New York, Aug 21. One day before elections were to begin for a new "reformed" Parliament, South African Security police have swooped on the leadership of a 600 organization-strong anti-apartheid coalition spearheading a country-wide boycott of the elections. By the end of the day at least 24 executive members of the United Democratic Front were known to have been detained under the Internal Security Act, and arrests were continuing.

Shortly before the arrests, on August 19th over 3000 black and white protestors in Johannesburg and more than 6000 in Cape Town had attended UDF rallies, opposing the elections.

The South African regime has touted the new Parliament as a major reform of apartheid and the Reagan administration has welcomed its establishment as "a reason for hope for peaceful change." But the majority of Black South Africans condemn the new system for entrenching apartheid and reject the idea that this is the beginning of democracy. In fact the tri-cameral Parliament will have houses for three ethnic groups, with 178 white members, 85 colored (mixed race) members and 45 members of Asian descent, each meeting separately. Africans, 72% of the whole population, are totally excluded, on the grounds that their South African citizenship is to be replaced by citizenship of so-called independent black states called bantustans.

In New York Judge William Booth, President of the American Committee on Africa condemned the arrests, saying, "The South African regime believes it can act with impunity because of the strong support being given it by the Reagan Administration."

The UDF was launched in August last year, to work for "a single, unfragmented South Africa ... a true democracy in which all South Africans will participate." Denouncing the constitution as "yet another undemocratic constitution in the country of our birth," it called for a boycott of the elections.
The UDF has, since its inception, faced constant surveillance and harrassment by the Security police. Many activists in its member organizations have been arrested and charged for demonstrating and campaigning against the elections. But the current attack signals an intensification of repressive action aimed at the whole leadership. It is being made under legislation which allows for indefinite incommunicado detention without charge. This draconian legislation forbids access to lawyers or the outside world, and has often meant long interrogation, solitary confinement and even torture and mysterious death for those held under its authority.

Among those currently known to have been arrested are seventy-year-old Archie Gumede, one of three National UDF Presidents, Mewa Ramgobin, the Treasurer and Patrick Lekota, Publicity Secretary. Several of those arrested, including Lekota and Billy Nair, have already spent long terms of imprisonment in South Africa's maximum security jail, Robben Island.