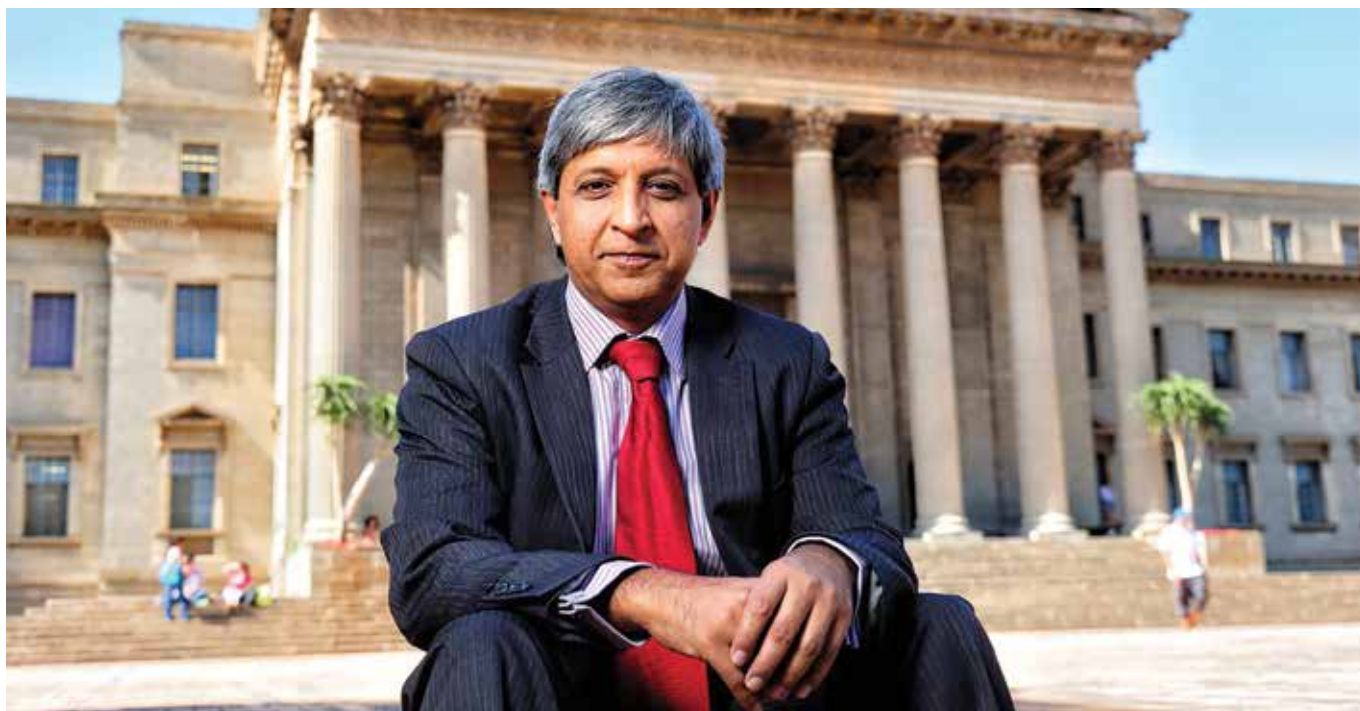

We need an honest conversation: An interview with Adam Habib

The *New Agenda* team interviewed the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, Adam Habib, following the launch of his latest book, *Rebels and Rage: Reflecting on #Fees Must Fall*.



NEW AGENDA:

Would it be correct to say that the core thesis of your book was that a legitimate student movement lost its way due to strategic, political and even moral errors. Is that a fair depiction? Would you have anything to add?

