

## MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

Before the banning of the UDF and other democratic organisations, speculations were rife about the possibility of UDF participation in the October municipal elections. The suggestions and discussions about this possible scenario have been raised by a whole range of people and groups: liberal press, academics, political groups, government supporters and indeed comrades within our structures.

The mass democratic movement, pursuant to its tradition of free, open and democratic debate before deciding on any issue does not treat this matter lightly. It must be emphasised from the outset that no single democratic structure has until now proposed participation in the coming elections. What has happened however, is that people have requested that we fully explain our position in relation to the October elections.

Can we use the elections to further the struggle for freedom? If so how? Are there possibilities of further deepening the crisis faced by the state? This paper does not pretend to answer all these questions but aims to facilitate discussion in our search for the best way of advancing our struggle under the present conditions.

The challenges facing the mass democratic movement on the question of elections in the white areas are different from those facing the oppressed communities. The better part of the paper will deal with debates in the oppressed communities.

Our approach to the municipal elections will in the first instance be determined by the state of our organisations, the mood of the masses and the strengths and weaknesses of the regime. Let us take a general look at our organisations.

### State of our organisations and the mood of the masses

While it is useful to discuss the state of our organisations separately from the mood of the masses, this can at times be misleading. We will therefore discuss the two together without collapsing the one into the other and at the same time make a distinction between the two areas but not separating them altogether. We will not separate the two phenomena because they have a symbiotic relationship (i.e. each benefiting from the other). The state of our organisations has an influence over the mood of the masses, while the latter has a bearing on the strengths and weaknesses of the former.

Most of our mass organisations are facing the deepest crisis in the history of their existence. The state has reacted viciously to the proliferation of popular organisations and the emergence

of grassroots structures like the street, block and area committees.

The attacks on our organisations varies according to regions, areas and sectors. As far as regions are concerned the area most affected by repression is the Eastern Cape. We need not scratch our heads very hard to find out why.

Layer after layer of leadership in most parts of the country has disappeared into detentions. In some areas organisations have been rendered inoperative as the state desperately tries to break the people's resistance.

Cadres have to constantly duck and dive from the South African regime as well as the bantustan repressive forces. In some places like Northern Transvaal naked terrorism and at times attacks by bandits from Renamo and Zimbabwe became common place.

As a result many activists have to operate from outside their areas. This has had a negative impact on our organisations. But while it is difficult to freely and openly conduct the activities of the mass democratic organisations in most areas, this does not necessarily mean that organisations are dead.

A significant number of organisations have managed to adapt to the repressive conditions. This has been clearly demonstrated by the sustenance of rent boycotts, the success of the recent stayaways; the May 5th and 6th's last year in protest against all-white elections, the 21st March protest against the banning of the UDF and other organisations and the June 6 - 8th stayaway.

In Natal our organisations in the Midlands sub-region have not only won many people to the side of the mass democratic movement, but have built strong democratic structures. The defence against Inkatha's aggression has even spread to rural areas.

This is a clear proof that beside the most severe repression in the history of our country, our foot soldiers are quietly doing a remarkable job. The fact that we have managed to take the struggle to higher levels can be attributed to our ability to adapt to repressive conditions and to the mood of the masses.

In all the struggles of the people against oppression and exploitation, the mood of the masses, their preparedness and determination has always brought liberation day near. It is the masses who help determine the pace of the struggle. But what is the state of the masses of SA today? The mood of the masses will be best gauged by their response to calls by the mass democratic movement, their participation in campaigns and their reaction to initiatives from the state and its collaborators.

Since the State of Emergency, the mass democratic movement has

called a number of campaigns. At the national level, the UDF and Cosatu have spearheaded them. Locally, the civics, youth and other structures have been responsible for most of the initiatives.

The positive response of the masses to our calls has given us a clear message that notwithstanding the three years of the two emergencies our people have not shifted their political support away from the mass democratic movement. The spirit of resistance amongst our people is still very high.

