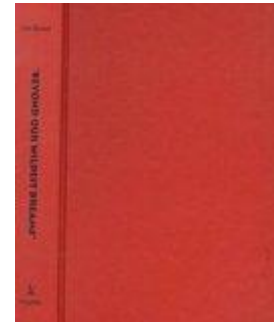




**Ineke van Kessel.** *"Beyond Our Wildest Dreams": The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. 384 pp. \$49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-1861-7.



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## Local Struggles and National Liberation in South Africa

'Local Struggles and National Liberation in South Africa'

The title of van Kessel's new book is taken from an interview with the former national treasurer of the United Democratic Front (UDF), Azhar Cachalia. 'When we founded the UDF', Cachalia told van Kessel, 'we had never in our wildest dreams expected that events would take off in the way they did. What happened was beyond everybody's expectations.'

The UDF was formed in 1983 to bring together opponents of constitutional reforms proposed by the National Party government. The reforms maintained racial segregation and, de facto, white supremacy, prompting the UDF's choice of slogan: 'Apartheid divides, UDF unites'. The UDF failed to prevent the government introducing the new constitution. But, within seven years of the formation of the UDF, the National Party had unbanned and entered into public negotiations with the African National Congress, leading to the transformation of South Africa into a non-racial, constitutional

democracy. The key factor behind the unexpectedly rapid political transformation was, of course, the countrywide revolt of the mid-1980s -- a revolt which intense state repression was able to contain, for a while, but not to defuse. The UDF played a central role in this revolt, such that the revolt has been referred to (in other studies) as the 'UDF revolt'.

Van Kessel's book, based closely on her 1995 doctoral thesis at the University of Leiden, provides a valuable account of political protest and organisation in the 1980s. It focuses on three local case-studies: a 'youth'-led revolt in Sekhukuneland (in what is now part of South Africa's Northern Province), civic organisation in the West Rand township of Kagiso (in what is now Gauteng province), and the community newspaper *Grassroots* in Cape Town. Preliminary chapters provide a clear and concise overview of national political developments in the 1980s, and some of the analytical issues arising in the study of these events. But the core of the book is the three case-studies through which van Kessel ex-

plores the local character of this countrywide revolt.

The first case-study, most of which was published in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* in 1993, is of Sekhukuneland. Van Kessel documents the growth of political mobilisation among young people (the so-called 'youth'), mostly students at high school guided by students from the University of the North or other tertiary institutions. This was a 'youth revolt', led by the Sekhukuneland Youth Organisation. But, van Kessel shows, relations between the youth and their elders remained antagonistic. The youth mobilised forcefully, alienating many older people. Their struggles against chiefs and their campaign of burning supposed witches led to a conservative reaction among older people. When state repression intensified in 1986, resistance collapsed. Van Kessel emphasises the 'confusion', especially between young and old, that pervaded this site of struggle:

In recounting this episode of youth power, young activists displayed ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they had clearly enjoyed a sense of power and of pride in going it alone as vanguard forces of liberation, while the older generation was paralysed by apathy and helplessness. ... On the other hand, these activists felt a profound sense of insecurity and disorientation. The youth movement lacked sophisticated leadership and had no clear sense of direction. Confusion was the key word, popping up time and again in many conversations with young and old alike in Sekhukuneland (116).

Van Kessel also emphasises the weakness of links between local youth organisations and the formal structures of the UDF. The local UDF leadership had unusually close links to the ANC underground. Such close links would have been frowned upon in some of the other provinces, where a political division of labour was considered more strategic. However, they seem to have been cut off from both the national UDF lead-

ership and, once conflict escalated, activists on the ground. Insofar as this was a 'UDF revolt', it was because it coincided with and was perhaps in part inspired by actions in other parts of the country, not because of any direct organisational or even ideological link.

The second case-study in this book is of civic organisation in Kagiso on the West Rand. Van Kessel relates the story of what she calls a 'reluctant rebellion'. In Kagiso, in contrast to Sekhukuneland, organisation predated the formation of the UDF and the outbreak of revolt. The local civic had been formed in 1981, primarily through the efforts of young activists who had experienced the events of 1976 but thereafter linked up with older residents. The civic campaigned actively over local civic issues (especially rent increases) between 1981 and 1983, but then lapsed into quiescence. Indeed, the township's residents remained conspicuously ambivalent about protest even when some local leaders sought to draw Kagiso into the burgeoning township revolt. It took brutal repression on the state's part, together with good tactical judgement among civic leadership, to weld the township into a cohesive political and moral community. From late 1985 through mid-1986 Kagiso was the site of strong consumer, bus and school boycotts, as well as what were often called 'people's courts'. A further intensification of repression, including the widespread detention of activists, eventually led to the demobilisation of popular resistance.

