

# UDF 40-YEAR ANNIVERSARY NATIONAL CELEBRATION

**SUNDAY 20TH AUGUST 2023**  
**JOHANNESBURG CITY HALL | 13:00 - 17:00**

## OUR CURRENT GENERATION | REKGOTSOFETSE CHIKANE

From Protest to Challenge; Mobilisation to Organisation; From a First to a Second Republic

On the 21st of October 2015, I was part of a moment that made me realise that change in our country is inevitable. But the question that struck me was whether this inevitable change should be led and fueled by those who have a belief in human dignity and democratic responsibility to your fellow citizen, or whether it would be led by those who wish to make the country their own personal bank account.

I stood amongst thousands of students, across race and class, gender and ethnicity who had gathered in front of the gates of parliament under the collective belief that something was broken in our Republic. We gathered in front of a building of a fully seated parliament, demanding a refund on the dream that was sold to our parents in 1994. A dream that many of you in this room sold to your family, your partners, your friends and your colleagues. A dream that you sold to the world.

A dream of a democratic South Africa that was characterised by non-racialism and non-sexism. A dream that regardless of your socio-economic class, that you would no longer be arbitrarily discriminated against. You sold and were sold a constitution that enshrined that a belief that our country would be founded on values of Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms. You sold and were sold a dream that your children would never have to experience the harms of the Apartheid regime. That your children would be equally entitled to the rights, privileges and benefits protected by the supreme law of our first Republic, The Constitution.

Yet there we stood. In front of parliament. Arms linked; hearts bound. Your children demanding for a refund on what was sold to you, and what you sold to the country.

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spirit of active citizenry  
for transformation and  
accountability.**



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I don't wish to belittle the efforts and sacrifices that many of you in this room made throughout your lives to bring us the freedoms that I am allowed to enjoy today. I don't wish to diminish the lives that were lost in the fight against Apartheid, many of which were your friends and family.

What I do wish to tell you today, is that there is revolutionary politics being formed by my generation. A growing unrest with what we have experienced over the last 30 years and what we believe we will continue to experience for the next 30 years if nothing is fundamentally changed. We have a growing belief that something is broken our country.

I am here to tell you that the success of whatever declaration that is created today, is wholly dependent on those in this room understanding that something is fundamentally flawed in our democracy. That a change to this flawed democracy, is dependent on the adoption of political consciousness that is willing to imagine, demand and create...A Second Republic.

I have been told, since 1999, at the age of 7...that we are the most unequal country in the world a record we still hold till today. I am part of a generation that has never experienced the promised sense of justice from Truth and Reconciliation. I am a generation that has experienced the normalisation of afrophobic violence. I am part of a generation that has experienced the normalisation rape culture. I live in a country were a rape takes place every 3 hours. I am part of generation that has witnessed the death of Andries Tatane and the miners of Marikana at the hands of the police meant to protect us.

I live in a generation that has begun to fully comprehend that if you are born into poverty. You will die in poverty in this country. Over the last twenty years of my fairly young life, I have witnessed unemployment amongst young people, predominately black, rise from 35% in 2003 to over 50% in 2023. We live in a country where the expansion of social protection, access to housing, education and healthcare, hasn't even begun to dent the intergenerational and cyclical nature of inequality experienced by the black child. A country where 2/3s of black children live under the poverty line while only 2% of white children do. We live in a country that if you are white or amongst the business and political elite, that you can experience the privilege of being born. Whilst everyone else remains born into bondage.

I am of the firm belief if we were to place our constitution, our political representatives and leaders, and those in economic power in front of a court represented by the 6 million young not employed, in education, or any form of training...I believe this court would find all these individuals and institutions guilty of creating a lost generation.

A revolutionary changed is beckoning in this country. A revolutionary change that is being precipitated by the growing realisation that even though my generation never experienced apartheid, that democratic South Africa bares an eerie resemblance to it.