It is clear that the state is trying to use repression and reform to win the support of our people. But as of now they have not succeeded. They have managed to destroy few of our organisations and weaken others, but have failed to smash most of our structures and win the political support of our people.

Our organisations are still able to meet, plan, strategise and advance the struggle. This is demonstrated by some of the successful campaigns carried out so far. But while leading activists have adapted to the changed conditions, most of our people have not done so. The challenge facing the mass democratic movement is how to ensure that the mass of our people are also able to adapt to the repressive conditions.

However, beside this, we have managed to open up new ways of continuing with the struggle. This is illustrated by the demonstrations staged by our unions in the factories against the Labour Relations Bill.

#### The government

The government has to a large extent regained the confidence and support of its natural allies: big business, a section of the imperialists, the majority of whites and its stooges in the oppressed community. This is not surprising. The government has to a certain extent delivered the goods to its friends and supporters. Especially to the business community it liberally gave the privatisation, deregulation and now the Labour Relations Bill. To the imperialists it is still keeping their little ugly puppy, Savimbi, alive and kicking. It still destabilises the Frontline States thus making economic independence impossible.

To whites it has provided "security" so that they can sleep soundly at night. This was done by restricting and muffling the press so that the the truth of what is happening in the country today can only be known when we attain our freedom. And finally to the poor "baas boys" in the townships, the government has promised them a seat near "baas-Botha" in the Great Indaba. The state has also shown that it can intervene whenever its loyal puppets are in danger as has happened in Bophuthatswana.

The regime is desperately attempting to regain the strategic initiative. Thus it is very important for them to have successful polls in the townships. The state is trying to do this by:

- \* Brutal repression, the state of emergency, banning of organisations etc. This they hope will help them regain control of the townships. (It has already happened in some townships.)

- \* Trying to win the support of our people through upgrading schemes, building of a few fancy houses. But the state is unwilling to provide enough money to build houses for all the people.

- \* Trying to sell its constitutional concoction to the oppressed people. The state is trying to mollify the anger and militancy of our people by promising to make us part of the decision making machinery, though we will not be part of parliament.

The state is grappling with many schemes and ideas as to how to contain the militancy of the masses. It has no long term political solutions to the crisis facing our country. It offers few houses, scattered upgrading schemes and a powerless National Council. But the people want full political power. It tries to promote spurious leaders and organisations but the people are not impressed. They want Mandela and his organisation.

#### The reasons behind the municipal elections

It is no accident that the state has called for municipal elections for all national groups on the same day. Firstly, the state wants to prove to the world that the policy of separate but equal is a viable option for the problems facing South Africa. If the polls are high, this will be concrete proof to this belief.

Secondly, as far as the Africans are concerned, the state wants to use the elections to prepare the ground for its National Council.

Thirdly, the state hopes that by October, repression will have taken its toll on the mass democratic movement and the masses will flock singing Hallelujah to the polls.

Fourthly, the state further wants to use the elections to revive its puppet structures which collapsed under the intense pressure of the people in the townships.

Lastly, there is speculation that upgrading schemes in most townships will be completed by October, thus giving the councilors enough ammunition to argue for people to vote.

#### Should we participate or not?

As stated in the beginning there is no UDF structure which has suggested that we should participate in the coming elections. But because of a number of insinuations about this possibility, we should look closely into the issue.

But before we get to the crux of the matter, it will perhaps be instructive to re-state the belief of the mass democratic movement on the question of participation and non-participation in government created structures. We are always informed on this issue, as on many other issues by our understanding of three important concepts viz. principle, strategy and tactic.

#### A principle, What is that?

A principle is a set of fundamental beliefs held by a person, a group or an organisation which guides and instructs their conduct, behaviour and response to issues. Principles may not be bent to accommodate particular demands on different occasions. They are to a large extent fixed and to change them will need a major restructuring of an organisation. Some of the most important principles of the mass democratic movement are non-racialism, accountability and democracy.

#### A strategy

A strategy is an elaborated plan worked out by an organisation or institution to achieve its aims. The strategy of the mass democratic movement to bring about a non-racial democracy in our country is to use a combination of different forms of pressure on the regime eg mass political work.

