



Wits Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib negotiates with Leigh-Ann Naidoo. Photo: Zen Marie

# WE SHALL NOT BE MOVED OR LED ASTRAY

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE 2015 STUDENT MOVEMENT

By *Leigh-Ann Naidoo*

The author is a PhD student in the school of education at Wits University and a co-convenor of the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism ([www.jwtc.org.za](http://www.jwtc.org.za)).

*Activist Leigh-Ann Naidoo offers some key thoughts from the midst of the student protests*

**H**ow does one even start telling the stories of what happened during those three weeks in October? Let me thrash out six key points to consider in reflections on the current student movement in South Africa.

### **SITUATING THE MOVEMENT**

This is not a movement that started at the University of the Witwatersrand

or that started about fees. This is a movement of student protests that has been developing for more than a decade: so think carefully when anyone or any political party wants to claim it as theirs.

Some have suggested that the 2015 #FeesMustFall protest is comparable to the 1976 student uprisings, because of the masses of students across the country that took to the streets. To my mind, it seems more appropriate to look back to 1969, the year that the South African Students Organisation (SASO) was formed. From this radical black student organisation came the politics of black consciousness,

which encouraged self-reflection and a centring of the black self as well as insisting on a Pan-African outlook. It also, in its beginning phases, critiqued the education system in South Africa and fought to improve higher education for the black student, while also developing its own organisational practices and structures and a political education programme for its members.

The last few years have seen black consciousness and Pan-Africanism re-emerging at universities through a range of student formations. The student mobilisation of 2015 started in March at the University of Cape



Town (UCT) with Rhodes Must Fall, the black-student-led movement. It spread to Rhodes University in the form of the Black Student Movement, Transform Wits at the University of the Witwatersrand, Open Stellenbosch at the University of Stellenbosch, the Black Student Stokvel at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) and, more recently, Transform Pukke at the University of the Free State (UFS) and Tuks UPrising at the University of Pretoria (UP). What we saw in the October protests were student movements from across the country linking up around key issues that they all agree on.

### **POLITICAL PARTIES CANNOT CAPTURE THE WAVE**

Political parties more broadly, and student political parties specifically, cannot capture the democratic wave of protests sweeping South Africa.

The various student movements have battled to ensure that student political parties do not lead the movement, and that people who form the movement leave their political affiliations at the door. Over and over again, I have heard students describe their inability to connect and join in the struggle together when political party regalia becomes a barrier between them. Student movements across a range of institutions have had to deal with political parties' offers of donations, from food to money to strategic guidance. Not only have movements resisted these donations but they have also started to insist that students not wear political party regalia, as this becomes yet another distraction from the critical issues at hand.

At a more organisational level, student movements have rejected the idea that they stand behind student representative councils (SRCs), who are in some way more legitimate or democratic than the movements themselves. This has to do with a disillusionment with student politics marked by dwindling numbers of voting students, turf warfare between varying parties, and the lack

of SRC response to calls from the more radicalised student movement to "decolonise" rather than "transform" the university. Student struggles are concerned with the total change of the institution and the colonial systems that it continues to maintain, such that incremental transformation could never be understood as sufficient.

The #FeesMustFall campaign was led by SRCs in many instances and there was a convergence between SRCs, the incumbent student political parties and the non-aligned student-led movement in collaboration with workers and staff. The zero-percent increase was the symbolic moment where SRCs and ANC-inclined student political parties diverged from the broader student movement. Not only is it plausible that SRCs led by ANC-aligned student leaders were toeing the party line, but it also seems that the broader question of transformation-vs-decolonisation played itself out. SRCs were too happy to grab the shallow transformative gesture of President Zuma and his government rather than push ahead for a more radical change or, as some would claim, the decolonisation of higher education such that free quality education for the poor was attained.

### **NOR CAN SRCs, SENATES AND COUNCILS**

Higher education SRCs, senates and councils are also unable to capture the emerging democratic practices and needs of the student movement.

The constitution of these bodies is part of the reason why. SRCs, because they are largely distracted by party political alliances and mandates. Senates, because they (still!?) are largely controlled by white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, educated men. Councils, because they are dominated by businesspeople and others deemed educated and skilled enough to lead a university, and yet so far from the ground that they bear some responsibility for how long the shutdown of universities continued.

The student movements' practice –

"radical praxis", I would call it – is one that speaks truth to power by demanding decolonisation and social justice as opposed to incremental change through transformation. Radical praxis also insists that all people involved in the movement share responsibility for the thinking and the doing: there is no division of labour between "leaders" who discuss, decide and communicate the strategy and "followers" who rock up for the marches and the mass meetings, following the "leadership" like silent lambs with no serious questioning.