On August 20th, 1983, many of you gathered at the Rocklands Civic Centre in Mitchells Plain in response to the atrocities perpetuated by the apartheid state. My father, who is in this room today, declared on that day that the gathering in Mitchells Plain would be a turning point in the struggle for freedom.

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So I am hoping that today, that those who have gathered, have done so under a similar belief and spirit. That your active citizenry for changing this country, will be reflective of the moment in 1983 and that of 1985, rather than 1991.

Throughout the 1980's the UDF had three distinctive characteristics. The first was that you were initially reactive to politics. In the face of the apartheid discrimination and laws, hundreds of organisations representing thousands of South Africans would react to decisions made by the regime with a level disgust and a belief that creating a better South Africa could only be done by those on the ground.

Secondly, the UDF altered its motives and operations to embrace the logic of community struggle. It seems to me that you realised that without returning to your communities that the struggle would be non-existent. You wanted to transform mass mobilisation that was the result of the upsurge of reactive politics in communities into a form of active citizenry. Active participation in the struggle. You sought to move protest to challenge. Mobilisation to organisation. For you in the room, community struggle was meant to signify a return to people's power.

The consolidated effort made by many in this room during the early years of the UDF led to its third characteristic...

You made the country ungovernable.

You realised that the centre could no longer hold. That the status quo of the country was an unacceptable state of existence. And in order to change the status quo, you could no longer adhere to the logic of the country at the time. You sought to force change and you evolved from reactive politics to community struggle, and eventually to ungovernability.

So the question I must ask today, is whether you are willing to do the same again? Or whether you will choose to make the same decision in 2023, that you made in 1991. To unite with the ANC and seek to change and alter the movement from within.

I think this is a strategic and categorical mistake.

Your current proposed approach to active citizenry is based on the logic of holding those in power accountable to their actions. But if our political system is fundamentally flawed, then trying to hold those in power accountable becomes fruitless exercise. What makes this situation worse, is that those who are in power are you friends and colleagues. Many of them, you used to fight alongside. I have heard many of you over the years lament, that the ANC has changed into something you no longer recognise. Many of you have looked on in despair at the fall of organisation that use to represent the ideals of people's power. The ANC has become marred in political patronage, corruption, ineptitude, and when I hear many of you speak, I deeply feel your disappointment with the current state of the ruling party and its impact on the dignity of South African's. But I am very surprised at your disappointment.

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For me, and for many young people, this ANC doesn't surprise. It is exactly what I have grown up with. It is what it is.

Our response as young people, for at least the last twenty years, to the ineptitude of the state, our legislature, and all our political parties not just the ANC has been to embark upon renewed and reinvigorated reactive politics. We have made this country the protest capital of the world. Protest activities have been characterised by:

- A rejection of the status quo of this country,
- Our reassertion for the need to change this country and return it to respecting the ideals of protecting human dignity
- And reclamation of our democratic identity that formal politics has taken away from our citizens

As we speak here today, many of you wish to use the current political systems and its mechanisms for public participation as a means to change the country. I am here to tell you that that probably won't work. Outside of our democratic elections, public participation in our country is incongruent with the political culture of our political parties. Political parties in South Africa, outside of elections, are not incentivised to listen to citizens. Political representatives, between elections, are only incentivised to listen to their political parties. And when our political parties no longer fear citizens and instead viewed them as simple sheep to be herded or a nuisance that needs to be catered for. That means that our democratic system has stripped the people of their power.

So when I hear that UDF40 seeks to participate in formal politics. That you are seemingly seeking to broker an elite compact with those in power. It makes me uneasy. I agree with you that there is a need to shift away from arm-chair and social media activism. But unfortunately, it seems to be at least that you are dangerously moving towards a politics centred on the business of statements and open letters shared within WhatsApp groups filled with your friends, colleagues, comrades and fellow stalwarts. It is the kind of politics that your generation seems to have become a bit too comfortable with. That somehow statements, open letters or even being the guest speaker to events and discussions will somehow change the crisis that South Africa faces.