#### And a tactic

Our understanding of a tactic is that it is a weapon by which a strategy can be effected. A boycott, a strike, a petition or a sit-in are some of the examples of a tactic. Both the strategy and the tactic varies from one situation to the other and changes according to time and material conditions. Unlike principles they are not fixed.

It should be clear from our brief explanation of the three concepts that embarking on a boycott of a structure, commodity or an event cannot be a principle. It is a way of expressing anger or advancing one's principles. Students might boycott classes because of corporal punishment, workers might boycott a canteen because of bad food and the leader of the Damara Council may boycott FW Botha's meeting because of the latter's withdrawal of charges of murder against the SA troops. But students can go back to school and workers might decide to eat at the canteen without breaking their principles. A boycott is a weapon in the hands of the people to advance our struggle. It is used on

specific occasions and when the situation so demands.

### Boycott as a Strategy

It should also be stated that while in most cases a boycott might be a tactic, it can also develop into a strategy. A good example is the boycott of bodies of the minority rule like Black Local Authorities. This is different from a tactical boycott on the one hand, which would be ad-hoc and specific in character, and a principled boycott, which would be totally fixed and general in character.

The boycott of institutions of minority rule is understood as a strategy in that it is a coherent and ongoing form of opposition designed to isolate these institutions and to render them as ineffective as possible. Ever since 1976, these institutions have been identified as the weak link in apartheid rule in that they rely for their effectivity on a degree of support from the oppressed community.

On the one side the apartheid system was turning more and more to these institutions to preserve itself as it went deeper into crisis. In particular it was attempting to generalise the system of bantustan rule which has proved so effective by extending something similar to urban areas.

On the other side the intensification of struggle, the advance in mass consciousness, mobilisation and organisation made it increasingly possible to isolate these institutions totally from the masses. Thus making it impossible for them to function. This cracking of the most immediate and weakest shackle of apartheid rule created the possibility of building alternative centres of people's power.

### Arguments in favour of participation

Different reasons have been put forward in favour of participation in the elections. Let us look into some of them. The commonly held argument for participation goes like this: The relentless repression of the past few years has smashed and weakened our structures. Repression will continue, thus we will not be able to have an opportunity to revive structures and be in a position to effectively oppose the municipal elections and continue with the struggle. We should therefore use the space provided by the elections to propagate our views.

The argument goes further. Upon being elected our candidates should refuse to take their seats thus making the structures to collapse. The other side of the argument is that we should in fact take our seats, continue to engage apartheid using the space to fight for our rights and destroy the structures from within.

Other people, particularly within government circles and amongst its junior partners have dared us to participate and prove our claim of representing the majority of South Africans.

So are we convinced about participation?

There are conditions for democratic organisations and individual democrats to participate in dummy bodies. These are:

- \* The dummy bodies should be so popular that the only way to have access to the people is to take part in them.
- \* There are possibilities of taking part in these structures so as to render them ineffective.
- \* That we can use the structures to propagate democratic views.

On the first condition we will all agree together with those who think we should participate, that the dummy structures are unpopular and have been rejected by our people. The percentage polls in the 1983 and 1984 elections were very low. This happened when the UDF had just been launched and many civics were still ad hoc structures or were not formed.

But even at that time the bodies of minority rule were unpopular. The reasons for their unpopularity are not hard to find. Firstly, these structures have no political power and no matter how hard the participants may try to satisfy the aspirations of their constituencies, no positive results will ever be forthcoming.

Secondly, the government is not prepared to carry the burden of building, improving and maintaining black areas. The financial responsibility to do this is left on the shoulders of the people living in these areas. With inflation, unemployment and low wages rampant in black areas, it is impossible for the oppressed people to carry this burden. At the same time, the government always puts pressure on the councils to get money to run their areas. One of the easiest ways for the puppet structures to get money is to increase rentals.

Thirdly, the councillors and their friends in the Indian and coloured areas have on numerous occasions proved to be a corrupt lot. Bribes, swindles, evictions and other forms of immoral conduct have become their second nature.

