

SPEECH BY AZHAR CACHALIA

AT THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE THE PRESS 29/1/90

On behalf of the National Executive Committee of the United Democratic Front I bring warm greetings to this anti-censorship conference. As you are aware the UDF has, since its inception, borne the brunt of state repression. That the state has failed in its objective of destroying the UDF is testimony to the determination of our people to be free, and, to finally rid South Africa of the scourge of racial chauvinism and the political system which underpins it.

But the UDF has of course not been the only anti-apartheid formation which has been subjected to harsh repression. The media in general and the press in particular as is characteristic of all undemocratic dictatorial states became one of the apartheid regimes first targets. So the suppression of Communism Act of 1950 was used to ban the Guardian, New Age, Fighting Talk, the African Communist, World and Weekend World. Thereafter spanning four decades a myriad of draconian legislation was used to close newspapers, harass journalists and control the public's access to information. The state then sought to build its legitimacy by quite deliberately misinforming the South African public what was actually happening in our country. The effect of this was that the public, more particularly our white compatriots were left

totally uninformed and ill-equipped to deal with the challenges that face this society. Under the state of emergency even the pretence at a semblance of press freedom disappeared.

The struggle against censorship and for press freedom is therefore not an isolated struggle. It is not a struggle that should be waged only by journalists and other media workers, just as a democratic legal system should not just be the concern of lawyers alone. But it is inextricably linked with the struggle for a united, non-racial, democratic South Africa.

This is why the UDF has little hesitation in supporting the demands of your campaign. But let me hasten to add, that the struggle against censorship and for free speech is not, in my view, just a good tactical issue to broaden our base and therefore the struggle against apartheid. It is much more than this, it is a question of a struggle for a fundamental human right which in any democratic society must be guaranteed by law. Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights state:

"Every one has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers".

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which I believe are essential to the full development of ones personality and to a meaningful participation in society. They are rights which ought to be ^{let us respectfully note} universally recognised. In the preamble to the universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is recorded that:

"It is essential, if a man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and repression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law".

So we say that we seek a society which will guarantee ^{of expression to others} this freedom alongside other freedoms as fundamental human rights. This is a freedom that must be guaranteed irrespective of which political system we one day choose for ourselves - irrespective of which government is in power. And this is a fundamental freedom because the freedom that I am talking about is that freedom to think differently, and to know that this society not only tolerates this but will defend ones right to propagate these views to the bitter end.

At the same time it is important that we realise that the struggle against censorship is not only a struggle against this particularly penicuous aspect of Nationalist rule. To understand the total effect of censorship in any society we need to address the question of who controls information in a society, how information is used and what purpose it is designed to achieve.

In South Africa a privileged minority control both political and

economic life. Our media as well is largely controlled by this privileged minority. Thus the print media is controlled by a handful of privately owned corporations while the government in the main control the broadcasting. It is, as many of you would know, virtually impossible for others without access to substantial resources to make any significant inroads into these areas. One of our urgent tasks therefore is to look at how we begin to democratise both the control of and access to information. To have a right to such information when it is not accessible is just as good as having no right at all. It is not only meaningless but dishonest to say that a society guarantees all the right to an education when we know full well that the majority of our people cannot afford the most basic education. It is mischievous to say there are no food queues in South Africa when we know many in our country are forced to go without food.

It is not easy to rest political control from the arrogant and powerful and there are no simple short cuts to democracy. When we ultimately attain that society in South Africa which will guarantee all its citizens the basic rights and freedoms of organisation, speech, thought, press, movement, residence, consciousness and religion, as well as full trade union rights for all workers including the right to strike and one person one vote in free and democratic elections it will be the culmination of a hard and long struggle waged by many people. And if we want to ensure that our future government will indeed protect all these basic freedoms, it is up to us now, in the way we wage

our struggles to create the conditions which will make it impossible for any future government to retreat from this commitment. The only way we will ^{guarantee} ensure this is to ultimately ensure that at all times decision making is vested in the people and not those who simply proclaim to act in the interests of the people.

I sincerely hope that the campaign against censorship will in the course of our struggle address some of these questions. I am confident that we ^{in the process we will begin} will ~~now~~ begin to lay the basis for the creation of a truly free press which will soon be one of the crucial pillars of a post-apartheid, democratic society.

Thank you.