ADAM HABIB:

I think it is and I think that is a fair point. It was a legitimate movement focusing on a set of legitimate issues. It begins on issues of alienation and access. It had quick successes that

surprised us and the leaders of the movement. But it factionalised quickly after the initial successes. And certain factions picked up moral and strategic errors, and other factions were not able to stand up to that. This led to the movement losing some legitimacy. It worries me for the movement but also for the project of transformation at the university. When people write about social movements, they forget that these movements have an evolution. Progressives often love to romanticise social movements and I have been guilty of this too. But social movements

can evolve in regressive directions. People don't seem to want to see this and we need to recognise this tendency. We mustn't hide from it and must understand why it happens and how to avoid it.

NEW AGENDA:

Was the factionalism of the student movement due to opportunistic elements within it?

ADAM HABIB:

I think that is partly true, but it is not the main development. Everybody



was astonished at how quickly the student movement rooted. Everyone understood the resonance it had. We met then President Zuma two weeks before the crisis. I was having debates with other VCs and saying we are heading for an explosion. We knew this would happen but just didn't know how quickly it was going to come. Prior to our meeting with Zuma, I met a bank CEO and said: "if the universities explode you are also going to lose as you will have no graduates." When the movement exploded it also took the student leaders by surprise. Some of the other VCs blamed me for the spread because I gave the movement legitimacy and energy by spending the night with Wits students. In the book I intimate "What makes you think I didn't like that? I think this is a legitimate struggle."

Obviously, any movement has opportunists. But the real moment this movement goes wrong is with the political parties. When this movement succeeded far more than anyone imagined, the parties thought that they could use the movement for their own ends. I remember having a conversation with [then Minister of Higher Education] Blade Nzimande who thought that the ANC students had control. But [Julius] Malema [of

the Economic Freedom Fighters] also thought he had control. So all of the parties made an effort to control the movement and, in doing so, they factionalised it. Other than the ANC and EFF there were "far left" elements, remnants of WOSA [the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action], the SRWP [Socialist Revolutionary Workers' Party], NUMSA [National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa] who also thought: "this is the revolution". Each one began to make a play for the movement. The movement also gave rise to PASMA [Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania]. The PAC [Pan Africanist Congress of Azania] saw young kids using rhetoric of the PAC and so they organised quickly. All kinds of political parties swept in.

This factionalisation had real consequences. The thing people misunderstand about resurgent violence globally is that they think that social movements become violent when police are introduced. That is true, but it is only part of the story. Social movements also become violent when they factionalise. This is a global trend and the literature is showing it. The correlations are shocking. As factionalisation sets in, violence starts. Do you introduce the police after the violence starts? This is the question I

“

... social movements become violent when police are introduced. That is true, but it is only part of the story. Social movements also become violent when they factionalise.

reflect on.

NEWAGENDA:

An interesting parallel may be the yellow vests in France. It began peacefully and then suddenly turned violent.

ADAM HABIB:

Yes, and then people think "here is a social movement to claim." And the result is factionalisation and violence.

NEWAGENDA:

You have presented your narrative of the evolution of the student movement forcibly today and in your book. How has your argument been received by the broader Wits community?

ADAM HABIB:

It has been received in three very different ways. There is a first group, which is the bulk of the academics and what I call the vast silent majority of the student base, who say they identify with my narrative and are in broad agreement. They may not agree with every element but they think the overall narrative I present is true. There is a second group that is largely associated with the SRC and political parties. They are publicly critical of the way I have taken them on. They are particularly incensed that I won't apologise for >>

“

But social movements can evolve in regressive directions. People don't seem to want to see this and we need to recognise this tendency.



bringing in the police in 2016. But I have made it clear that I would do the same thing in the same circumstances because I think it was the progressive thing to do. This freaks them out. I do that recognising that police action had traumatic consequences for students and academics. Believing I had two ills, losing the institution permanently or having a lesser evil which is the fracturing of part of the community, I took the lesser evil. Ironically, when I speak to young student leaders as individuals their view changes from their public view. Many of them accepted my position but could not say so publicly as 'it would alienate us from students'. You would be amazed at how positive my personal relationships are with individual student leaders. There is an interesting discord between their public and private opinions which worries me.

