
Two assassinations, a VC of steel

and the remarkable ‘uncapturing’ of Fort Hare

By Anneliese Burgess

Ms Burgess is an award-winning journalist with more than 20 years of experience in communications and the media. She is currently the co-editor of *Vrye Weekblad* and author of *Heist! South Africa’s cash in transit epidemic uncovered*. As an independent business owner she is also the creative director of *The Story Telling Agency*.

The man uncapturing the University of Fort Hare from organised crime and other crooked interests is vice-chancellor Sakhela Buhlungu, who survived an assassination attempt earlier this year that claimed the life of his bodyguard, yet he remains resolute and refuses to go into hiding. ANNELIESE BURGESS writes about a remarkable ‘uncapturing project’ which could be a blueprint for every other state institution in South Africa, if only they had men of steel like this VC.

The first indication to the outside world of how deep and vicious the fightback against the University of Fort Hare (UFH) renewal programme had become

was on a Friday afternoon in May 2022.

Peet Roets, the university fleet and transport manager, was on his way home from the Alice campus through rush-hour traffic in East London. As he peeled off the N2 towards Gonubie, the seaside suburb where he lived, two men opened fire on Roets’ vehicle, killing him, then sped off in a dark blue VW Polo with tinted windows.

It was a dramatic escalation of an increasingly fraught standoff with the organised criminal networks that had sucked UFH’s coffers dry and whose tentacles vice-chancellor Sakhela Buhlungu was determined to cauterise in his ambitious plan to “renew” the university.

There was little doubt that Roets was killed for clamping down on corruption in the university’s fleet network, but his murder was not the first time the criminal networks had flexed their muscle.

VIOLENT FIGHTBACK

Two months earlier, the homes of Buhlungu and another senior university official had been fired at. And a month later, a third senior official’s home in

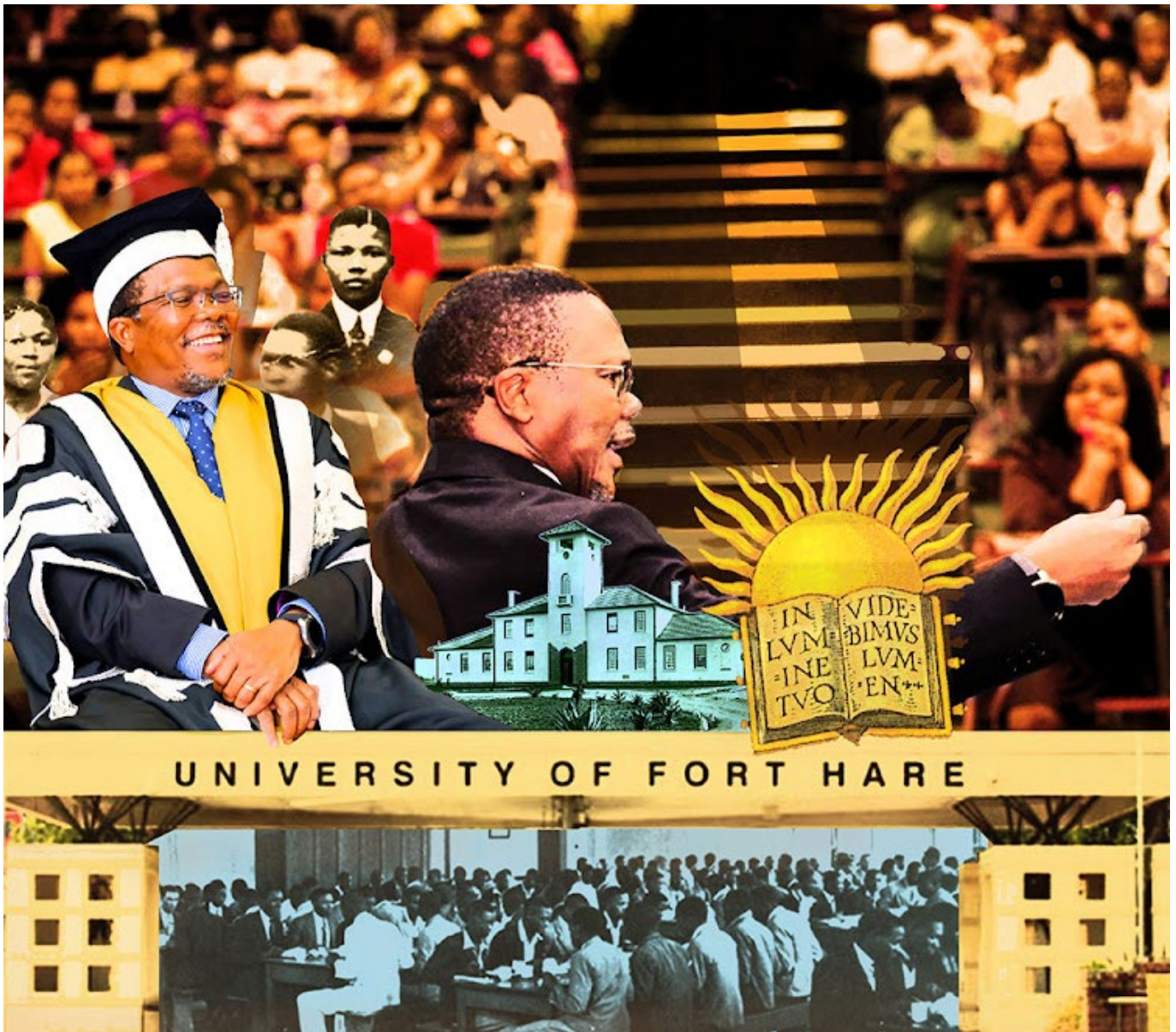
East London was attacked by gunmen. It had been clear for a long time that deep, dark forces were at play at Fort Hare, and just a year after he was appointed, it became necessary for Buhlungu to have a bodyguard.