Van Kessel's final case-study is of the community newspaper, *Grassroots*. *Grassroots* also preceded the UDF, having been launched in 1980. As the first radical newspaper since the 1950s, *Grassroots* pioneered the media strategy that was to be carried forward by newspapers and newsletters across the country. It operated with the objective of developing and radicalising popular political consciousness. People were encouraged to identify links between their immediate, local grievances and the broader issue of political

change, as well as (in racially-divided Cape Town) to go beyond racial identity and hostility. The paper was funded from abroad, with the ANC's blessing.

*Grassroots* initially avoided a high political profile, concentrating instead on local issues. After the formation of the UDF in 1983, *Grassroots* dedicated more space to national political issues, enthusiastically promoting the UDF. Later, it became little more than a mouthpiece for the UDF. Van Kessel relates how the paper failed both to understand and to respond to pressing local political issues. Instead, it degenerated into an uncritical advocacy of tactics that aroused local opposition and hence provoked division (including especially consumer and school boycotts). Whatever success it had had in the early 1980s, *Grassroots* marginalised itself later in the decade. As van Kessel writes:

*Grassroots* was far too militant and ideologically outspoken to appeal to an essentially conservative, church-going colored public. Like the youth movement in the Northern Transvaal, the newspaper was not only fighting the apartheid state or the capitalists. It was as much a platform for young colored intellectuals who contested the authority of the conservative forces within the colored community, such as the churches and the educational establishment. Although it advocated community empowerment and worker leadership, the paper, in fact, represented the newfound identity of students and graduates who asserted their place among the forces of change (286).

In each of these three case-studies, van Kessel shows how a core of activists, linked to the ANC but with divergent strategic approaches, sought to build a popular movement to fight for political change. In each case they enjoyed mixed success. In Sekhukuneland, a youth movement grew rapidly, but failed to draw in older residents or build disciplined organisation. Indeed, the militancy of the youth, especially with respect to witch burning, alienated many older people and provoked a conservative reaction. In Kagiso, state repression

succeeded where activists initially failed in pushing the township's residents to close ranks and defy actively the state. But in this case also, the organisational basis of resistance proved weak, and the intensification of repression in mid-1986 led to a period of quiescence. *Grassroots* initially played a major role in building organisation and radicalising political consciousness, but its shift to uncompromising political advocacy undermined its appeal. In the cases of Kagiso and *Grassroots*, van Kessel shows that the struggle was as much one between activists, over strategy and tactics, as between activists and the state.

Using extensively both original interview material and documentation, van Kessel provides richly textured accounts of local politics in the 1980s (focusing especially on the 1985-96 period). Except for the first, background chapter, she says little about the UDF as a set of national and provincial structures, i.e. as a narrowly-defined organisation. Instead, she treats the UDF as a broad-based 'social movement', and examines three examples of the UDF's affiliates. In my own book on the UDF, I focus primarily on the UDF as a set of co-ordinating structures and do not discuss its affiliates in any detail. In this sense my own book views the UDF as a political organisation from above, whilst van Kessel's examines it (as she herself puts it) as 'a social movement from below' (9). Our studies are thus complementary; where they overlap, it seems that we are generally in agreement. This is not entirely surprising, as she had seen drafts of much of my book and I had read (and cited) her doctoral thesis.

I remain, however, uneasy about van Kessel's broad use of the label 'the UDF' to encompass the entire broader movement of aligned organisations. I argue in my own study that the UDF should not be regarded as coterminous with the entire Charterist (or ANC-aligned) movement inside the country; increasingly, large sections of the latter were opposed to the UDF as a specific set of structures and leaders. This was in part due, I argue, to

the fact that the UDF was in general associated with specific strategic emphases. My approach is not without its problems; van Kessel's case-studies warn against generalising too readily about the relationship between political alignment and strategic position. But there are clear problems with treating the UDF as, primarily, a broad movement (whether 'social', 'popular' or something else again). Van Kessel herself repeatedly refers to the UDF as something more specific than a movement. For example, in writing that *Grassroots* became a mouthpiece for the UDF she presumably is referring to the provincial UDF leadership in particular. She writes that the UDF played integrative and ideological roles (302). In the case of Sekhununeland, not only did the UDF 'not develop into a broad-based social movement' (79) but also, she reports, 'quite a few' of the people she interviewed 'had never heard of the UDF' (141).

