

Student Activism at a Struggling Institution: The Case of University of Limpopo, South Africa

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The Vice-Chancellor's Inauguration

The 15th of September 2006 saw the inaugural ceremony for Professor Mokgalong to become the first permanent Vice-Chancellor of University of Limpopo, which had been created in 2005. As part of a national reform designed to restructure the landscape of higher education in South Africa, University of Limpopo had come into being through a merger between University of the North (UNIN) and the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA). Lying several hundred kilometres apart and situated in two separate provinces run by separate local governments, the two institutions were not the most likely bed mates. Still, the merger had been carried through by the ANC led government, and Professor Mokgalong had now been named as the Vice-Chancellor of the new university. Small pamphlets were therefore distributed all over campus inviting students and staff members to attend the inaugural ceremony at the main theatre at 09h30. The newly developed "Vision" and "Mission" statements of the University's "Strategic Plan" had been neatly pasted on one side of the pamphlet, so as to underscore that this was an important step in becoming a "world class" university "epitomizing excellence and global competitiveness".

This happened to also be the first day of my ethnographic fieldwork at Turfloop, which is how the campus that used to make up UNIN is popularly known. The inauguration seemed an opportune occasion for the participant observation to get started, and I sneaked into Great Tiro Hall (the university's main theatre named after local struggle hero Abram Tiro). Tiro Hall accommodates approximately a thousand people in rows of chairs that rise steeply towards the back of the theatre. From these elevated seats, members of the audience look down towards the stage which is equipped almost as a real theatre. At its highest, the ceiling rises some twelve to fifteen meters above the ground and creates an impressive indoor space that is partly illuminated during daytime, since rays of sunlight make it through the yellow glass used for the windows positioned immediately below the ceiling. Tiro Hall was nearly full and hundreds of students and staff members were still queuing at the main entrances and the side exits. While the Program Director, Mr Mohuba, was making his introductory remarks, a tiny black bird made it through a broken window, and it was almost as if her loud singing and the disturbance it caused gave a small hint of what was about to happen.

The word was passed over to the Chairman of the Council, Professor Tebogo Mokgoro, who talked to the merits of Professor Mokgalong in his former capacity as interim Vice-Chancellor. He also provided an outline of the challenges and difficulties that were integral to the merger process and the university reforms at large. Meanwhile, the sound of a large group of people singing emerged from outside the Hall, where members of student organizations had begun to *toy-toy*, which is a South African protest style of dancing and singing used during the struggle against apartheid. Emanating from behind the main entrances at the back of the Hall, hundreds of singing students now entered the Hall, where chaos and noise erupted. The interference forced the Chairman to make lengthy pauses to his speech, simply because it was not audible among the audiences. Nevertheless, he stuck to his path and at the first signs of order, the Chairman summoned up in a tough voice that: "Nobody can hold anything against the process that has led to the appointment of the new Vice-Chancellor". Thereafter he sat down.

Mr Mohuba then passed the word to the Vice-Chancellor, who delivered a stock-taking of the accomplishments made so far in the merger process, as well as the developments anticipated for the coming year. Tiro Hall was now relatively quiet, and so the Vice-Chancellor was not interrupted in his presentation itself, whereas the subsequent 'Question & Answer'-session again made a noisy and polemical event of the ceremony. At first, a couple of students made requests for the microphone to present the Vice-Chancellor with critical questions about supplementary exams and increasing tuition fees. Subsequently, student leaders rose amidst jubilant cheering to launch insults and accusations against the Chairman of the Council, who they claimed to be a "liar" and "a hypocrite". They made references to an article published in a national newspaper two months prior to the event, where the Chairman was apparently quoted to deem the interim Vice-Chancellor "unappointable". This led some to accuse him of having had an interest in the position as Vice-Chancellor himself, while others continued to ask: "How can the Chairman ask us to rally behind a VC the he has himself deemed unappointable?".

When the Chairman recaptured the point that nothing could be held against the appointment process, 25 – 30 students shouted "Order" repeatedly to indicate that the Chairman was out of order in his rejection of the question. Mr Mohuba seemed paralyzed in his role as Program Director, but when a nobly dressed male lecturer and a female student made requests for the microphone, he seemed relieved and quickly pointed them out. Probably against his expectations, the student screamed into the microphone that: "The hypocrite Chairman must step down!", while the lecturer in a more polite tone questioned: "...the connection between the appointment and the Chairman's statements made to national media." This blew the roof off Tiro Hall. Up to 50 student leaders now stood up and shouted insults at the Chairman, while campus security guards entered the Hall from the side entrances. The situation was clearly getting out of

hand, and one particular student leader was now chased by several guards into the rows of seats where other students were sitting. At this point the Master of ceremony made what appeared to be a wise decision, when he declared from the podium that the inaugural ceremony had now reached its end. The security guards immediately backed off, while hundreds of students started *toy-toying* and the rest of us slowly left Tiro Hall.

