



# “1968” IN SOUTH AFRICA: Can Students Bring Change?

On October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015, the events in and outside South Africa’s parliament were symbolic for the country’s political and economic state. Outside parliament students were demonstrating against the proposed hikes in university fees (#FeesMustFall) and had to be prevented by stun grenades from storming the building. In times of political uncertainty like today in South Africa, its students - encouraged by their successful protest campaigns - may be able to play a catalytic role in pointing out the failures and mistakes of government, the extent to which corruption has spread and how the policy of vested interests damages the well-being of the nation.

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On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 the events in and outside South Africa's parliament were symbolic for the country's political and economic state. Outside parliament students were demonstrating against the proposed hikes in university fees (#FeesMustFall) and had to be prevented by stun grenades from storming the building. Depending on which university students are expected to pay around 10 % more because state funding to universities' budgets decreased from 49% in 2000 to just 40% today.

Inside parliament Minister of Finance Nene tried to control the damage done to his budget by a steep increase in pay for civil servants. Public service unions gained an effective 10.1% increase in wages and benefits for government employees for this year. The minister had to find an additional 64 billion Rand (4.3 billion Euros) for the years 2015 to 2018 to cover the wage bill. At the same time he had to reduce South Africa's economic growth forecast to 1.5% this year and 1.7% next year resulting in a decline of tax revenues. The minister had no other choice but to use the contingency reserve to keep his budget balanced.

While students have to pay more, public servants get more. The public sector has been expanded dramatically since 1994. This is partly due to the extension of services and the creation of new provinces but is mainly the result of the African National Congress' (ANC) policy to provide public sector jobs for party members. From 1973 to 2014 the number of ministers increased from 18 to 35, of deputy ministers from 6 to 38, of directors-general from 18 to 159. New posts were created as well like 2501 chief directors and 7782 directors to which there is no direct comparison in the past.<sup>1</sup> One also has to add the costs of the loss making public enterprises to the entire public sector bill which strangles South Africa's ability to invest in the future, in infrastructure for example and of course also to invest in tertiary education. While the new political class is looting the state the future of the country is gambled away.

South Africa has made some progress in education since 1994. 84% of school age children complete the primary circle but only 71.2% of children who should be in grade six are literate and only 58.6% are numerate.<sup>2</sup> The involvement of parents is critical for the performance of pupils. Parents who do not have formal education themselves find it difficult to assist their children with homework. This is the case for children coming from formerly disadvantaged families, i.e. mostly black children.

Children from poor families who cannot afford to send their children to private schools are exposed to inferior inputs like infrastructure, textbooks, student/teacher ratio and of course teachers. Despite huge monetary investments in teachers' training South African teachers are sensed to be underqualified. Professor Jonathan Jansen, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State says: "I would hire a Zimbabwean teacher, just on paper, ahead of a South African teacher. They are better trained in subject matter..." and "their work ethic is different. ... They come to school to work and they deliver."<sup>3</sup> South African teachers refuse to be assessed and they are supported in this stance by SADTU, the teachers union. The union also seems to prevent government from taking harsher measures against failing teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> R W Johnson: *How long will South Africa survive? The looming crisis*, Jeppestown 2015, page 113

<sup>2</sup> Nhlanhla Thwala. *With no firm foundation, pupils are behind from the start*, Mail and Guardian, 23.-29.19.2015

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Nhlanhla Thwala, 2015

Another problematic issue is language. Students are taught and assessed in English but for the overwhelming majority this is not their mother tongue. There are 11 official languages in South Africa. To promote English as the lingua franca is essential for South Africa if internal communication is supposed to be smooth and not to be a barrier to the functioning of a modern state in a global economy. But there are other tendencies that view English as a language of “prestige” and illustrates that a person is “detrified”.<sup>4</sup> The government’s recent recourse to traditional leaders and tribal support seems to support such thinking.

South Africa’s universities have to manage this diverse input of pupils from rich private and poor government schools. All universities have developed admission quotas and programmes that try to find a compromise between keeping academic standards and opening up to students from disadvantaged families and school backgrounds. Admission policies are constant issues of discussion and complain, often to the extent that universities are accused of intentionally keeping them as a bastion of white privileges. Raising academic standards is a slow and time consuming process and the frustration of those can be understood who despite all efforts are unable to overcome the backlog of disadvantage.