To some extent this is a semantic difference, and one that neither needs to be nor can be resolved. It does, however, direct our attention at the relationship between struggles at the national and provincial levels on the one hand, and those at the local level on the other. The choice of labels is less interesting than the actual relationships between different groups or levels of organisation. Van Kessel describes the relationship between local and national struggles as the 'missing link' in the existing literature. She suggests that probing this link is one of the two respects in which her study goes beyond the existing literature (the other issue being the importance of morality and symbolism in the struggle). She seeks to use her case-studies to show what general political developments mean at the local level, and how national and provincial struggles looked like when viewed through local prisms. In doing this, she persuasively argues that local politics concerned not just the 'struggle' (i.e. the apartheid state versus the people) but also diverse 'struggles behind the struggle' (11), whether factional, generational or something else again. Van Kessel writes:

In addition to the overall struggle against apartheid and for a more just socioeconomic order, other agendas as well were pursued on the micro level. Situations of near anarchy or power vacuum allow for a shift in power relations, often best visible at a local level. A common feature of many wars of liberation was the -- mostly temporary -- rise in status of previously fairly powerless groups such as women, youth, or the poor. The anti-apartheid struggle was not a classic war of liberation, but the phase of popular mobilization in the mid-1980s shared some of these features. The young men and boys, who were the most visible actors in the battles of the 1980s, were no doubt motivated by anger against the oppressive and humiliating condition of apartheid. But they were also contesting patterns of authority within African society, they were in search of adventure and excitement, and they formed competing bands in the battle for control over territory, resources, and girlfriends." (11)

Whilst van Kessel is surely correct to point to gaps in our understanding of the relationship between national and local struggles, this relationship has not been entirely neglected in the literature. There is actually quite a substantial existing literature on local politics in the 1980s that grapples with the same or similar questions. Much of this work (including my own) sought to counter the interpretation put out by the National Party government and argued by the prosecution in a series of treason trials, i.e. that protests across the country were an essentially orchestrated attempt at revolution, directed by a discrete group of conspirators based in the UDF leadership, on behalf of the exiled ANC. The alternative view was that the revolt was locally-based, driven by discontent with material conditions (and perhaps conditions in schools, although school students were left largely unstudied). Politically-conscious activists at the local level provided necessary leadership and direction but, according to this view, their

roles fell far short of the instigation portrayed by the prosecution in treason trials.

Studies in this broad tradition include my own work on what is now Gauteng (including Kagiso) and the northern Free State; Mark Swilling's early work on the East Rand and East London as well as his later thesis on Uitenhage, Glenn Adler's study of Uitenhage; Charles Carter's thesis on Alexandra; and a number of honours dissertations on different parts of the country. More recent studies of the Eastern Cape in the 1980s -- including Janet Cherry's work on Port Elizabeth and Mike Tetelman's thesis on Cradock (even though it stops in 1985) -- also highlight the remarkable localism of urban protest (where 'localism' is certainly not meant to imply parochialism). Van Kessel's work on the Northern Transvaal overlaps with Peter Delius's book, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle*. Other studies explicitly focus on 'struggles within the struggle'. Outstanding among these is surely Josette Cole's book on Crossroads. A series of studies in the 1990s focused on the so-called 'youth' -- including books by Straker and myself as well as Lungisile Ntsebeza's excellent but unpublished study of youth in East London.

For sure, most of these studies do flit over the precise links between national and local politics. They are much stronger on the conditions which favoured radical political leadership than on that leadership itself. Studies such as Carter's (of youth activists in Alexandra) provide important windows into the activities and lives of some groups of local activists. Several studies document cases where, in the absence of any powerful local impetus to protest, political interventions by nationally-oriented leaders or activists were ineffective or even counter-productive at the local level. But studies generally avoid examining closely those organisations which most clearly linked local struggles with national liberation: the ANC underground, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the university-based Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO), the South African

Youth Congress (SAYCO) and the Area Committees of the UDF itself.

There are indeed clear gaps in this literature, but it is not clear to me that van Kessel takes us far beyond the existing literature. This is partly a substantive issue, in that van Kessel does not shed much more light than do preceding studies on the thinking, strategies and organisation of nationally-oriented activists at the local level. More importantly, however, it is also a presentational issue. Van Kessel seems to be uncomfortable with and thus tends to eschew explicit analysis and comparison. By downplaying the existing literature, she does not make it easy for the reader to discern accurately just where she is breaking new ground. By steering away from direct comparison, she blunts her own analysis. Her accounts of struggle in different parts of the country are fascinating, but the analysis is not obviously path-breaking.

It would be misleading, however, to conclude a review of *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams* on such a critical note. The book is full of rich description and keen insights. The three case-studies are more thorough and detailed than most existing case-studies. The emphases on social division - whether generational, between villages, or along racial or class lines - and on the moral dimensions of the struggle will surely encourage further exploration. It is a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of the making of the democratic South Africa.

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