Fourthly, our people have correctly identified that a participation strategy involves more than simply participation in the tricameral parliament and black local authorities. But it also means participation in the SADF, SAP, JMC's and other oppressive institutions.

Today the bodies of minority rule are more unpopular than ever before. The struggles of the masses against these structures in the last few years have discredited and in some areas destroyed them. More than ever before the masses have correctly linked them to apartheid. Today, those who remain in these structures are thought to be doing so for financial and personal interests. The attitude of the people to these structures is not only negative but antagonistic.

It is therefore clear that we cannot participate in the elections so as to gain access to the masses. The masses are outside these structures and are engaged in fierce battles against them.

The second condition namely that we can enter the structures so as to render them ineffective need not occupy us for long. The structures are ineffective thanks to the rejection by our people. You don't enter an ineffective structure to make it ineffective. Do you?

The last condition of making the structures to propagate our views is also not feasible. If our analysis is correct that the state is out to crush the mass democratic movement, what makes us think that it will let it thrive within its own structures. Even if we were able to contest seats in these elections, the space gained will be short lived.

There are other important reasons why we think participation is not a viable option for the oppressed. The boycott strategy is linked to the nature of the South African state. The state's origin in colonial conquest gives it a racially exclusive form. While whites enjoy formal democratic rights, the vast majority of our people have been excluded.

Thus opposition in the 1950's took the form of an externally based confrontation with state structures. The crisis, which this precipitated forced the state in the 1960's to begin devising co-optive strategies. The Bantu Advisory Boards, bantustans, CRC and SAIC were established on ethnic lines as junior partners.

The boycott strategy evolved to fight against attempts to divide us on ethnic lines and preserve the unity of the oppressed.

We have seen how the boycott of dummy structures has forced the state again and again to change its constitutional agenda to try to buy off and pacify the oppressed. Our boycott of the SAIC and Advisory Boards, forced the state to come up with tricameral parliaments and black local authorities.

Therefore the boycott of dummy structures is not a limited ad-hoc tactic to be used only in limited situations. Nor is it an inflexible principle. Rather it is a strategy i.e part of a general coherent approach to build united opposition and move



towards one person one vote.

### The way forward

For us to be able to move forward, we need to regroup the centre, reorganise our structures, strengthen our alliance with our fraternal organisations and broaden ourselves.

### Regroup the centre

To challenge the coming elections effectively, we must have strong political centres at all levels of our movement. But what are political centres? To refresh our minds lets borrow Isizwe's (Vol 2 No 1. Sept 1987) description:

"By 'political centres' we are referring to organisational collectives that are capable of providing political leadership, that are able to strategise, to lead. Political centres are collectives that do not simply react to one crisis after another. They are able to plan ahead, carrying the struggle to the enemy on the people's terms..."

The main reason for the need to regroup the centre is because the political centres are the engine of our movement. The state is aware of this, that is why it always directs its repressive energies against the nucleus of our organisations whether at street, block and area level or at regional and national level. In regrouping our centre at all levels, the following are important:

- \* Revitalise activists. This is important because some of our activists have been demoralised by repression. We need to encourage our cadres to draw inspiration from the increased level of consciousness on the part of the people (as explained earlier).
- \* We must master the techniques of secret and underground work. This is imperative because more often than not large scale detentions breaks the nucleus of our organisations. Activists must learn to operate underground because the state of emergency will be with us for many years.
- \* Vigilance and discipline should guide our work.
- \* Rumour-mongering, unnecessary personal clashes etc should be done away with.
- \* Under the present conditions, the need for education and training increases.
- \* We should strive for more ideological unity. When the state is attacking us like now, we need each other more than ever before. We should therefore vigorously fight against factionalism,

regionalism and individualism.

We should keep in mind that without a strong centre our attempts to seriously challenge the state will be futile. We need a strong and firm centre to propel the mass democratic movement.