In such a situation government must make particular efforts to support tertiary education. This is not the case. The subsidies of government to universities were reduced and are at present at 0.6% of GDP, much lower than for example in other emerging economies like India (1.3%) or Russia (2.3%).<sup>5</sup> University fees are between 4100 Euros and 2200 Euros per year depending on the family income of the student and the fee structure of the university. In addition students have to pay for accommodation, meals and books. Universities use income from fees to support poorer students. UCT (University of Cape Town) for example earmarked 12% of all fees to top up National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) allocations. Poor students can apply for support from NSFAS on a loan basis. This is another point of complain: after having finished university many start their first job highly indebted while at the same time the family expects support from the one member “who has made it”.

During the protests it was revealed that Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande commissioned in 2010 a working group to make proposals for free university education. The report was delivered in 2012 and suggested that students from families earning less than the lowest tax bracket and up to 18.000 Euros per year should be eligible for free university education. The suggestions were not implemented. Students are particularly angered that government had obviously identified the problem but did not act.

Under the pressure of students’ mass protests all over the country President Zuma announced that the fee increase for next year will be dropped. This will not stop the protests of students who are now fighting for free higher education. But many protests are no longer about fees or free education; they are about the diminishing hope of black students to ever make it from impoverished schools and communities to decent jobs and living conditions. A student collective stated: “If we do not revolt, we will be stuck sitting *emakoneni* – loitering on a township street corner”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Nhlanhla Thwala, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Siya Mnyanda: UCT: *The ripple effect of education*, Mail and Guardian, 23.-29.10.2015

<sup>6</sup> Comment in Mail and Guardian: *#FeesMustFall is shaking us up*, 23.-29.10.2015

South African's student protest movements can record some success. Last year the #RhodesMustFall campaign of students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) succeeded that a statue of Cecil Rhodes<sup>7</sup>, symbol of white colonialism, was removed from the compound of the university. In a similar fashion the #FeesMustFall campaign was started which very fast spread to all universities in the country. Most university had to be closed for a couple of days. The use of social networks through the internet played an important role in the success of the movement. And commentators registered with interest that white and black as well as rich and poor students were protesting next to each other.<sup>8</sup>

The student protests of 1968 in Europe happened 23 years after the end of World War II in a situation in which the political system seemed to be static, the political class satisfied with its achievements and the majority of the population content with the new won affluence. The students could not see that change would come from inside the system and became anti-establishment.

21 years after the abolishment of apartheid students in South Africa seem to be in a similar situation. The new political class is satisfied with its status and income, changes from inside the ANC are unlikely in view of vested interests and progress is slow in diminishing the inequalities of apartheid. Attempts of politicians from the ANC or the opposition party DA (Democratic Alliance) to get on top of the movement or just to address assemblies of students were rebuked vehemently. When the leader of the DA, Mmusi Maimane, arrived at the UCT campus to join protesting students he was told "To get lost. Immediately!" South Africa's student movement is anti-establishment.

A letter of a student to the *Guardian* sums up the sentiments of the protesters in directly addressing President Zuma:

"There's a new generation coming and they are angrier than before. Unlike your generation, white people haven't made them angry. You have. The ANC has made them angry. You have discredited everything that was possible in 1994. Under your leadership a culture of corruption has found a place in South Africa's government. The born-frees<sup>9</sup> are tired of hearing about how great the ANC used to be. To them that's as good as a myth, and myths mean nothing to people who are hoping for a better future."<sup>10</sup>

The student protests in Western Europe in 1968 did not lead to an opposition in the form of new parties, but the ideas and sentiments had a long lasting effect on societies towards more liberalism, more participation in democracy and more transparency in political processes. In times of political uncertainty like today in South Africa its students - encouraged by their successful protest campaigns - may be able to play a catalytic role in pointing out the failures and mistakes of government, the

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<sup>7</sup> Cecil Rhodes, 1853-1902, mining magnate, founder of Rhodesia, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony 1890-1896.

<sup>8</sup> Johnny Masilela: *Lessons from the born frees* in Sunday Independent, 01.11.2015

<sup>9</sup> Born after the abolishment of apartheid in 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Athambile Masola. A version of this letter first appeared on the Mail & Guardian's Thought Leader, [www.msn.com/en-za/news/editorpicks](http://www.msn.com/en-za/news/editorpicks), 27.10.2015

extent to which corruption has spread and how the policy of vested interests damages the well-being of the nation.

Students at UCT set already one example: together with the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union they convinced the UCT management to stop outsourcing of services like transport, protection, cleaning and catering. The university announced that it will employ about 900 workers full-time from those services.