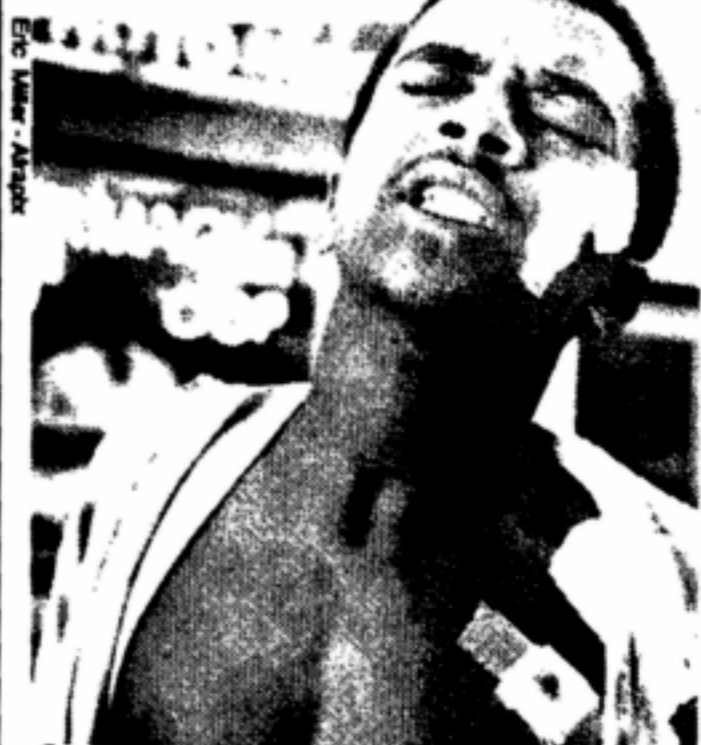


# DEFIANCE



Benny Good - Afsajix

## a measure of expectations



Eric Mauer - Afsajix

Cape Town school protests - August

*The success of the MDM's defiance campaign indicates more than mass rejection of apartheid and the repression which maintains it. It is also a reflection of the enormously increased expectations ordinary South Africans have about their future. JO-ANNE COLLINGE reports.*



Cedric Nunn - Afsajix

During the defiance campaign

**W**hen, on 15 September, South African Council of Churches general secretary Frank Chikane marched to John Vorster Square at the head of thousands, his mission was directed at the police station where, eight years before, he had been detained in the cell next to Neil Aggett.

At the end of the march, Chikane and other leading clerics handed a memorandum on police brutality to the station commander at John Vorster Square. Then he turned to face the crowd massed outside, under the twin flags of the ANC and the Communist Party, to lead them in singing Nkosi Sikele' iAfrika.

The significant - but incomplete - twist of history that the scene represented did not escape the man who had witnessed Aggett's inert body removed from his detention cell.

After the march, Chikane commented to the press that the official decision to grant permission for mass demonstrations in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria did not reflect a 'change of heart' on the part of the government. It was, Chikane said, a necessary state accommodation of persistent mass struggles.

The protest marches were largely part of the month-old Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) defiance campaign - a campaign designed to challenge both the racial discrimination of apartheid and the security laws underpinning the survival of the minority regime.

The overwhelming size of the Cape Town march on 13 September and the speed with which the Johannesburg and Pretoria marches gathered ground two days later - in the absence of any burning local issue - magnified a central feature of the defiance campaign itself: the existence of a widespread political consciousness which enabled people to be mobilised even where organisational networks had not recovered from three bruising years under state-of-emergency rule.

**I**t was surely this consciousness which gave the defiance campaign its wide appeal. What else could have drawn thousands to picnic on

'all white' beaches? What else caused students to march in remote Phutaditjaba, prompted workers to challenge residential and canteen segregation on the mines, drew pupils in the Border region to demand admission to white schools and prompted challenges to hospital apartheid even in Free State towns like Welkom.

The massive stayaway on election day - the largest in South African history, estimated to have been observed by three million workers - signified that a very broadly-based political culture had taken root. Vast numbers of people knew what action was expected of them even where the state of emergency made it impossible for this to be conveyed openly through mass communication media.

There are suggestions of an additional dimension to this upsurge in political activity. At an anti-election meeting in Actonville on the East Rand, National Union of Mineworkers general secretary Cyril Ramaphosa spoke of 'the sweet smell of freedom' permeating the villages, townships and workplaces of the country.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, addressing the Cape Town march, was more forthright. 'We say, hey Mr de Klerk, you have already lost... Our march to freedom is unstoppable. It is the march of all of us South Africans, black and white'.

Put in more mundane terms, the tide of expectations is swelling in an unprecedented way. There is the prevalent belief that this time increased political pressure will deliver the real prize: a non-racial, democratic system of government.

The second salient feature of the mass protests in particular and the defiance campaign as a whole was the obvious and unrestrained support for the ANC.

In Cape Town, where a human mass of anything between 25 000 and 80 000 marched behind the ANC flag, Congress of South African Trade Unions general secretary Jay Naidoo addressed the crowd, saying: 'Today we have witnessed the might of our people. We have witnessed the might of our people under our flag - the green, black and gold flag'.

