

RESISTANCE politics will never be the same again.

That is the simple but inescapable conclusion one has to come to when one speaks to leaders of resistance organisations about the effects of the seven-month State of Emergency.

Slowly, but steadily, leaders who were in detention or had gone underground to avoid detention are now re-emerging. The former are recovering slowly from the effects of lengthy incarceration; the latter are shedding their disguises and appearing once again in public places.

Activists of the United Democratic Front, for example, were this week cleaning out their Khotso House headquarters, still in a state of chaos after repeated police raids in the early days of the Emergency.

On the surface they are returning to "normal". Underneath that surface, important changes have taken place.

"Over the seven months of Emergency, we have devised ways and means of operating that enable us to withstand extreme repression," Transvaal general secretary Mohammed Valli, one of the few UDF leaders to escape detention, said in an interview this week.

"We have adapted our organisation and structures — and these methods will stay with us.

"The lifting of the Emergency does open up some new space for us, but only in a few areas. We will take full advantage of this and come out into the open again.

"But we won't go back to the way we were working before the State of Emergency. Next time the state clamps down on us, they'll find it much more difficult to weaken us," he said.

UDF leaders view the lifting of the Emergency as only a temporary lull in repression. Expecting another swoop at any moment, they intend being prepared to deal with it.

"We are not going to be tempted into going back to the way we operated previously," Valli said.

What does this mean in concrete terms? "Not all our work will be as public as it was before," he said.

"We will maintain a public presence — this is very important to us. But people won't necessarily know when our committees meet or even who makes up those committees."

The UDF operation will be further decentralised. Instead of activities being co-

ordinated at a national level, local structures will be set up to play this role at a regional level. The central office in Khotso House should — theoretically at least — become much less important than it has been in the past.

Transvaal education office Raymond Suttner elaborated: “Many people thought that because our head office was not operating during the Emergency, the UDF was not operating.

“But our whole style of operation had changed. We had to develop a much more disciplined way of operating.

“I wouldn't say we have emerged stronger than we were, but in some ways we are stronger because we have developed an organisation that is better able to cope with repression, which we expect to continue,” Suttner said.

Neither he nor Valli would be more explicit about the steps the UDF will take to withstand repression. But Valli quoted what he called an old wisdom: “It is more difficult to fight an enemy you can't see than one you can. This is the problem the state has now created for itself by repressing open organisation.”

During the Emergency, UDF executives — both national and regional — met regularly. Detained members were temporarily replaced from the ranks.

“At certain levels, our structures have been weakened. But they haven't succeeded in their aim of destroying us. We have recovered,” he said.

Valli believes the Emergency was intended to cripple opposition organisation and smash the popular uprising that was taking place, regaining the initiative for what he calls “puppet structures”.

“On all these counts they have lost out,” he said.

Support for the UDF has spread enormously, he said — so much so, that the national leadership cannot keep track of affiliates and supporters around the country.

At the same time, he argues, new structures have developed. He cites the emergence of street committees in the Eastern Cape and in some areas of the Transvaal in recent weeks. “There is no doubt that at the local level, we have structures that are much stronger than before the Emergency,” he said.

There are other important changes.

“Previously, the struggle was youth-led. Now the youth are just one constituent in the struggle.”

Parents are now engaging in the education crisis. More importantly, workers are now taking a more central position.

Certainly, it is clear that the UDF has developed a far closer relationship with Cosatu, the new union super-federation, than it had with its predecessor, Fosatu.

What are UDF plans in the immediate future? According to Valli, the plan of action includes a continued campaign for the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of the ANC, a campaign against "bantustan structures, particularly against KwaNdebele independence", a campaign to save the Sharpeville Six (sentenced to death for the murder of a community councillor) and a May Day campaign.

The UDF will also be gearing up for the National Education Crisis Conference at the end of March, which will decide how to deal with the end-of-the-month deadline for changes that would avert a mass school boycott.

So much for the UDF. But what about its affiliates?

A representative of the Transvaal Students Congress (Trasco), formed during the Emergency when its predecessor, Cosas, was banned, was adamant that student organisation was stronger than ever.

This was made possible by the ongoing commitment of students to organisation — even in prison.

This representative, who asked not to be named, told how student leaders had conducted their struggle from prison. Since most of the detainees were in communal cells, the leadership split up into different cells and ran discussion groups daily.

When a newspaper was acquired by the prisoners, it was read aloud in each cell and discussed in groups.

"Committees were set up to discuss matters with the students and make decisions," he said.

Communication between cells took place during washing times, meal times and when prisoners were working in the kitchen.

Communication with the outside world was maintained, among other ways, through those who were kept for the 14-day routine spell in the cells. Before short-term prisoners were released, they were thoroughly informed about the situation and encouraged to promote local student organisation on their release. They were told whom to

approach when they were released and what action to take.

The proof that organisation was strengthened, he said, was that Trasco could be formed in the middle of the Emergency, not long after the banning of Cosas.

Leaders in prison encouraged the development of local student organisations. Bodies such as the Alexandra Students Congress and the Garankuwa Students Congress emerged.

Representatives of 35 areas gathered to form Trasco in January. Now it is planning to hold its first Transvaal executive meeting next weekend to formulate a plan of action for the future.

On the agenda is a campaign for the unbanning of Cosas (T-shirts, stickers and pamphlets have already been printed) and a closer relationship with other organisations, especially trade unions.

Another UDF affiliate, the Transvaal Indian Congress, expressed a similar optimism about its post-Emergency strength.

"We cannot deny that the Emergency restricted us and our organisation," an executive member said. "We were prevented from publically campaigning and organising at a time when the whole tricameral system was falling into disrepute and we could have taken advantage of this.

"We didn't develop new forms of organisation, as others did, but our organisation did carry on functioning. The leadership met continually, activists continued their work and we maintained a high level of discipline.

"We weren't on the offensive, but we were able to defend our base," he said.

Optimistic of an active re-emergence of TIC, he said "intensified resistance" was on the agenda.

Although the Azanian People's Organisation was not as hard hit by detentions as some of the other organisations, there is also an important rethink going on in its ranks.

"We have had to make a very detailed assessment of our previous positions and approaches. Right now there is a lot of intense discussion going on about method," said Saths Cooper, national president.

There were areas where Azapo activists have had to lie low to avoid detention, and others where structures had grown stronger. Some existing branches had become defunct; but other new ones had sprung up, Cooper said.

"In the short term, we are seriously considering the merit of our previous approach to the struggle,

and whether we should not adopt a drastic new approach.

“There is a rejection of previous organisation that resulted in public demonstrations and such activity. I don’t know what form new action will take, but various options are being considered.

“We are considering the total withdrawal of participation from any sphere of activity that continues the repression and exploitation of ourselves and our people,” he said, citing rent, labour and education as areas in which boycotts could be called.

The other positive effect of the Emergency, he said, was that the “true forces of the Left” had realised the need to cooperate and this would in the longer term result in a new alliance of the “real Left”.

Whether or not the claims that these organisations have been adapted and strengthened is true will certainly be tested in coming weeks. With deadlines coming up on schools and consumer boycotts, and activists across the board predicting a tumultuous time in the next few months, the claims will be put to the test.