It is a difficult task to value everyone's voice and contribution and to listen closely to all. Since 1994, we have become more and more accustomed to making an X on the ballot and leaving the rest up to representatives. We have become less and less accustomed to taking part in conversations and strategic critical thinking or various forms of principled action. Running regular mass democratic meetings with students, workers and academics requires time and patience and skill. University governance structures operating on corporate time do not relate to or understand this.

### **CRIMINALISATION OF PROTEST**

Universities under apartheid are rumoured to have had policies against allowing the police and army to come onto campuses, and when they did come, academic staff stood between students and police. And now, in 2015? Most universities called in the police as well as private security companies to deal with mostly peacefully protesting students.

University managements, under the orders of largely lily-white senates and councils, continue to waste time criminalising, victimising and, even more problematically, ignoring students. They could instead be listening, critiquing and joining the call for government to implement its own findings around free quality higher education for the poor and, more broadly, figuring out what a decolonised public >>

African university could look like.

Beyond the actual violence meted out by private security guards and police, a dozen universities wasted time and resources to secure high court interdicts against protesting students, often naming one or two – but in some cases up to eleven – poor black students and adding the nebulous “and anyone else participating in disruptive actions”. In effect, these interdicts put the police on standby to come charging in to shut down dissenting voices and critique. Violence therefore looms large on campuses where interdicts have been posted around campus.

The more sophisticated – or maybe I should rather say the “more liberal” – argument for such actions claims that they are protecting the majority of the student and staff population who do not want to disrupt the everyday business of university life. And that the disruption caused by protest actions will surely further disadvantage the same poor black students whom the protest seeks to help. Many students themselves have pointed out that private security, police and the courts are in fact the means to protect those who benefit from business as usual, those who are mostly middle-class and mostly white. This forgets that South Africa is the most unequal society on the planet: to argue for business as usual is to argue for the maintenance of an unjust status quo.

### CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE

Student movements at historically white institutions (Wits, UCT, Rhodes, Stellenbosch, UP, even the University of Johannesburg) have been challenged to recognise their privilege relative to other institutions. They have also understood the urgent need to incorporate the situation at the many historically black institutions (HBIs) into their own analysis, thinking, and plans. As the march to the Union Buildings showed, students at the HBIs have been fighting more bravely and desperately than us for years, and they have been far more violently and systematically suppressed.

Through the legacy of apartheid, some institutions are much better endowed than others. Student movements are no longer content when privileged institutions strike deals with their managements. When people tie their fate to those who are worse off, the struggle can focus on the most marginalised and oppressed.

On the subjective level, the student who can pay fees can stand with ones



**Student struggles are concerned with the total change of the institution and the colonial systems that it continues to maintain, such that incremental transformation could never be understood as sufficient**

who can't. The white students who see themselves reflected in the curriculum can stand with black students who wonder if the work of any black thinker is significant enough to merit a philosophy course of its own. The academic who earns a living wage with the outsourced worker who earns R2 500 per month, with no benefits, after 15 years of service. The academic based in an elite research institute with the department-based academic who has to fit research around a heavy teaching load.

At the structural level, the privileged white university with the historically black university of technology; the university of technology with the agricultural college; the agricultural college with the FET college; the FET college with the community college. And so on.

This move turns the tables on the

power dynamics and hierarchies that maintain our higher education system. According to Frantz Fanon – who is the main decolonisation scholar being read and put into practice – the process of decolonisation is a painful one as it undoes the system as we know it, and it does so declaring that “the last shall be first, and the first shall be last”.

### VIGILANT ENGAGEMENT

To my mind, the key lesson so far, for all of us from the 2015 student movement, is that we need to take the time to inform ourselves more about the status quo and to be more proactive so that we cannot say “we did not know” or “we knew, but we could not do anything”.

We know this is the most unequal place on the planet. We know this is a result of colonialism, and then apartheid, and now the neoliberal post-apartheid state. We have learned that sometimes the youngest, the least experienced or the least knowledgeable may indeed be the ones to start charting a new way. We also know that what is sold to us as the best constitution and the most peaceful transition to democracy may be true in their moment, but everything must remain under the critical eye of us all. Age-old struggles remain the struggles of today, even as conditions and contexts change and forms of oppressions morph before our eyes. We must struggle to remain vigilant and engaged to ensure that the small gains we will inevitably make are protected for generations to come. Racism must fall, capitalism must fall, patriarchy must fall, homophobia must fall, and apathetic uncritical citizenship must fall.

Let us hope that, as the new national student movement grows, and as it connects with the struggles of unemployed youth, high school students, communities and workers, we learn from the bravery and tenacity of this generation, supposedly “born free”, who are no longer willing or able to fit into the narrow forms of democracy that remain in South Africa. [NA](#)