

2021 Student Protests in South Africa: Confronting a Deep Rot?

In what has become almost a usual feature at the beginning of every academic year, students in South Africa's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have taken to the streets to [protest](#) the financial red tape that precludes a significant number of them from registration. The grievances range from calls for free tertiary education, the cancellation of historical debt to the reduction of student fees that deny many South Africans from impoverished backgrounds access to higher education. Unfortunately, an innocent man, [Mthokozisi Ntumba](#), lost his life during this year's protests, a presumed victim of a stray 'rubber' bullet from the police. Four police officers have subsequently been charged with murder, and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) has vowed to [oppose](#) their bail application.

The current protests are a microcosmic manifestation of a deeper problem bedeviling South Africa; the perception that the promises of democracy have been elusive, leaving the historically disadvantaged on the same socio-economic station that they occupied during apartheid, has been the accelerant of disenchantment, not only among the protesting students but also among the majority of South Africa's poor. In the lead-up to the [1994 general elections](#), which produced Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first democratically elected president, there was palpable and justified fear and trepidation that the transition from apartheid to democracy would be bloody. In fact, some observers even bandied about the possibility of civil war. [Black on black violence](#), mainly between the [Inkatha Freedom Party](#) and the United Democratic Front, threatened to plunge South Africa into a perpetual orgy of murder, thereby delaying or even occluding a transition to democracy. White

supremacists, paranoid about the future loss of privilege in a democratic South Africa, were also doing their most to torpedo the [Convention for a Democratic South Africa](#) (CODESA).

Understandably, some people use the word '[miracle](#)' to describe South Africa's relatively smooth transition to democracy. Mandela's new government faced a Herculean task: how to bind the wounds of a nation that had been rent asunder by centuries of colonialism and almost half a century of apartheid, both of which the black majority bore the brunt? Racial discrimination permeated all crannies of the country and, while this race-based discrimination had been an unwritten law, apartheid codified, perfected and normalised it after 1948. The post-1994 government was faced with the uphill task of redressing all these injustices, and hence meeting the expectations of the historically disadvantaged.

A good education is one of the ways of ensuring that the historically sidelined group are brought into the mainstream of the country's socio-political and economic space, a terrain that for centuries has been dominated by the white minority whose descendants still enjoy the trappings of past injustices.

These stark realities might help us to understand the frustration felt by many South Africa students whose economic circumstances threaten to confine them to the fringes of education. Their frustration is also towards a governing party that is still struggling to cope with both immemorial difficulties and inequalities and problems of its own making. There is no gainsaying the fact that this ugly past still haunts South Africa. However, the transition from liberation movement to governing party has not been achieved by the ruling [African National Congress \(ANC\)](#), and this is partly because when it came to power, liberal and market economic ideology was in vogue, while socialism was on the retreat. The ANC elected to go with what was in fashion, meaning that it did not overhaul the capitalist system that arrogated all

economic resources to the white minority but was a nightmare to the unfortunate majority. Taking the current economic and political realities across the world into consideration, it would be foolhardy to champion the adoption of orthodox socialism or any radical hybrid economic ideology in order to bring in the majority poor from the shadows. The ANC is thus hamstrung, and only the extremely cynical would turn a blind eye to their limited space for a manoeuvre.

However, there are issues that are well within the party's power to solve, and the failure to do so justifies not only the student protests but also protests from the wider society. The ongoing [Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture](#) is sketching a picture of dizzying allegations of corruption and general mismanagement of state resources and positions, with the ANC and some individuals aligned to it being the main protagonists. It does not also paint a pretty picture that, in a country where some students are barred from registering at universities because of financial difficulties, the state has, since 2019, paid [R4.5 billion](#) to 6334 suspended public servants sitting at home. Power struggles within the ANC, which started simmering in the lead-up to its [National Conference](#) in 2017 and culminated in President Jacob Zuma's resignation in 2018, have divided the fabled liberation movement, and hence undermined the prospects of concerted efforts towards righting the wrongs of corruption and addressing student grievances with one voice. At the 2017 Conference, as one of his last promises as ANC President, Jacob Zuma said that the government would provide [free education](#) for poor undergraduate students. Some argued that because Zuma did not offer a road map on where the money could come from, his declaration and timing were [cynical](#), as he left his successors in a pickle from which they are trying to climb out.

Zuma-aligned apparatchiks, such as the Ace Magashule, the current Secretary-General of the ANC, are no doubt supportive

of student protests, but not exactly for noble reasons. They are still reeling from how Zuma was forced to [relinquish the presidency](#); hence they begrudge the current President, Cyril Ramaphosa, and his position. For this reason, the detractors of Ramaphosa's presidency are all too happy to support protests that will force Ramaphosa into a corner. If he endorses free education, then he will shoulder the burden of creating modalities for how universities will remain afloat. If he insists on student payment, his critics will present him as impervious to the plight of poor students, most of whom are black. While the dilemma into which Ramaphosa's ANC critics are throwing him might appeal to protesting students, it could also be a ruse to lure students into unwittingly stoking internal and factional battles in the ANC, with superficial attention to how the impasse on financing education could be resolved. It is thus imperative that students maintain their agency and sovereignty as they fight their just causes and thus spurn the machinations of opportunistic politicians.

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