

Student Protests 2015, 2016 – and 2017?

For two years, South Africa has seen mass student protests. How did they shape the country? What did they achieve? And how will the movement evolve in the academic year 2017 that has just started?

23 September 2016: About a hundred students of South Africa's biggest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), have gathered on Church Square, in the centre of Pretoria, to occupy the National Treasury. On their banners, they call for "free education for the poor". Everything goes as planned. Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan addresses the students and explains why the budget currently does not allow for free education. The students then leave the building to celebrate their success.

The DA is perfectly organised. The party's jurists have made sure that nobody could get arrested. Photographers watch that different sexes and races are represented on their pictures. Participating students are provided with lunch. They are asked not to use the term "occupy" on social media, in order not to alienate the white middle class, which constitutes one of the DA's most important voter bases.

The same place, six weeks later: Church Square, and with it the capital's entire city centre, are covered in red. The left-wing populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have announced a "Day of Action". Several thousands of people have gathered to call for free education for all (n.b. not only the poor), as well as the resignation of President Jacob Zuma. People sing, dance, clap and shout. A restaurant owner closes his place, as a group of about fifteen protesters appears on the other end of the street. Lat-

er on, buildings are looted. Not much of the DA's protests' peacefulness and organisation can be found here.

The methods of the different groups of protesters are different, just as their ideologies and demands. Yet one thing is clear: South Africa's young population is dissatisfied. Even though the mass protests started off among students, representatives of the DA, the EFF, and experts all agree that much more is at stake than higher education policies. The „born free“ generation is dissatisfied with the slow pace of economic and social transformation since the end of apartheid.¹

It all began with a statue

When EFF student leader Mosibudi „Rassie“ Rasethaba thinks back to the beginnings of the protests two years ago, he sounds almost nostalgic.² Back then, black and white people of different ideological and social backgrounds marched together. Public opinion was still in favour of the protesters. Media, university staff and even some members of government sympathised with the students.

Back then, in March 2015, students of the prestigious University of Cape Town started to protest for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, a nineteenth century British imperialist (**#rhodesmustfall**). Soon afterwards, the university management gave in. The statue was removed from campus.

But that was only the beginning of a wave of protests that should soon affect the entire country.

In October of the same year, students in Johannesburg started to protest for lower tuition fees (**#feesmustfall**). More demands were soon to be found: President Zuma should step down (**#zumamustfall**) and Afrikaans should no longer be a language of tuition (**#afrikaansmustfall**).

Yet the diversification of the students' demands was not to be the only development the movement should make in the course of the past two years. The demonstrations became increasingly violent. Kwena Moloto, student leader of the DA, blames the frustration of the young black population, whose situation has not sufficiently improved under the African National Congress (ANC) government since 1994.³ The Africa correspondent of the French newspaper *Le Monde*, who is also present at the EFF „Day of Action“, points to the ideology of „Toyi Toyi“.⁴ During the struggle against the apartheid regime, the population had learned that nothing could be achieved without violence.

Rassie from the EFF seems to confirm this. According to him, nothing substantial has ever been achieved with peaceful means. However, he sees the main cause of the eruption of violence in the increasing deployment of police and private security forces on campuses. This thesis is supported by several social scientists. A circle of violence would emerge between security forces and protesters, in the course of which both sides would increasingly radicalise themselves.⁵ On the other hand, Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand and one of the country's leading intellectuals, argues that he only ever called the police after protests had turned violent.⁶

The media, political parties and the fragmentation of the protest movement

Another trend to be observed during the last two years is the fact that the number of participating students continuously declined. One of the reasons for this is increasingly critical public opinion. Rassie from the EFF blames the media, which according to him are controlled by same rich people as the

universities. Kwena from the DA is not convinced by this theory: the same media that supported #feesmustfall in 2015 turned against it in 2016, most notably because of the violence.

Rassie identifies a further reason for the shrinking number of protesters in the ideological growth of the “fallist” movement. According to him, the fact that not everybody supports this ideology focusing on free higher education and “decolonisation” of universities is the price one has to pay. For Kwena the opposite is the case: the movement unnecessarily narrowed its ideology and thereby alienated more and more supporters.

2016 was characterised by mass protests representing diverse ideological positions, to the extent that Prof. Christi van der Westhuizen, author and sociologist at the University of Pretoria, suggests one should speak of „protest movements“ rather than „movement“. ⁷ These include, most prominently, anti-racist, black feminist and queer groupings, in tension with black nationalist patriarchal elements. According to Prof. van der Westhuizen, the largest part of this new, heterogeneous political class that emerged from the protests would emphasise the inclusion of marginalised groups.

Yet Prof. van der Westhuizen also points to another, smaller part of the movement that displayed an anti-democratic discourse. Adherents of this stream act as if the apartheid regime was still in place. They are disillusioned with democracy (a global trend, yet according to Prof. van der Westhuizen particularly worrying in South Africa, as the democracy is a mere 23 years old). Instead of including everybody, this group follows a narrow form of racial nationalism and a utopian version of Pan-Africanism. This is another hint to the heterogeneous nature of the protest movement.

Within this fragmentation, another trend can be observed the increasing influence of political parties. According to Prof. van der Westhuizen all parties wanted to benefit from the mass movement. This process,

which has started in 2015, was consolidated in 2016.⁸ Especially the EFF were able to profit by the protests, which Rassie attributes to ideological similarities and mobilisation capacities.

