



# Rebels and Rage: Reflections on Fees Must Fall

*Adam Habib*

Jonathan Ball: Jeppestown. 2019. 238 pgs

## *Review by Ben Turok*

The turmoil wrought by a decade of Jacob Zuma's misrule has generated some fine new books. In crime, Jacques Pauw's *Presidents Keepers* and Myburgh's *Gangster State*; in economics Mark Swillings' *State Capture*, Philippe Burger's *Getting it Right* and Frederick Fourie's *Informal Sector*; and now in politics Adam Habib's remarkable *Rebels and Rage*.

If ever there was a need to demonstrate the case for participant observation Habib's book does just that. Here was a vice chancellor deeply immersed in tortuous engagement and yet able to stand back and make profound analytical observations. And he does so honestly and, at times, self-critically, yet it is clear that he behaved with enormous courage in the face of extraordinary provocation. He had the onerous responsibility of protecting Wits University while at the same time continuing to engage with protesting students. It was an impossible task.

Yet Habib is willing to acknowledge that mass action and social mobilisation are an essential component of the "strategic arsenal required for changing our world". And he concedes that "the students achieved in ten days what vice chancellors had been debating for ten years". The problem was the way the students went about it.

The students raised three concerns: at first, a fee increase lower than nine

percent, then no fee increase, then free university education. Added to this was a demand for insourcing of cleaning and other staff.

From the start of the confrontation between management and students, Habib believed that even as the students became increasingly militant, even violent, a political solution had to be found since a "security solution was not sustainable in the long term". And this even while an anarchist tradition of decision-making took root in the Fees Must Fall movement.

We cannot deal in a brief review with the details of the clashes between the students, management and security services. These are fully dealt with in the book. What is worth noting is that a small group of supporters within the academic community not only openly took sides against management, no matter how serious the situation, but also failed to condemn the violence publicly. It seems there was a great deal of duplicity in their discussions with Habib and their open interventions in support of the students.

Habib complains of the same conduct by some student leaders. In their personal discussions with Habib they were courteous and seemingly cooperative, but when addressing large numbers of students they were rude, nasty and dishonest about the

negotiations with management.

Habib makes bold to say "rage is necessary, violence is not" and he points out that students sought to justify their violence by reference to Fanon and the struggle against colonialism in general. But Habib argues there is a huge difference between the historical struggles against colonial rule and struggle in the context of a democratic society with a range of democratic institutions, even if it contains serious distortions.

Habib also raises the question whether oppressed communities are correct in framing their objectives as a "retreat into nativism", where the previously oppressed become the master, or as progress towards the construction of a non-racial, cosmopolitan society.

He makes the critical point that such questions should not be left for the day of victory but ought to be built into the policies and conduct during the struggle itself.

On these considerations, Habib remains highly critical of the conduct of the protestors, including their failure to create a unified movement with appropriate policies. "The new society is seeded in the struggle itself".

These are conclusions worth remembering. **NA**