisations, the trade unions, women movements, business persons, or whoever all must accept the concept of a `CNA`. I was pointing to the emergence of the UDF long before the 1983 launch. And this document was in my office and the cops raided my office and found it this whilst I was in jail and submitted this to my defence team as evidence against me. Ishmail Mahomed asked me what I meant by CNA? I said `the Community of Natal Activists`. It was clear I'd inverted the ANC to call it the CNA. Fortunately the state's case collapsed before they got to that.²⁷

So by 1991 or 1992 we emerged from the unbanning with a Patriotic Front against apartheid. If the likes of Buthelezi were included in the first instance with the UDF it would have been an affinity for the ANC. The ANC did reach out to people in homelands including Holomisa. And we need to remember that Buthelezi was not at Codesa. The IFP was not at Codesa. And until seven or eight days before elections it wasn't clear whether the IFP would participate. But no organisation can get into election mode within ten days so there must have been prior preparations. One becomes wiser with hindsight. If the ANC found it necessary to have a Patriotic Front after its unbanning, it could be interpreted as irresponsible for us in the UDF to ignore it, because maybe we would have avoided Inanda, and we could have avoided the thousands of people who died in KwaZulu-Natal after unbanning and made easier or more comfortable for Buthelezi to assume responsibility with us as he is assuming now. That is on the one hand. On the other hand given the reality of the time the UDF was described by me in 1984 or 1985 as having a lot of youthful support. While the IFP had *amabutho* in all the townships, they had invaded our meetings, they had open fights, and so on. Could all those things have been avoided?²⁸

Radical youth and leadership

But one cannot ignore the fact that we were struggling with the dilemma of a militant African youth. And we were not Mandela or Tambo, who had the stature and charisma to call the shots, so to speak. And when Mandela came out and said in Durban in his first public address urging people to throw their spears and pangas into the sea there was a sector of that crowd - I was in London at the time watching the event on television - there was sector of the population that agreed with him, but a lot didn't.

²⁷ This material is included in the Gilbert Marcus Papers at the Historical Papers section, University of the Witwatersrand.

²⁸ Significantly Archie Gumede was in correspondence with Chief Buthelezi. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 3, Section 3, Document 6: Chief Buthelezi-Archie Gumede, 18th August 1987.

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Chris Hani, Cyril Ramaphosa and I with others went up to not Ulundi, but to Eshowe and another township near Empangeni, to meet with the police officers in Esikhawini hoping to restore peace and order. At lunch Chris Hani began questioning, in a very jovial manner, `Why is this in KwaZulu-Natal?` And we tried to explain the power relations. And he questioned again: `What is the basis of us to be here today, negotiating with police officers who owe their first allegiance to the IFP. Why couldn't this have been done during the days of the UDF?` Unknown to him Boipatong was still to happen. It was the *amabutho* in the hostels in the mining areas.²⁹

Meeting with Winnie Mandela

On a final note, and concerning this hindsight and our options, I got unbanned on the 30 June 1983. I had already made arrangements with a cousin of mine to make available a roadworthy car for a group of us to travel. At around 3 o' clock in the morning of the 1 July MD Naidoo, George Sewpersadh, Subry Govender and I went to Brandfort to extend solidarity with the person who we ourselves called the first lady - Winnie Mandela. She was then banned and house arrested in Brandfort. But we considered it to be our political duty and requirement to go up to her, drive those hundreds of kilometres.³⁰

INTERVIEW ENDS

²⁹ The Boipatong Massace, 17 June 1992. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/boipatong-massacre-17-june-1992>.

³⁰ See Ramgobin, *Prisms*, pp.181-183 and Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, image 23.