The third element is the left in the academy. Here there are two groups. The

first is the broader progressive left who I think broadly identify with and support what I am saying, although they would like me to be less vocal about it and more diplomatic in the way I engage the student movement. They believe that the trick of the moment is not to be as vocal or as bold or as outspoken as I am. The second group is the far left. There is a group of them, and, I'll emphasise, they are not a coherent bloc. They come from Maoist, socialist, postmodernist backgrounds and they coalesce around a critique of my "securitisation" agenda. But I argue that they have not articulated an alternative. My worry about them is they have gotten caught in what postmodernists invariably get caught up in. They can describe "pain" but they cannot devise a strategy to transcend "pain" and transform society and institutions.

I will end with the following question: Is the broader left correct to hold the view that I should be more diplomatic? I take a slightly different view. I think that we are in a very toxic political moment, both nationally and globally. I think it is strategically dangerous to have an engagement of appeasement. I think we will land up with making the same mistake the left made with the rise of fascism in Germany or in Spain. For me, that is the real danger. What is required is explicitly raising strategic problems going forward and this is a global issue and goes beyond #FeesMustFall. It is about how we think globally as a progressive community. That is important, and we should be bold about putting this debate on the table.

NEW AGENDA:

In your book you argue that the student movement's turn to violence and racial essentialism alienated potential supporters. While you allude to it, it seems like a story is missing from the array of reflections by academics and students alike, namely the story of the many

thousands of students who participated enthusiastically in the initial stages of the movement, yet became increasingly frustrated, increasingly frustrated with the movement at later stages.

ADAM HABIB:

I think that there are two parts to this. First, I think there is a further voice. I think there is a mainstream voice that says there is violence at our institution and that needs to stop immediately. I am between the far left and that voice. I am saying that this is a legitimate struggle. My worry with the struggle is not the objective, but its methods. I am proposing a way to continue the struggle while keeping people united. It is a slightly different voice from the mainstream. It is odd for people to hear a VC saying this. This is not a neoliberal architect speaking.

I think I articulate the voice of the silent majority of students. I think the student body is instinctively progressive. They know that the cost of higher education is unacceptably high, but they also instinctively know that the political activists are leading to a path of destruction. They want Wits to exist as an accessible and quality institution, so don't destroy it. And they say that they want to qualify and can't be expected to sacrifice this. This in-between space is where the silent majority is.

Why does the silent majority require the VC to voice their view? I think they are silenced. They are silenced by two groups. The first is the political architects within the movement. The mass meeting was used as a mechanism to silence individuals rather than to represent the views of the broader community. This comes from a vanguardism that says: "we are the revolutionary elite that understands more than ordinary people." That vanguardist approach – the belief that we know better than the collective multitude – concerns me.

The second reason is that students are alienated from party politics. The

more our parties misbehave, the more they see hypocrisy and duplicity from our political parties, the more alienated they become. I am worried about the fact that our student leadership and party activist base are learning from a compromised political class. At the heart of that political class is a belief that one can say one thing privately and another thing publicly. Young people will say one thing to me in private and another thing in public. I expose this because it undermines the core of progressive politics in our country. The left is guilty of this too. Many of the left-wing academics say to me that they do not believe in money, but then come to see me in private and threaten to leave for Stellenbosch if they are not paid more. People can give critiques of neoliberalism and securitisation, and within six months they are gone to Sweden, London, Canada. If you look at who left from our academic cohort you will see that it was not the mainstream but the “far left” who did. It is easy to write about neoliberalism from London or Canada rather than to live through these things. I wrote the book to expose this hypocrisy.

I want to say something about the international dimension of the emergence of the far right. When you start engaging in politics as a fundamentalist operation you can destroy the very basis of progressive ideals. In the 1920s (and I am quoting Trotsky on this) you have the emergence of fascism alongside stuttering mainstream capitalism. Stalin says you should treat them [bourgeois democracy and fascism] in the same way. Trotsky says you can't as this is fascism. You may temporarily enter into an alliance with liberalism because otherwise this is fascism. The Stalinists don't forge that alliance. The consequence is that tens of millions of Russians die.