Over the next fourteen months the tensions that marred the inauguration ceremony would develop to the stage of campus-wide turmoil, where buildings and vehicles were set alight and student groupings clashed with police forces on campus. There is thus a remarkable similarity between these contemporary events and events of the struggle against apartheid, for which Turfloop campus has been famous since its inception.

Student Activism

The Turfloop campus of the current University of Limpopo was opened in 1959 as the University College of the North under the trusteeship of the University of South Africa with the specific aim of serving the black population only (Maja, Gwabeni and Mokwele 2005:24). The ideology of separation was a determining factor for locating the institution in a rural township 30 kilometres east of the provincial capital (Polokwane; formerly known as Pietersburg). The naming of the township as Sovenga was drawn from the three main ethnic groups of the area (Sotho, Venda and Tsonga) so as to emphasise the ethnic basis of the university college (White 1997:75). From 1970 it started operating independently as the University of the North, which remained the name of the university up until it was merged with the Medical University of South Africa in 2005.

As the second-largest black university in South Africa, the University of the North had a proud history of student activism. It was here that the legendary black consciousness leader Steve Biko, among others, launched the South African Student Organisation (SASO) in 1969 aimed to promote a strong sense of identity amongst black students (Dawson 2006:278). Turfloop came to have a history of tension, riots, demonstrations and unrest and thus features prominently in a “Barometer of student struggles” recently developed by a journal for activists (Khanya 2004). An article called “Turfloop tension” published by the Sunday Express on 20 October 1974 summoned up how Turfloop was viewed by the white minority rulers:

“Turfloop has been the scene of Black student militancy almost since the day it opened in 1960. It has been the stronghold of SASO, the Black students' movement and has provided it

with three presidents. Strife reached a peak two years ago when a student leader, Abram Tiro, was summarily expelled for criticising the Bantu Education system in a speech at a graduation ceremony. This sparked off Black and White student demonstrations - and a corresponding police crackdown - around the country. Now the militancy at Turfloop has been given a fresh spurt by the triumph of the Frelimo terrorist movement in Mozambique.”

(Copied in White, 1997:109)

Tiro was the President of the SRC in the early 1970s, and his critique of the Bantu education system was launched at a graduation ceremony held in April 1972. He described the paradoxical nature of the fact that family members of black graduates were not allowed to attend the ceremony, while the families of white academic staff were present in numbers. The university administration was humiliated by the speech and decided to expel Tiro, who refused to make an official apology (White 1997:104-7; Mawasha 2006:72f). Tiro's expulsion was followed by mass protests across the country as an expression of black solidarity. But Tiro's speech not only led to his expulsion from university; it also set the path for his continued struggle activities, which saw him murdered by a letter bomb in Botswana in 1974. This is why Tiro is the most celebrated hero at Turfloop, where a range of important buildings from the main theatre to student houses carry his name.

As evidenced by the *toy-toying* in Tiro Hall at the Vice-Chancellors inauguration, student activism is still the order of the day, but obviously for reasons that are not directly related to the struggle against apartheid. In brief, the post-apartheid sector has seen a difficult transition from the racially segregated system under the former regime to an open and free-market, competitive system since 1994. The new system brought with it new and less favourable funding regimes and increased competition over students (Nkomo & Swartz, 2006:2-3), and in this setup the former black universities have been particularly prone to funding shortages and decreasing levels of students, since black students (and the best qualified black academics) have now been allowed entry into the well-funded, former white universities in the urban centres of Johannesburg, Cape Town and Pretoria.

After the turn of the Millennium, the ANC-led government has pushed through merger reforms in an attempt to turn the tertiary education sector around and make universities more responsive to public service needs (Nkomo & Swartz, 2006:3). The policy frameworks are very ambitious, but judging from University of Limpopo they seem to be somehow out of tune with the reality on the ground. Given the funding shortages, University of Limpopo keeps increasing the tuition fees and costs related to on-campus accommodation, which means that the majority of students who come from poor backgrounds find themselves in jeopardy during the annual registration, while students of the black upper or middle-class

will often have drifted to former white institutions. In this environment, students still feel that there is a struggle to be fought and that the realm of student politics therefore makes for a pertinent arena in which to fight for their rights.

