



# As By Fire

## The end of the South African University

By Jonathan Jansen, Tafelberg

*Reviewed by Ben Turok*

**T**his is a devastating book which will be read at universities around the world. It analyses and explains in the clearest terms the student uprising at South African universities in 2015-6. The book is based on the experiences of Jansen as vice chancellor of the University of Free State and on interviews he conducted with eleven vice chancellors of other universities.

The analysis has a deeper significance too as it shows how a relatively small minority who were leaderless could totally disrupt an institution by intimidating the majority into silence. There was no need for political campaigning or persuasion to get broad support; intimidation was enough. This method is the reverse of the classical approach to insurrection which required theory and ideology, an organized party and mass support. Will others now try the same formula in other institutional settings?

Jansen attributes the student unrest to government's encouragements to increase student intake thus swelling numbers but at the same time reducing university subsidies from 49% in 2000 to 38% in 2014. Universities responded by increasing tuition fees from R12.2 billion in 2010 to R15.5 billion in 2012 representing an increase to institutional funding from 24% in 2000 to 33% in 2014 and students reacted strongly.

The poorest students were able to access NFAS support but the better off students could not and so it was the latter who first led the protests, at least at the historically white universities.

But Jansen shows that the fees issue was by no means the only cause of the protests. It was the sense of alienation experienced by students who came from a largely black African environment into an alien culture such as that at UCT. They were made to feel that they are different and so fell back on the defence of black identity. In an unusually candid comment Max Price is quoted as saying, "UCT has the trappings of the colonial, of the empire, and it valorizes European culture still. It doesn't do very much to make an effort to provide other role models, or to say that there are different cultures, different histories, or to make an effort to valorize the history of these black students... so for the first time they realized they were black was when they came to UCT."

The students, who are largely post-1994 "born frees," were promised freedom but now felt constrained by a largely white management and professoriat tier in an alien environment.

Nevertheless the first demonstrations were generally non-racial with a group of white students supporting the Rhodes Must Fall and similar campaigns. Jansen shows considerable sympathy for the protests at this stage and clearly made huge efforts at his university to meet with the protesters and relate to their complaints.

Things changed in 2016 when the protestors formed exclusively black groups that turned to violence. Jansen's tone changes strongly as he discusses the new turn in events, but he tries

to identify the factors behind the shift. Among these is the external political environment with Parliament in disarray, with numerous scandals exposed in the media and with the obvious loss of direction by the Zuma government. Society is generally disenchanted and a culture of impunity has emerged.

The achievements of the Mandela years are forgotten and the benefits of a democratic order seems to elude the students.

In this climate the most radical of the students come to the fore and the burning of buildings and cars became a reality. Because these groups are leaderless and keep personnel changing the disorder became unmanageable as the management was confronted by "deadly vigilantism". The language of the protestors became overtly racist and the call for "decolonization" of the universities came to predominate.

As we have seen, there were ample grounds for such arguments in the historically white universities. But decolonization was now articulated in racist terms in favour of black power.

Jansen argues that South Africa is now a constitutional democracy and that references to colonial legacies are misplaced, but he is on weak grounds here as the quote from Max Price indicates.

Finally, the trauma experienced by Jansen and the other vice chancellors comes across vividly. He complains, with some validity, that the media reports on these events rarely referred to the difficulties experienced by the management as a result of which many are now resigning. Most importantly, the universities are locked in tension, a condition wholly unsuited for learning and scholarship. [NA](#)