He went on: 'We are saying that our leaders Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo are indeed the people who will

be sitting in the parliament of the future'.

In Johannesburg, where both the ANC and SACP flags were prominently displayed and where a greater proportion of the crowd comprised seasoned activists, pro-ANC freedom songs were sung for the duration of the one-hour procession.

**I**n the defiance campaign a large number of activities related to the 'unbanning' of organisations outlawed under emergency and security laws. This involved meetings being called under the auspices of organisations prohibited from doing so; banners and T-shirts of these organisations being displayed; and office bearers and representatives of the organisations appearing on public platforms.

Where such 'unbannings' of MDM-aligned organisations took place, a simultaneous defiance of the ban on the ANC almost invariably occurred. Where people unbanned the Congress of South African Students (Cosas), they also unbanned the ANC. Where they illegally flaunted their UDF T-shirts and banners, they also unfurled the black, green and gold flag. They did so even while enjoying the unlawful pleasures of Durban's officially-white Addington Beach.

The first month of the defiance campaign was, in large measure, about legitimising the ANC. Even the anti-election campaign, in contrast to that waged during the 1984 tricameral elections, had little to do with discrediting the candidates for the houses of delegates and representatives. The campaign was much more concerned with establishing an alternative vision of the future, using the ANC's constitutional guidelines as a touchstone.

The third observable trend during this time of mass protest has involved the alignment of groups and individuals outside of the main extra-parliamentary resistance movement with activities enacted by this dominant oppositional force.

The number of clerics, professionals, liberal politicians, academics and high-profile business people on both the Cape Town and Johannesburg marches was highlighted in the commercial press.



While few of them would themselves hoist the ANC flag, it is significant that they would rather be associated with those who do so than with the apartheid regime and the actions of its armed forces.

It is not far-fetched to speak of the attainment of hegemony by forces representing the Congress tradition.

The non-violent nature of the marches, which took place in streets bare of police, was trumpeted by the SABC. In truth, despite the grim utterances of law and order minister Adriaan Vlok, the defiance campaign protests were equally peaceful in their execution, but were often met with state violence which drew occasional retaliation.

**V**iolence - or at least the potential for violence - lies not in the mass defiance campaign at all, but in the government's response to the moving force behind these demonstrations - namely, the enormously increased expectations ordinary South Africans have about their future.

It is trite to say that the desire for change arises from the conditions of apartheid itself - the experience of poverty, discrimination and wholesale subjection to the powers of the armed forces. It is more useful to note that this desire is channelled and formed both by historical factors and present reality.

There are several elements in the immediate political climate charging the hopes of the oppressed.

\* Firstly, there is the widely-reported fact that the South African government is under concerted pressure from its traditional Western allies to negotiate a transfer of power with representative leaders of the people.

\* Secondly, with Namibian independence unfolding next door there is evidence that Pretoria can be induced to surrender power. The success of struggles against colonialism in Southern Africa has always given South African resistance a fillip - Namibia more so than any other, because the colonial power in question is the apartheid government itself.

\* Thirdly, there is tangible evidence of the international credibility of resistance forces with even Pretoria's allies. Not only has the Bush administration talked of



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expanding contacts with the ANC, but the UDF has secured talks with key heads of state.

\* Fourthly, there is the emotionally-charged climate that elections for the minority parliament have come to generate. This time the tension has been heightened by the 'reform' campaign of the National Party itself. The disenfranchised have read the campaign for signs to confirm international pressure on Pretoria. State President FW de Klerk's statement that the door is open to those who seek change and that there is no need 'to batter it down' is received with both scepticism and optimism.

There can be little doubt that popular expectations are fixed on a particular form of change, involving no less than the transfer of political power to the majority and, in many cases, a restructuring of the economy.

To the extent that political movements shape popular consciousness over and above the teachings of experience, two traditions have moulded the ideas of the supporters of the present MDM - the 77-year-old nationalist tradition of the ANC and, to a lesser degree, the socialist course pursued by the South African Communist Party. After the banning of these organisations, their guiding ideologies found only intermittent expression in mass organisation - until the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This era saw the emergence of

militant trade unions which won legitimacy for organisations of the working class, and student organisations openly basing themselves on the Freedom Charter.

The overtly racist and anti-democratic nature of the tricameral parliament galvanised those who supported the notion of a non-racial democracy into action to form the UDF in 1983. The legitimacy of state structures was challenged at every level; township struggles - around housing and education - were at one and the same time about power and poverty.

**T**he wildfire multiplication of UDF affiliates and the consolidation of unions in Cosatu - the country's biggest labour federation - is history. So too is the insurrectionary form that resistance took after the Vaal uprising of September 1983. These circumstances enabled the outlawed liberation movements to expand their underground political work, consolidating their traditions of struggle.

When the national state of emergency was declared in June 1986, Cosatu and the UDF had already adopted the principle of pursuing 'unity in action'. It is this strategy which is embodied in the notion of the MDM. Whether the notion of an active alliance would have solidified as the 'MDM' if the UDF had not been effectively banned is open to question.