#### Re-organise structures

Most of our structures are still in existence, though some of them are weak. One important reason for the weaknesses of our organisations is that they are unable to adapt to repressive conditions. This brings us to the point discussed earlier viz, that we must master secret and underground work. We must however be careful not to mistake our tactical adoption of underground work with the strategic adoption of underground work by the ANC.

We adopt underground methods so as to be able to continue with open, above board mass work. The most important task facing us is to re-organise and strengthen our grassroots structures like street committees. These structures are crucial for our campaign against municipal elections because in most parts of the country we will never be in a position to hold mass meetings and organise openly.

Civic organisations are the most important structures in our struggle against the municipal elections. All sectors should help rebuild and strengthen them. In areas where it is impossible to revive civics, other structures should be set up to oppose the municipal elections.

#### Strengthen alliances with fraternal organisations

With increasing repression, there is an urgent need for the mass democratic movement to plan, work and move forward as a solid block. The alliance between the UDF affiliates, Cosatu and the churches should be strengthened at all levels from national, regional and to the local level.

Through the campaign for National United Action we have demonstrated that when we strike in Unison our blows have a desired impact. The Pietermaritzburg experience is a living example of how important united action can be.

In attempting to strengthen our alliance with fraternal organisations we should pay special attention to our inter-action with Cosatu. This is so particularly because of the centrality of the working class in our struggle. But also because it is important for Cosatu to play an active role in reviving community organisations where they have been smashed by repression. The fight against bodies of minority rule is not the concern of the UDF affiliates only. It is a challenge facing all democrats and oppressed people.

By strengthening our alliance with our natural allies we must be aware that we are helping to build our structures. For victories registered by Cosatu will always be celebrated by the entire democratic movement. Workers who belong to Cosatu unions also belong to our civics, youth and women structures. At the street, block and area levels Cosatu and UDF have worked together without any distinction between the two structures. What we need to do is to consolidate and co-ordinate this process.

We should also work very closely with the churches. Recently and particularly after the bannings, church leaders have shown their preparedness to confront the state. The mass democratic movement must guide and give lead to the progressive initiative taken by church leaders.

Finally it is only when our unity with our allies is strong that we can influence the rest of the community and together effectively challenge the municipal elections in October.

#### Broaden the Front

Before the banning of the UDF, organisations in different parts of the country had dedicated themselves to work with structures outside the UDF and the broad democratic movement. This approach is more important now than before.

The government is trying to win over uncommitted sections of our community to join the collaborators. It is attempting to build a block of "moderate" leadership. The state will only succeed in this initiative if we fail to spread our moral and political influence to all sections of our community.

Our political influence and directive must guide the entire community if we hope to frustrate the municipal elections. While we have managed in the people's camp to influence many people, there is still a lot of work to be done. Our relationship with people outside our structures has been uncoordinated. We need to draw taxi-owners, sports bodies, traders and religious groups closer to the mass democratic movement.

#### Position in the white areas

As we have already said, the mass democratic movement is calling for a boycott of the municipal elections. However we recognise that conditions in the white areas are different. Strategies and methods used in the enemy camp will always be different from those used in the people's camp.

White democrats should use the elections to strengthen the alliances forged in the white community and to win more whites to the mass democratic movement. We further call on all whites to continue to build anti-apartheid alliances and isolate the

Nationalists and their allies.

Approaches to the elections need to be determined by material conditions and should be worked out in consultation with local UDF structures. However no affiliate can participate as a UDF structure and no UDF activist can stand as a candidate.

### Conclusion

The campaign against the municipal elections is not the only one facing the mass democratic movement this year. It is however, one of the most important ones. It is important because the state hopes to drag itself out of its political crisis especially in the oppressed communities.

It is also important because like in the past, our people should use this challenge to move to higher levels of organisation. We have correctly identified bodies of minority rule as a weak link in the apartheid chain. We therefore, need to concentrate our energies into this area and frustrate the state in its attempts to rationalise our oppression. Objective conditions are favourable for us to move forward. What we need is to re-organise ourselves and grab this opportunity to move forward.