One of the big challenges experienced by South African student politicians today is to “recognise that the context of activist action has fundamentally changed,” as the novelist and former Vice-Chancellor of University of the North (Limpopo) Njabulo Ndebele has it (2007: 57). While the relations between black and white still make up the dominant cleavage in social terms, it is a black ANC-led government and a black university management that the student politicians are confronting in the political arena. Still, student leaders draw heavily on the history and symbolism of local struggle leaders who gave their lives in the struggle. This is very clear in the use of rhetoric and metaphors. Irrespective of whichever organisation students belonged to, during weeks of activism they addressed each other almost solely in the military jargon using titles such as general, commander, colonel and lieutenant. Many even dressed up in camouflage clothing or wore t-shirts with Ché Guevara emblems or green army caps. In terms of language, many turned to the use of violent metaphors and allegories when they spoke of wars, bombs, bullets, fights, revolutions, killings, and oppression and liberation. In order to fully appreciate this re-enactment of the struggle against apartheid in student politics, one needs to understand the serious conditions that have been characteristic of University of the North / Limpopo over the last decade.

A Struggling Institution

University of Limpopo made it into the news for all the wrong reasons in October 2007. An article published in the Mail & Guardian’s spotlight on higher education in October 2007 (Vol 23, No 41), titled: “Institution of unsolvable problems”, held that University of Limpopo was “on the brink of collapse”. The concrete occasion was the release of a report of an independent assessor submitted to the Minister of Education that launched a damning critique of financial administration, human resource management, academic planning, governance and management at the university (Government Gazette, 13 August 2007/No.30169). As the third investigative report of its kind into the university’s affairs in a time span of eight years, the report boosted public opinion brewing in South Africa that the institution was crumbling beyond repair.

Another article published in City Press on 14 October 2007 titled: “University of Limpopo finances a shambles” opened with a blunt observation: “The merged University of Limpopo is a mismanaged and maladministered financial time-bomb surviving on overdraft facilities”. Not surprisingly, students and student leaders read newspapers as well, so even if they were not already fully aware of the gravity of the

continued institutional crisis through their experiences at the university, they had apt opportunity to pick up the message from the public media. Students and staff members were circulating photocopies of the news items, and while staff members feared for their jobs, students were angered. The year 2007 had already seen a registration crisis in January, where students learned that tuition fees had increased by approximately 20% when they came back to campus to en-roll for another term after the Christmas break. The increase in tuition fees posed a serious financial challenge to the larger part of students, who emanate from impoverished households in rural areas with little opportunity for their parents to make a salaried income. On this account some had to stay at home during the first term, but for those who had actually struggled and managed to meet the new demands, it seemed odd that the University was again close to bankruptcy.

Given that the independent assessor's report pointed out that the top management team and the council lacked capacity and was deemed "considerably weak", the leading student organization serving on the Students' Representative Council called for the entire council and executive management to be expelled. Meanwhile, the management team was busy trying to develop a six month turn-around plan demanded by the Ministry of Education as a follow-up to the report. As stated in a Mail & Guardian editorial (Higher Learning October 2007), the situation was precarious, since the Ministry's hands were tied: "It can yield a big stick behind the scenes, but unbridled meddling into the affairs of an autonomous UL [University of Limpopo] could have other unintended consequences."

Tensions kept brewing in the student community in October 2007, where rumours were now circulating that another tuition hike was on its way. Furthermore, the results of the elections held for the Student's Representative Council were contested by two of the organizations, who claimed that the results were rigged so as to bring to power the organization most supportive of the Vice-Chancellor. There was an infuriating atmosphere on campus, where revolutionary memos were circulated in the morning, mass meetings held at noon, and protest marches and *toy-toying* took their beginnings in the afternoon. Management realized that riots were about to erupt and brought the police force onto campus, but that did not stop the turmoil from flourishing.

Turfloop on Fire

Late October 2007 thus saw the most hectic student riots at Turfloop campus in recent times: Cars and tyres were burned; stones were thrown through windows at the main library and the administration block; entrance buildings were set alight; and groups of students were fighting armed police officers by throwing stones. Protests and demonstrations had been lingering the whole week, where at one point a mass of 300 students had tried to force their way through to the main administrative building in order for them to “remove the Vice-Chancellor” by physically chasing him out of his office. Several police vans had been called in advance and chains of police officers prevented the students from getting through to the entrance of the administration. The students aimed not only to remove the Vice-Chancellor, but also to chase away the security guards employed by the private firm “Campus Security”.