However, not only did the parties influence the protests, the protests also influenced the parties. Kwena points out that they revealed the hypocrisy of the ANC, while at the same time pushing the DA's youth and students organisations to the left. For Rassie, on the other hand, the EFF learned from the decolonisation movement to incorporate more non-western thinkers such as Frantz Fanon or Steve Biko into their ideology, in addition to European philosophers such as Karl Marx.

Successes and failures of the "fallists"

The protesting students had a number of objectives. The most obvious of them, lower or no tuition fees, has not been achieved. However, fees did not increase in 2015 and only for students coming from rich backgrounds in 2016. President Zuma mandated a commission to develop models for affordable access to universities. Yet the publication of the final report has been postponed several times, currently until June 2017. Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan announced that the budget for higher education would be increased by 16 billion Rand (approximately 1.1 billion Euros) over the next three years.⁹

Contrary to the issue of fees, which can be evaluated differently, Rassie, Kwena and Prof. van der Westhuizen all agree that the protests initiated an important process of "decolonising" at university level. Almost all South African institutions are currently revising their curricula. Policies relating to harassment and racism are also under review. Cleaning and security personnel have been insourced by universities to protect them from the vulnerability of external agencies. Furthermore, the University of Pretoria has announced that it would phase out Afrikaans as a language of tuition over the next years. The next years will show whether South Africa manages to build up a non-western oriented, independ-

ent university culture, and how well this would work.

Moreover, Rassie mentions changes on a subtler level. He noticed that black students from poor rural regions now participate in class more actively and with more consciousness. This effect would go beyond universities: Even school children now dare to take the streets for their interests, as illustrated by black girls who perceived it as racist that they were not allowed to wear certain hairstyles.

New debates on the table

Higher education has long been neglected in South Africa. The budget for tertiary institutions corresponds to 0.74 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. In Germany, this number is at 1.31 percent and in South Africa's neighbouring countries even at 2.32 percent on average.¹⁰

Thanks to the protests, the issue now has the public attention it deserves. In the future, politicians will have to take the students' interests seriously. Around the issue of "decolonisation" of universities, South Africa has seen the emergence of a new debate and a process of reform, which could potentially inspire countries all over Africa and in the global South.

According to Rassie, one of the fallists' success was to "demystify the rainbow nation". Problems that were seen as taboo after the end of apartheid can now be raised again. Those include land reform, but also other aspects of South Africa's structural inequality. Moreover, the protests would prove the increasing demand for transparency and accountability.

Thus new debates are on the table, which will shape South Africa in the coming years. According to Prof. van der Westhuizen, the big issue for the "born free" generation is the actualisation of promises made after the end of apartheid. In a sense then, the protests insert themselves in a wider social context and a political challenge that go far beyond higher education policies.

And 2017?

According to Rassie, 2017 will be a decisive year for the “fallist” movement. On the one hand, it will be about winning back public opinion. On the other, it will be about combining the dissatisfaction of the students, the rural population and the working class into one national protest movement. Rassie is member of the national leadership of #feesmustfall. Even though he cannot speak about details, he is ready to reveal some elements of the strategy for 2017: a charter on the ideology of the fallist movement should be written; protests should be carried out of the campuses onto the streets; and students should engage in community work to educate the non-academic population about political issues. However, Rassie also expects violence to increase further. According to him, the higher the pressure on the state, the stronger its retaliation.

Kwena, too, predicts further protests. Yet he believes that the “fallist” ideology already excludes too many people and interests for it to grow again.

“South Africa has been forced to introspect”

It is yet too early to draw conclusions from the “must fall” protests. The developments of the last two years bear risks as well as chances. **The risks include a rise of populism, increasing violence, shrinking readiness to compromise and tensions between different communities.** The economic gains of increased access to universities are also questionable, as unemployment among university graduates is on the rise. What the South African job market would need is more graduates from technical and vocational colleges.

Nevertheless, the opportunities seem to outweigh the risks: more access to universities for the youth from poor backgrounds; reformed curricula tailor-made for the South African context; more attention for the next generation’s interests; higher confidence of historically marginalised groups. Most importantly, however, the protests raised new

debates. They addressed forms of discrimination that for long have not been recognised. This has repoliticised the country, and especially the youth, or, to put it in Rassie’s words: “The protests have forced South Africa to introspect.”

¹ See Feltes, Tilmann (2016): *Südafrikas „born-free“-Generation rebelliert*, accessed on 20 January 2017: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_45200-1522-1-30.pdf?160525152345

² Semi-structured interview, 27 January 2017, Pretoria

³ Semi-structured interview, 30 January 2017, Pretoria

⁴ Conversation with Jean-Philippe Rémy during the EFF “Day of Action” 2 November 2016, Pretoria

⁵ See Duncan, Jane (2016): *Protest Nation: The Right to Protest in South Africa*, Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

⁶ Habib, Adam (2016): “The Politics of Spectacle – Reflections on the 2016 Student Protests”, *Daily Maverick*, 5 December 2016, accessed on 31 January 2017:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-12-05-op-ed-the-politics-of-spectacle-reflections-on-the-2016-student-protests/>

⁷ Semi-structured interview, 9 February 2017, Pretoria

⁸ Habib, Adam (2016): “The Politics of Spectacle – Reflections on the 2016 Student Protests”, *Daily Maverick*, 5 December 2016, accessed on 31 January 2017:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-12-05-op-ed-the-politics-of-spectacle-reflections-on-the-2016-student-protests/>

⁹ Gordhan, Pravin (2016): *2016 Budget Speech*, Pretoria: National Treasury

¹⁰ UNESCO dataset, accessed on 7 February 2017 unter <http://data.uis.unesco.org/?queryid=181#>; newest available data for the respective countries