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Friends for a Purpose: South Africa's UDF as a Model for the Environmental Movement

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Abstract: Multiple serious threats face Earth as a home hospitable to the human race and the myriad species that inhabit this planet. Nine of these are named in the 2009 “Planetary Boundaries” theory of Rockström et al. Pope Francis discusses many of these threats in his highly spiritual, accessible, groundbreaking 2015 environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*. In the encyclical, Pope Francis calls for political action to pressurise governments to legislate and enforce sound environmental policies. Such action to limit environmental degradation entails sustained strategic citizen mobilisation at national, regional and municipal levels.

In this paper I maintain that the United Democratic Front (UDF), which contributed to the toppling of apartheid in South Africa in 1992, might serve as a model for such multi-level sustained strategic citizen mobilisation. What I dub the “United Environmental Front” should involve every citizen of planet Earth, and operate internationally, regionally, nationally and locally. Alliances of concerned citizens should challenge the hegemony of vested political and economic interests which pollute, strip landscapes, dump radioactivity, contribute to global climate change, etc.

Having undergone a personal conversion, activists will educate others to avoid ecologically harmful lifestyles. Shouldn't people in religious life be at the forefront of this global and intergenerational solidarity?

Keywords: Environment, UDF, South Africa, *Laudato Si'*, activism

Introduction

South Africa (hereafter, SA) had a history of alliances to topple apartheid. For instance, the multiracial Congress Alliance was founded in the 1950's and included the SAIC - the SA Indian Congress - founded in 1924, (of which Mahatma Ghandi was an important member).¹ The Congress Alliance led to the writing of the Freedom Charter in 1955. A larger political tripartite "strategic alliance" was forged later between the African National Congress, the SA Communist Party and the Congress of SA Trades Unions. This alliance persists till this day in SA parliamentary politics, preventing the communists and largest trade unions from effectively challenging the policies and candidates of the ruling party.

1. The United Democratic Front

Arguably the most effective of the alliances to challenge apartheid was the United Democratic Front (UDF), launched in 1983 in opposition to P.W. Botha's proposed changed constitution and tricameral parliamentary system. This was designed specifically to co-opt "Indian" and "Coloured" minorities to prop up SA's faltering apartheid government. The tricameral parliament was mere window-dressing. It offered no executive powers to the House of Representatives ("Coloureds") or House of Delegates ("Indians"). The purpose was to keep the majority Black population disenfranchised with no share of power in SA.

The UDF brought together members well over five hundred anti-apartheid groups, civic, student, political, labour, and ecclesiastical movements. Based on non-racial principles, the UDF brought under one umbrella members of “Black, White, Coloured and Indian” organisations.²

The front operated countrywide, incorporating movements from all the ethnic groups scattered around the country. The UDF brought together people who did not have a natural affinity to each other, e.g.

- White madams of the Black Sash movement who were initially and primarily concerned for their domestic servants’ welfare.
- Congress of South African Trade Unions - an umbrella body of mostly “black” (meaning everybody not identified as “white”) trade unions.
- Conscientious Objectors: End Conscription Campaign - young white men who refused to do four years of military national service. Many of the members of the ECC were labelled “homosexuals” – in those days a grave insult – because they were either pacifists or strongly objected to SA’s military adventures in the neighbouring states and in the townships of the country
- Black student activists, members of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) at secondary and tertiary level, protesting the scandalous apartheid educational system

Yet participating together in the struggle for democracy, calling one another “comrade,” and learning about and undergoing the trials and persecutions meted out by the apartheid government helped people to forge friendships and understanding despite their vastly disparate backgrounds.