Around 20h00 on 31 October 2007, one could see flashes of blue light from the overwhelming presence of police forces that was pouring into campus in huge vehicles. It was the last night of my fieldwork at Turfloop, and I was taking a walk around campus to witness how groups of student protesters were touring all over the area throwing stones and using petrol and tyres to set Turfloop on fire. Whenever a police van arrived and armed police officers started chasing the students, they split into smaller groups and vanished into different student houses and residences. One of the main gates, which had been abandoned by Campus Security guards amidst threats to their security, was set on fire. When two vehicles from the fire brigade tried to get close to the fire to try to control it, they were showered with stones and therefore had to give up.

Many student protesters had run into the central and partly fenced student housing area named after Abram Onkgopotse Tiro. Garbage containers were set on fire and students took refuge behind them and threw stones at the police officers who were getting closer and closer. The area had now emerged as the central battleground and the police started shooting, but apparently with rubber bullets. For security reasons I decided to go back to my room at this point, and I therefore have to rely on other reports to gain a full picture of what transpired thereafter. That night 204 students were arrested by the police and property damage amounted to R600,000 (The Citizen 8 November 2007). What was more dramatic was that one student was shot and ended up in the intensive care unit of the provincial hospital (The Citizen 2 November 2007; Daily Sun 13 November 2007). Student leaders used the media attention to highlight that “millions of Rands are unaccounted for on this campus” and urged the Minister of Education to intervene (The Citizen 8 November 2007).

The morning following the dramatic events, a communiqué was issued by the Vice-Chancellor to the university community. The communiqué, which was widely distributed on campus, noted the “disruptive and anarchical behavior of some students” and explained how the Executive Management had requested the assistance of the South African Police Services “in the interest of restoring and maintaining stability on campus”. It further denounced the “false rumours” that the Executive Management would increase the student fees without consultation and that the Executive Management should be in favour of any student structure. The communiqué then read that “University Management has decided to suspend and expel from the campus the following student leaders”, which was followed by a list of 30 student leaders from the two student structures that had not been granted a victory in the recent elections. The student community was further advised not to harbour any of the listed students in the residences and threatened that students found to contravene the instruction would also be “summarily expelled”.

Conclusion

The events and developments described in this paper go to show that from the perspective of students at University of Limpopo, the restructuring of the of higher learning in South Africa has had little to offer. With particular reference to the merger process that created University of Limpopo, the independents assessor’s report found that: “The merger process has not been properly implemented and in fact, the cost of the combined institution is more than the costs prior to the merger”. While it is easy to point to student riots as activities of irresponsible student leaders and to view the use of violent protest as a disproportionate measure, it should not be forgotten that it is the students who bear the brunt of the unfortunate developments described. In a region characterised by unemployment and poverty, a 20% hike in tuition fees is a serious matter deserving of serious measures.

The *toy-toying* that took place at the inauguration ceremony of the Vice-Chancellor was a first reaction to the lack of transparency governing the appointment process, whereas the violent protests and turmoil that followed in October 2007 was a reaction to the powerlessness experienced by student leaders. Tuition fees had been increased by 20% without consultation in January, and the independent assessor had reported that the university suffered a complete lack of accountability and that it was managed by a principal who was “deemed considerably weak”. The students keep appealing to the Minister of Education (petitions have been delivered to her office in 2008 as well), but with a view to institutional autonomy the Minister allows the University of Limpopo to drift into darkness.

The students thus do not agree with the optimism recorded in a recent analysis of the university carried out under the auspices of the Human Science Research Council of South Africa, where the concluding remark about the university states that: "The ugly duckling of the 1960s seems to be developing into a swan in the 2000s." (Mawasha 2006:83)

The metaphor of the swan seems to imply that the university is well managed and that students and staff are properly consulted as stakeholders in ongoing processes of decision making. The experiences of students, however, point more in the direction of tokenistic participation in processes that lends credibility to decisions, but seldom allows for any real student influence to be exercised. In this sense the students are cornered, since their appeals to the political level cannot be honoured in a context, where institutions are expected to be autonomous and self-reliable. The challenge faced by student leader is thus how to make the University Council and the Executive Management accountable. When this appears not to be possible in the board rooms, the students adopt a strategy more in line with student activism of the past. Provided that campus is literally enmeshed in meanings of the struggle, the symbolic parallels that can be drawn between former struggle heroes like Onkgopotse Tiro and Steve Biko and that of contemporary student leaders become meaningful. As documented in this paper students still complain, *toy-toy*, run riot and finally get shot or expelled. These developments, unfortunately, make student leaders' claims that they are prepared to die for lower tuition fees far too real and meaningful more than a decade after the fall of apartheid.

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