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SINCE February two of the most strident voices in extra-parliamentary politics have been remarkably silent.

Both the United Democratic Front and the Mass Democratic Movement have seemed content to be out of the public eye.

Their future has looked decidedly unsure as the African National Congress moves towards a consolidation of its forces

inside the country — forces that since 1983 had rallied behind a UDF and an MDM banner.

The ANC now talks of a tripartite revolutionary alliance — the ANC, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. Nowhere is the UDF or the MDM mentioned.

ANC and UDF spokesmen have stressed that there should be no debate about the future of the MDM since it was never formally constituted.

And the UDF has already come clean with a stated position regarding its future, saying most of its organisational work has been overtaken by the ANC.

UDF publicity secretary and ANC Southern Natal regional committee convenor, Mr. Lekota said the UDF had taken a decision to transform itself into a civic umbrella with all local civic associations as its affiliates.

He said civics, trade unions and the health sector among others would have to remain separate from the mainstream political organisation — the ANC — specially if the ANC became the government.

The future of the MDM, however, is less clear; some say it will remain while others say it will be overtaken by a new broad anti-apartheid front.

With the unbanning of the ANC, the argument has been that there is no need for a front within a front. However, Mr. Lekota stressed that should the ANC become part of the Constituent Assembly or even the government, it would need

UDF and MDM shift into a silent strategy

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to have organisations that would ensure it practised the democratic principles which were the basis of its existence.

"The ANC wants to remain a mass organisation and be a political party. We cannot assume that should the ANC come to power then the work of mobilising the people so that they have a direct role to play in drafting the laws of the country ends.

"People would still need to remain organised in the civic structures, the youth organisations, the trade unions and the various other organisations," Mr. Lekota said.

UDF conditions that affiliates should support the Freedom Charter would not necessarily be a pre-requisite for organisations in the new front.

An ANC official said a broad front was needed to facilitate mass action.

Nonetheless, as a new front took shape there would be no logic in maintaining the UDF or even the MDM in their present forms.

The official also anticipated the incorporation into the ANC of UDF political affiliates, such as the Johannesburg Democratic Action Committee, the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses.

For now the UDF and the MDM remain silent partners of the ANC. In the next few months, or even weeks, the transformation of the UDF will be complete and the MDM will be on a new character as a broader front of all organisations — fundamentally opposed to apartheid while not necessarily sharing the same policies as the ANC.