2. Reason for Such a Front: Apartheid as a Totalitarian Ideology

Why was there a need for such a broad front? As an ideology, apartheid touched every dimension of SA life, segregating people from birth to the grave. Opposition to apartheid was equally needed at every level of SA society. The grand vision of apartheid was of keeping Members of the racial groups completely separate and affording them (read: “whites,” and particularly Afrikaner whites, descended from Dutch colonialists) “separate development.” The strategy was to “other” – i.e. alienate – members of different racial groups to the extent that they believed in the need and the logic of apartheid. With its accession to power of the Nationalist Party in 1948, a whole raft of legislations was enacted to entrench white domination of the economy, codifying what had existed in many instances since the British colonial period, and from 1910 when the Union of SA became independent from Britain.

With the Immorality Act (1950) and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), (sexual) relationships were prohibited across colour lines. The Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953) assigned different amenities to different “communities” - e.g. municipal facilities like benches, buses, libraries, swimming pools, beaches; provincial facilities like hospitals, schools; and national facilities like post offices, universities, etc. The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act (1971) assigned different parcels of the country to different Bantu tribes. These were tiny tracts of land like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle which amounted to a fraction of the country, and were intended to deprive Bantu people of the natural richness of the land. Four of the tribal “homelands” took so-called “independence” (Transkei, Ciskei, Venda and Bophutatswana) and became separate “states” with their own laws, borders, passports, citizens, etc. and diplomatic representation in SA - the only country in the world that recognised them. The

homelands policy was designed to deny SA citizenship to the Black majority. The Bantu Education Act (1953) was enacted to provide inferior education to keep black people as hewers of wood and drawers of water - so that they would never be suitably qualified to participate as significant wage earners in SA's rapidly industrialising economy. Indian and Coloured schools and universities were allocated considerably less funds per student than white schools. White universities were world-class and black universities were no more than overpopulated "bush colleges" - some of which, however, contributed to the education of famous leaders like Nelson Mandela, Robert Mugabe, Steven Biko, etc.³

Each race was to have its own space and facilities, and there was no need for any group to mix socially or politically with another. The lie, of course, was that the white economy was completely dependent on the labour input of every other race. And so the government created labour pools within commuting distance of each white urban centre. There were Black, Coloured and Indian townships "out of sight, and out of mind" of the white suburbs, and further afield were the so-called homelands, enormous impoverished labour reserves, from which labourers were allowed to come to service the white economy - provided they had the right stamps in their "pass book."

3. UDF's Achievements

The UDF co-ordinated rallies, marches, political protests, student unrest, intellectual ferment - all around SA and abroad. Through its various labour union branches, it organised mass action for improved working conditions and remuneration. This was widely supported by other branches of the UDF. The front argued for disinvestment and sanctions, thereby contributing to the growing international isolation of SA.⁴ The UDF challenged apartheid education, health, economy,

job reservation, etc. to the point where the President P.W. Botha believed there was a “total onslaught” against white domination. He met this with his brutal “total strategy,” bringing the army into the townships to suppress any protests. Students were arrested, children were killed, activists were detained without trial, tortured, “disappeared.” Spies were deployed everywhere. Against enormous opposition, the UDF continued its activities, eroding the legitimacy and gradually wearing down the resolve of the SA government. On 2 February 1990, the political parties were unbanned, some political prisoners were released, some exiles were permitted to return, the State of Emergency was partially lifted, executions were suspended, and restrictions on the UDF were lifted. This created a climate in which, negotiations could be held for a new constitution, and ultimately democratic elections could be held with universal franchise on 14 April 1994. After that, the UDF naturally disbanded. The political landscape had obviously changed over the decade of the UDF’s existence. Having come together from very disparate backgrounds into a single struggle, many comrades in arms found common ground to continue their journey towards greater justice, equality and freedom, even in the new democratic dispensation.

4. Environmental Threats

There are multiple serious threats to the wellbeing of every person on this planet, and to the survival of the human species.⁵ “Planetary boundary” theory outlines nine threats to human existence on the planet. The theory shows that everything is interconnected. Our planet is not a collection of disparate cycles. But rather it is an “earth system.” Interfering with any set of factors may tip our planet beyond the point at which it can support human life. The 2015 version of this research lists these factors as: climate change, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmospheric aerosol loading, ocean acidification, freshwater use, biogeochemical flows, land-system change,

biosphere integrity and novel entities.⁶ Trained as a chemist, Pope Francis deals with five of these threats in his groundbreaking encyclical *Laudato Si'* (LS).⁷ But I argue that he barely scratches the surface of the environmental threats facing human life on the planet.