Mboneli Vesele was a big man with a big smile. The burly former soldier became Buhlungu’s shadow, accompanying him on his frequent walkabouts on campus, ferrying him to meetings and ensuring he got home safely in the evenings.

On a warm summer evening earlier this month (January 2023), less than a year after Roets was gunned down, Vesele was shot dead a short distance from Buhlungu’s home in Alice.

It is suspected that Buhlungu was the intended target. Vesele had just dropped him off when gunmen pumped the vice-chancellor’s vehicle full of bullets.

At an emotional memorial service, Buhlungu alluded to the ferocity of the pushback against his cleanup and the many fronts on which the battle was being waged. There was a long list of people being targeted in smear campaigns, he said. And all of them



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had also either been shot at or had their lives threatened in some way by “unknown men”.

“They are hunting us down and killing us,” he said. “Nothing was done about (Roets’ assassination), which is why these criminals had the confidence to strike again. Now it’s Mr Vesele. The next coffin to come out of Fort Hare will be mine.”

Yet he remained resolute. Some days after the assassination attempt, he told journalists who asked if he planned to quit: “Why would I step down? Because some rogues fired bullets and killed somebody? No, it does not work like that.”

“Sakhela has a backbone of steel,” one academic told me. “What he is doing here is a blueprint of how to uncapture

an institution. But it requires an extraordinary personal commitment to unroot entrenched corruption networks.

“Sakhela is staring down the barrel of a gun but refuses to be cowed. He is a remarkable man. For him, it’s not only about fixing an institution, it’s also about the symbolism of this specific institution with its centuries-old legacy as a crucible for black intellectuals.” ➤



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LEGACY OF THE ANCESTORS

When Buhlungu was appointed in February 2017, the university was deeply troubled. Broke. Its buildings falling apart. Riven by tensions and mismanagement and paralysed by rampant corruption.

Buhlungu has a stellar academic record. He has held senior academic positions at Wits and the University of Pretoria, and before Fort Hare he was the dean of humanities at the University of Cape Town.

He vowed to break the back of criminal networks and restore governance to the university, but his first year at the helm was spent firefighting. In October, the campus exploded with chaotic student protests about water, electricity and Wi-Fi outages as well as National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allowances.

By the beginning of 2018, though, Buhlungu's vision was starting to coalesce. In his address at the opening of the academic year, he used a biblical story to send a message to those who had financially crippled the institution,

but also to the students and staff about the proud legacy of the institution and his commitment to restoring it to its rightful place.

The story is about Naboth, who had a vineyard adjoining King Ahab's palace. Ahab wants Naboth's vineyard and makes him an offer, but Naboth does not want to part with the land. "I inherited this vineyard from my ancestors. The Lord forbid that I should let you have it!" Naboth is stoned to death, allowing Ahab access to the vineyard. God is displeased and sends a message to Ahab saying: 'In the very place that the dogs licked up Naboth's blood, they will lick up your blood!'"

There was another covert message: Buhlungu was prepared to die to save Fort Hare's soul. While that may have been an unspoken echo at the time, it became prescient a few years later when the attempts on his life began.

Fort Hare was originally a British fort in the frontier wars between the British and the Xhosa in the 19th century. In 1839, Chief Tyali, the son of AmaXhosa King Ngqika, donated several acres of land to Lovedale College, which was run mainly by Scottish missionaries. Lovedale donated land to establish the South African Native College in 1916, and it later became Fort Hare, a fully fledged black tertiary institution that drew students from across the continent.

Those who studied at Fort Hare and later became leaders of countries were Kenneth Kaunda, Seretse Khama, Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo. And, of course, a long raft of prominent black South Africans, including Govan Mbeki, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Robert Sobukwe and Desmond Tutu.

Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo met at Fort Hare. They founded the ANC Youth League there (and in a beautiful closing of the circle, in 1991, Oliver Tambo became the chancellor of his old alma mater).

EXTREME PUSHBACK

A central pillar of Buhlungu's renewal plan was to arrest the corruption and fraud that had Fort Hare shackled to penury. He would need the money flowing into the pockets of the tender mafia to make a dent in problems like the terrible state of teaching facilities, laboratories and student residences.

The first hammer blow fell in 2018 with fraud cases relating to contracts for cleaning and gardening services, student accommodation and maintenance and repair of air-conditioning systems. In time, the light began to shine in other dark corners with "allegations of maladministration in the awarding of honours degrees, mismanagement of funds and sourcing of public servants for study into various faculty programmes by an individual for personal gain," as a Special Investigating Unit (SIU) charge sheet put it.

But it was not only corruption. There were deep-lying problems with governance and the academic programme.

2018 was a year of severe pushback against the renewal agenda. There was a six-week staff strike that halted university operations, and a governance crisis in the council, the university's highest decision-making body, was careering out of control. In 2019, a small breakaway group attempted a "coup" by announcing itself as an alternative council. Much of the instability was linked to vested interests being threatened.

Once again, Buhlungu and his management team did not buckle. This time he called in the national department of higher education. Council operations were placed under administration, but the vice-chancellor and his management were not. It was unusual, but it allowed Buhlungu to continue his reform agenda. An assessor was also appointed to do a deep dive into the problems at Fort Hare and compile a report.



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BACK ON ITS FEET

Eighteen months later, in November 2020, Buhlungu announced on Twitter: “It’s official. The University of Fort Hare is no longer under administration!”

Normality was slowly creeping back. A functional council was in place and the assessor’s report was on the table, its content strengthening Buhlungu’s position. Apart from confirming the obvious – crumbling facilities and the “shocking state” of student accommodation – it highlighted the weakness of administrative structures and outdated policies.

The report made the following finding: “The socio-economic environment and regional political dynamics contributed to some institutional governance and management problems, [but] inside and outside the university, there seems to be a belief that UFH is, in the first place, an economic resource.”

This is the crux of the matter.

Buhlungu outlined these vested interests to the [Daily Dispatch](#): “Yes, there were small pickings for people

internally, but the larger bit of the free-for-all was for the people outside. Both people in private sector companies, service providers, and I’m even willing to say some politicians ... some business-connected politicians.”

SERIOUS ABOUT FRAUD

In the past two years, Buhlungu’s turnaround project gained real traction. Many fraud cases dating to 2018 came onto the front-burner. Last September, President Cyril Ramaphosa authorised the SIU to look into allegations of corruption and maladministration, focusing on four contracts, fraud in relation to awarding of honours degrees and NSFAS activities.

The university also fired and prosecuted Nigerian professor Edwin Ijeoma for irregularly registering and admitting two students who didn’t meet the criteria. According to media reports, one of those who was fraudulently admitted was Eastern Cape premier Oscar Mabuyane, although the university has never confirmed this. Some of the other allegations against him are that he stole around R5 million for unauthorised academic work and programmes at Eastern Cape government bodies and the legislature.

ACCOUNTABILITY

One of the Buhlungu administration’s crowning achievements was South Africa’s largest student housing project, a 2,047-bed village completed at the end of 2020.

“The changes here have been remarkable,” says a colleague who teaches at the university. “He and the team around him, many of whom are strong new appointments, have also completely lifted the academic game.

“And everything also feels and looks radically different to five years ago. There is water in the fountains,

and the gardens are no longer a complete wasteland. It’s so nice. This is a big, beautiful campus with historic buildings. Everywhere you can now see restoration taking place because the money is being used for what it was intended for.

“But what has happened here is essentially an uncapturing project. It is a blueprint for every other institution in this country. Buhlungu has shown how it is not quick and it is not easy. You must put in the very hard slog of getting correct procedures and policies in place to enforce accountability.”

About the importance of the policy reform, [Buhlungu says](#): “If you want to commit mischief, you first cause dust; there must be no rules, policies, procedures... governance must break down and then it becomes a free-for-all.”

THE COURAGE OF A LION

A colleague adds, “Ultimately, it all comes down to one thing. Suppose you want to successfully uncapture an institution, root out criminal networks and stand up to rogues that operate within state institutions; you must have the courage of a lion.

“Assassinations are commonplace in the Eastern Cape. Councillors, school principals, school governing bodies – everywhere there is money to be stolen, people are killed. Buhlungu is only the most high-profile person here this has happened to, but he is by no means the only one. But he is fearless and brave. He is a man of higher purpose, clawing back this university from the mafia economy and slowly leading the institution back to reclaiming its legacy as a crucible for knowledge and learning”.

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