The elusive MDM, so real an influence but quite without structure, is an illustration of how the state of emergency failed. State security systems could outlaw organisations, but they could not remove from activists the experience of organisation. They could inhibit communication, but they could not control thought.

South African liberation forces, without recovering their organisational ground, are still readily mobilised. And this, it can be argued, contributes another crucial factor to the present escalation of expectations: a sense that resistance can survive the might of apartheid, that there is something to the slogan 'people's power'.

The government, as much as anyone else, must be conscious that failure to meet the expectations generated by this combination of



developments and perceptions could be disastrous.

It must be asking whether for the first time the potential does not exist for widespread insurrection, which could occur across the land, outstripping even the impact of the regional uprisings from 1984 to 1986.

**I**ronically, moves by the government to accommodate expectations in some measure may also fuel resistance, in that they would confirm people's sense that their own actions can achieve results. Increased demands would be made. Organisation would feed off its own success and the pressures for change would be incremental.

Both the hopes of the oppressed and the resignation of sections of the ruling group to change are pinned on a reading of international opinion that concludes even Pretoria's traditional allies are not prepared to tolerate apartheid.

The defiance campaign, though referred to by some MDM representatives as an effective 'dismantling of apartheid', has been largely an exercise in strategic protest. As explained by Mohamed Valli Moosa before his detention, it was devised particularly to expose the National Party 'reform' plan as a sham and underscore that what FW de Klerk had on offer did not represent an end to apartheid.

The greatest danger for the MDM is that the international community - especially Britain and the United States - might relieve the pressure on De Klerk on the grounds of his promises and his appearance of moderation; they might accept token human rights concessions as down payments on future unspecified moves to democratic rule.

If this happened, demands inside the country would not dissipate, but De Klerk would have a freer hand in countering resistance. He could return to the tactics of his predecessor.

Indeed there is still some doubt as to whether he has forsaken these tactics, a doubt based on the strangely dualistic character of state security responses to the defiance campaign, including its anti-election component, and to the schools crisis in the Western Cape.

At the level of rhetoric, heavy 'law

and order' utterances by National Party candidates - most notably Adriaan Vlok - in the run-up to the election can be ascribed to the need to secure the right-wing element in its ideologically spread-eagled constituency.

Daily, the press and SABC announced government crackdowns on the MDM. And while certain actions were taken, detentions did not even begin to approximate the pattern which was maintained almost consistently for 30 months of the national state of emergency - that is, until the hunger strike in February and March this year.

Nevertheless, repression remained a major issue, even if there was a gap between the Vlok rhetoric and the reality.

Repression generally took on quite new contours: those of containment or pre-emption, rather than confrontation. In many cases this required huge contingents of police and soldiers. Where this general strategy was not observed and confrontation did occur - as in the Western Cape and some remote areas - the force used by the state was considerable.

This force was nearly always disproportionate, since it was generally inflicted on people whose sole offence was to attend a meeting prohibited in one way or another.

Aware of the damage that the sjambokking of civilians does to its foreign image, government attempted to prevent meetings happening rather than breaking them up. It did this by a combination of banning orders, flooding the proposed venues with armed forces and armoured vehicles and roadblocking either supporters or scheduled speakers.

In many cases those committed to the principle of defiance held meetings at alternative venues despite the imposition of bans. The replacement meetings were - inevitably - smaller than the originals would have been. When, equally inevitably, they were disrupted by police, the confrontation was reduced in scale.

The Human Rights Commission calculates that at least 56 meetings were broken up by the armed forces from the start of the defiance campaign to election day and that the state refrained from violence in only 19 instances. It commented that there

appeared 'to be no policy of "minimum force"'.

Where meetings were not banned, a different form of pre-emptive state intervention frequently applied. Large contingents of riot and security police were deployed inside and outside meetings, apparently in an attempt to deter attendance, dampen the militancy of speeches and curtail open debate. This tactic was used extensively against the anti-election campaign of the Transvaal Indian Congress and, more prominently, at the workers' summit.

In another image-conscious move, the authorities substituted mass charge-and-release procedures for detention without trial in the case of activists apprehended during protest action. At least 2 000 people were arrested and charged in demonstrations within the space of five weeks, according to the HRC.

In the Western Cape the alleged brutality of the police in the build-up to the elections and on the night of the poll has been widely reported. It is common cause that at least some of the 23 deaths reckoned to have occurred that night were caused by police shooting.

It is equally clear that the level of resistance in the Cape had far exceeded the dimensions of protest. The defiance campaign there fed into well-organised and long-standing resistance focused on education.

The HRC observes: 'The severity of police repression in this area also indicates that police are acting to smash the well-organised and highly-motivated Western Cape Students Congress which has been rebuilding itself despite being restricted'.

The fact that two people were killed in the Peninsula at a vigil held on the very night of the peace march, and that kits konstabels (instant cops) are alleged to be implicated in this, underscores the suggestion by the HRC.

The Western Cape experience also suggests that any attempts by De Klerk to curtail security action without simultaneously moving to address the fundamental political questions will necessarily be self-defeating, since popular opposition will not find indefinite expression in protest marches. Those who marvel at the Pretoria Spring of 1989 would do well to heed this.