This idea that we look for the perfect solution and that politics requires no

“

When this movement succeeded far more than anyone imagined, the [political] parties thought that they could use the movement for their own ends. All of the parties made an effort to control the movement and, in doing so, they factionalised it.

strategic thinking is corrupt. This is the same mistake that progressives made in the USA by arguing that Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump are the same. I don't like Hilary Clinton but I would take her over Donald Trump. Politics is not about the perfect solution but about making strategic choices. I call this a radical pragmatism. I suggest that people read Perry Anderson's latest piece in the *London Review of Books* on [Jair] Bolsonaro's Brazil. It shows how the Workers' Party gets defeated. But it shows how Lula [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva] operated within the confines of politics and achieves remarkable things, yet [Dilma] Rousseff sadly went down holding steadfast to her values. If I was to choose a politician to get me through neo-fascist politics I would take Lula any day, regardless of his imperfections.

NEW AGENDA:

What do you think of the term “decolonisation?”

ADAM HABIB:

This is why I use the term “radical pragmatism”. I am ambivalent about “decolonisation.” I am interested in what it actually means. The view that the debate on “decolonisation” started in 2015 is nonsensical. The debate actually started around the principle of transformation. This idea that transformation is all within the confines of the paradigm of the existing order is nonsensical because when you actually listen to the content of what students want by “decolonisation” then you see that many of these are already in our plans or have already been implemented. So, the idea that there is a real break between prior efforts from progressives to transform our universities and decolonisation is untrue.

Having said that, I am not opposed to the term because of its relevance. A whole series of young people caught onto the term. In this context, do not fight the term but go with it and see where we can drive this. Let us stop debating between transformation and decolonisation and let's get to the substance. But this is where the movement flounders. I have this dispute with Eusebius McKaiser about this because he believes that I am being unfair on the students. But why? Describing something is not the same as determining how you transcend it. This is where I find the decolonisation literature very weak, other than one or two interesting pieces. A UCT student, Brian Kamanzi, wrote an interesting article about how you can change the engineering curriculum and I reflected on this in my book. I think, however, that as a whole there is a lack of ideas.

What also frightens me is a romanticisation of the decolonisation rhetoric. People say we shouldn't critique young people because it's disrespectful. There is the example of the student who called for science to be abandoned at UCT. I had a debate with a left-wing academic on this, someone ➤

who reviewed my book. She argued that speaking about that incident was disrespectful. I retorted that we need to expose this. And she said that we should not discredit the debate. But my argument is that we should take ownership of our mistakes. If we don't do this then the right wing will take ownership of them and manipulate them. We need to acknowledge mistakes and rectify them. This distinguishes me from a lot of the progressive movement because I think that there is a lot of appeasement. I use the example of Neville Alexander, who people claim to draw inspiration from. But Neville was saying in 1986 that "liberation before education" was a nonsensical slogan. Many in the ANC and SACP agreed with this. This is the kind of leadership we need to assert.

There are two further parts to the decolonisation issue. The first and easy part is what you can do in the humanities. We can fix the reading list and show that black philosophers and literary figures are represented in the primary reading list. We can fix the writing of history and ensure there is coverage of African history. But we do not understand enough of the history of the rest of the world. We need to understand this from the contextual needs of African society. We need to understand the US, we need to understand neo-imperialism and the neo-imperial project, because without doing this we won't move on. My fear is that there is a whole host of other issues which are not covered by the decolonisation discourse. When people criticise us, they don't realise that the humanities dimension of decolonisation has already largely been covered. There have been significant changes in the last four years. This is the easy stuff.