So while your generation seems to be concerned with efforts to fight and point fingers at each other. My generation seeks to save what is left of a country that has been gutted and pillaged by the very same generation that brought it freedom.

My generation no longer has the time to wait for the creation of an elite compact. It is becoming increasingly clear that political power, whether through an outright majority or coalitions, is ineffective at creating substantive change to the legacy of colonialism, the legacy of apartheid and what I believe is now 30 years of governmental failures, ineptitude, greed, cronyism, and perverse systems of political patronage.

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We are looking beyond formal politics. We are looking beyond trying to envisage ourselves as some form of blue-chip civil society. We are looking for alternative forms of political engagement. While many in this room are seeking for a political compact with those in power to hold them accountable, we are moving to our own stage of community struggle.

In similar way that to the UDF, young South African's are now beginning to shift protest into challenge. We are seeking to shift mobilisation into organisation. So the question that I must pose to everyone in this room: Are you willing to embrace the politics of ungovernability as a means of returning power to the people.

This question might make you feel nervous. It might give you a sense of trepidation. But our country, is slowly becoming ungovernable regardless of how you feel about it. The cracks are showing. The creation of a lost generation has fast tracked the inevitable explosion that will take place in this country.

You cannot create a generation of young people stuck in poverty, inequality, unemployment and ravaged by gender-based violence and then expect this generation, to magically be ready to participate in democratic South Africa and be ready to carry the country forward once we figure out how to hold political officials accountable.

I am my father's son. So I would never call on for a violent revolt. In a country where our police are more than capable of killing 34 innocent striking mineworkers on a hilltop in the North-West province or killing an activist in the streets of Joburg. Shooting students nine times in back from point blank range. In a country where certain political parties will gleefully sing songs about killing white Afrikaners under the guise that the song is of cultural and historical significance. In a country where we burn foreigners for the supposed crime of being foreign. In a country where not a single female does not think about whether today is the day that they are raped. We live in a country where whistleblowers are killed in front of their homes and in front of their children. A country where political assassinations have become the norm within our political discourse. Violent revolt would be catastrophic in our country.

My call for making the country ungovernable, is not to embrace violence and chaos. But it is based on my firm belief that it is the only way for us to begin imagining a Second Republic. A complete reassessment of our political system. A complete reassessment of our electoral system. An overhaul of the influence of money in politics. A renewed interrogation of business power in its structural sense commonly viewed as monopoly capital and its instrumental sense, commonly understood as state capture.

We need to seriously question what it will take to change the country for the better. It is not enough to just move back into our communities to recreate structures of old. It is your responsibility to join and assist the young people who are already organising. The communities that are already demanding change. You need to lend them, not only you political voice, but your social and economic capital as well. You fought for this country once before. You have made inconceivable sacrifices. You have left your mark on this country.

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Today I am asking you to do it again. Don't just create your own movement or declaration to hang on your walls. Join those who are already doing the work. Finish the job that I believe you left behind in 1991. Don't use this moment to celebrate your legacy and to reminisce about the past. I don't believe that your story is finished.

Young people are writing a new chapter of struggle inside the book that you began to write in Rocklands Community Centre on August 20th 1983.

We are sitting on the shoulders of giants.

Don't make yourself small by embracing active citizenry focused on maintaining the status quo. South Africa belongs to all who live in it. Not just those in power who have forgotten the might and the power of the will of the people.

It was said at your opening conference that "With this faith we shall be able to speed up the day when all of South Africa's children will embrace each other and sing with the new meaning". We are not singing in Nkosi sikelele i-Afrika. In fact we have created our own national anthem because we rejected the one imposed on us. The one that reminds us that we are lost.

Our generation is finding our struggle. We are discovering our mission. And we refuse to betray it. I hope you don't betray your own legacy. Join us as we demand for a Second Republic. And join as us we start making change tot this country.

Thank you.

Rekgotsofetse Chikane

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