The welfare of every citizen, and our descendants for generations to come is threatened by these ecological factors. To face such threats will require concerted effort from every member of every layer of human society if our species is to survive. Francis is aware that the environmental threats are global in their scope. Thus he makes a break from previous encyclicals and teachings of the church which are addressed to Catholics or to “all men and women of good will.” He breaks out of traditional partisan teaching, and writes “I would like to enter into dialogue with *all people* about our common home.”⁸ In his section on “justice between the generations”⁹ he urges cross-generational solidarity – to the point of befriending the generations that are yet to come, and preserving a home on Earth for them.¹⁰

Francis writes that we need to wean ourselves from our “throwaway culture.”¹¹ To do this, we must think of the origin and destination of everything we buy, including every piece of packaging and the rubbish we generate. We need to participate in climate demonstrations, such as are taking place around the planet. We need to disinvest and call for disinvestment from fossil fuel companies – no matter the cost and inconvenience to us. We need to expose the lies and hypocrisy of industrialists, and also be prepared to have our own moral compromises exposed. We need to educate our children and all adults about the harmful effects of our transport and fuel choices. We need to begin to invest heavily in more renewable sources of energy. We need to block the further development of nanoparticles if no environmental impact study has been done on them – even

if our brothers and sisters, our spouses and uncles are involved in these industries.

LS is not just a pious reflection on our common home, with a touch of St Francis Assisi to make us feel good. It is a battle cry to save our planet. To heed the call, every person needs to be involved. It is commendable to pressurise governments to carry out their responsibilities towards the environment. Pope Francis writes:

We cannot fail to praise the commitment of international agencies and civil society organizations which draw public attention to these issues and offer critical cooperation, employing legitimate means of pressure, to ensure that each government carries out its proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve its country's environment and natural resources, without capitulating to spurious local or international interests.¹²

While this is a very good place to start, environmental activism is not just about cleaning up the local river or sidewalk. Francis is clear that it involves political and strategic mobilisation at the national, regional and municipal levels. *Laudato Si'* tells us:

Because the enforcement of laws is at times inadequate due to corruption, public pressure has to be exerted in order to bring about decisive political action. Society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls. Unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment.¹³

Francis does not condemn governments for placing their priorities on short-term, visible projects, which bring returns within the immediate election cycle – particularly when resources are limited. Rather with a dose of realism, he writes:

“Results take time and demand immediate outlays which may not produce tangible effects within any one government’s term. That is why, in the absence of pressure from the public and from civic institutions, political authorities will always be reluctant to intervene, all the more when urgent needs must be met.”¹⁴

5. A Similar United Front is Required for the Ecological Challenge

It is no exaggeration, thus, to say that Pope Francis is calling for a co-ordinated approach to environmental threats along the lines of the UDF – not just groups of “environmental” activists, but every citizen of Planet Earth.¹⁵ The breadth of the environmental threats calls for a worldwide “UEF” – a United Environmental Front. There are world-wide networks and alliances of activists challenging the hegemony of vested political and economic interests which strip our forests bare, which pump pollutants into our air, water and land, which extract minerals and fossil fuels as though there were no tomorrow, leaking chemical by-products and fossil fuels in precious water reserves, which produce radioactive waste and dump it in Africa, which develop nanotechnology with no thought for its environmental impact, etc. Similar to the strategies of the UDF, these networks need education to enhance our personal conversion.¹⁶ They need to promote intellectual ferment, so that other ways of problem solving and new models of development might be conceived. These networks will thrive with some kind of co-ordination at grassroots level. We need to disinvest funds from all kinds of environmental demons. We will see larger and more intense protests, marches and demonstrations. Ultimately it is conceivable that this might lead to civil disobedience and occasional acts of industrial sabotage.