There is a second part of this debate outside of the humanities. How do you deal with an engineering curriculum? We can't stop looking at how to construct bridges. But we do



Our responsibility is to evolve the movement in a structurally progressive direction. How to do so is the real debate at the heart of South Africa today.

need to look at the social importance of bridges. Why are they being constructed in Sandton and not in Alexandra? What are the power relations that underlie the production of bridges? How do we pursue medicine if we can't speak indigenous languages? These are the issues we are very weak in.

There is also the issue of technical disciplines. We have Andrew Crouch, our deputy vice-chancellor, who comes at problems in a technicist way. He says, I need 120 points in order for a degree to be given. Where should the emphasis be? What courses should be weighted? How long should teaching engagements be? People grappling with this can't understand why they are being criticised for not transforming. The problem is that one is talking about pedagogy, the other is talking about the technical changes. We need to believe in and do both. There needs to be a bridge between technical and pedagogical notions of reconstructing the curriculum. But now we have people speaking across each other. For example, take engineering. Engineering students have a course that they need to do, and if they fail this course, which is in the first semester, then they will need to wait six months before they can do it again. This costs money. A technical

reform will ask why are we only offering it in the first term? Can we not do it as a part-time evening course in the second term? Is that a bourgeois reform? Yes, but it changes someone's life. This radical chicness which refuses to engage in technical issues is wrongheaded. I don't have all the answers but we need a conversation on this.

We have to finally deal with this belief that consultation means agreement. Students will say I don't want x in the curriculum, I want y. But with due respect, students do not yet have the knowledge to make all decisions. They should be consulted, but they should not be the sole arbiter of what is included and removed in the curriculum.

NEW AGENDA:

What do you think about the postmodern turn in the academy – alluded to earlier and how has that impacted on the student movement and academics in recent times?

ADAM HABIB:

There has certainly been a postmodern and postcolonial turn. There is something that Achille Mbembe says which is quite powerful. He is astonished at the influence of queer literature and critical race theory from the United States on the rhetoric that has emerged in South Africa. The social experience of the United States is an important experience. But the African American community in the US is a minority and not a majority. That informs the literature in particular ways. This literature and that which emerges around the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] movement in the US significantly influences the contemporary discourse, particularly around the student movement. The other thing that worries me about this is how much of this literature and how many student activists come from the core humanities framework as opposed to the social sciences framework. The core humanities lends itself more to

the description, as opposed to the understanding, of causal factors. It lends itself to postmodernism, with its emphasis on description as opposed to confronting how power is constructed and how we subvert power. This is the real substantive foundation that underlies why our discourse on decolonisation is so compromised.

NEW AGENDA:

Where should things go from here?

ADAM HABIB:

I think there are two things that should happen. First, is the role of the progressive executive: the vice chancellor cannot resolve the debate on decolonisation. VCs just don't have the nuanced understanding of the

multitude of disciplines to say what should be done in engineering, in mathematics, and so on. The real role of the executive is to say how do we create an opening for honest discourse. In our context at Wits we have made it mandatory that every school has a debate on the curriculum that includes every stakeholder, including students, academics and alumni. You don't have to change your curriculum but you must go through a substantive process that raises all the issues.

Second is the role of the progressive academic and student: have the courage to engage in honest conversations. If we do not have honest conversations and we remain at the rhetorical level, we will not resolve our problems. The last thing we want to do is to enable

access and compromise quality. This will not allow our institution to address inequality. If either access or quality is missing, then we will not get the social mobility necessary to resolve inequality. For me, stop romanticising the student movement. Our young people have the potential to be the foot soldiers of the revolution. But they could also be the foot soldiers of counter-revolution. Who do you think is behind the emergence of AfD [in Germany]? Of Italian populism? What did the youth do during the Chinese cultural revolution? There is no God-given right for young people to be radical. Our responsibility is to evolve the movement in a structurally progressive direction. How to do so is the real debate at the heart of South Africa today and this is what is being missed. **NA**