For people in religious life, environmental advocacy must become a constitutive dimension of all our ministries. We should discover all sorts of new friends: Jesuits should learn from Franciscan tradition. Men must sit at the feet of women theologians who are at the forefront of Christian environmental concerns.¹⁷ Christians can take a leaf out of Buddhists' behaviour with their "tread lightly" philosophy. People "in the world" would benefit from the wisdom of monastic movements and live more in tune with natural cycles. Theologians can learn from agriculturalists so that our speculation is not in some ethereal beyond, but rooted in the vital concerns of everyday life.

The trouble with living in emerging economies like India and Africa is that our compatriots have such high aspirations. Everybody wants to live the capitalist dream, ignoring that this is a distorted, unsustainable model of development. Telling people that this lifestyle is neither possible nor desirable is a sure way to "lose friends and influence over people."¹⁸ As we lose friends, we form new friendships and alliances, collaborating with like-minded people, including people who are not-so completely different to ourselves – even those on other ends of the planet.¹⁹

Notes

1. About 152,000 Indians arrived in SA from 1860 to 1911 to work mainly in the sugar fields of Natal, as indentured labourers (a sanitised version of slavery). See Pdraig O'Malley "The Indian Community in SA" - <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v02424/041v03370/051v03414.htm> .
2. These are the four largest race groups identified under apartheid. At one time, the classification included Griquas, San, etc. (e.g. Japanese were regarded as 'honorary whites.' Yet Chinese were in a group of their own.)

3. I have no wish to disparage the dedicated and (in some cases) highly qualified academics who taught there, selflessly committed to providing black students the best education they possibly could.
4. Jawahrlal Nehru led international isolation of SA because of its apartheid policies when he opened the discussions that finally saw the expulsion of SA from the Commonwealth in 1961.
5. See Johan Rockström, et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Ecology and Society*, 14, no. 2 (2009).
6. like nanoparticles and radioactivity.
7. Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si’ on the Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: 2015).
8. Ibid., 3. Italics mine.
9. Ibid., 159-162.
10. In LS 53, Francis specifically picks up on the UN’s notion of sustainability which implies that the present generation not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. See United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oslo: 1987), 27. He has a great ally in the Brundtland Report which decries that “We borrow environmental capital from future generations with no intention or prospect of repaying.” See *ibid.*, 25. This is not original to Pope Francis in Catholic Social Teaching. In his annual peace message for 2010 Pope Benedict quotes the concept of intergenerational solidarity from his predecessors John Paul II and Paul VI. See Benedict XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, Message for World Day of Peace (Vatican City: 1 January 2010), 8.
11. See Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 20-22.
12. *Laudato Si’* 38.
13. *Laudato Si’* 179.
14. *Laudato Si’* 181.
15. Particularly the most powerful - businesspeople who can make the difference to the way industry is conducted. But the likeli-

hood is that they will be the last to act - having such strong investments in the current way of conducting business. A case in point is the 2015 disclosure of industrial-scale cheating on Nitrous Oxide emission results on diesel vehicles manufactured by Volkswagen. There is no doubt in my mind that this is not reserved to one German motor manufacturer, but it betrays industry-wide deception to get around inconvenient legislation designed to protect the environment from nitrous oxides. These carcinogenic air pollutants are particularly virulent contributors to the greenhouse effect.

16. For a very accessible online textbook go to the Jesuits' Healing Earth: <http://healingearth.ijep.net/>.
17. Pioneering 'ecofeminists' like Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie Me Fague and Evone Gebara come to mind.
18. As opposed to Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).
19. There are many global networks such as Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM), AVAAZ and 350.org which enhance the sense that we are all citizens of one world, with common concerns and a united voice. Visit <https://avaaz.org> and www.350.org and <https://catholicclimatemovement.global/>.

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