

# DIVIDE



**S**INCE THE END OF APARTHEID, SOUTH AFRICA has made progress, not only politically but also economically, through the expansion of public services, a growing middle class and social grants to millions of its poor. Yet 23 years later, those born after the 1994 democratic elections – the “born-free” generation – have become increasingly frustrated with what they see as a broken promise of opportunity.

Against the broader backdrop of wealth inequalities, corruption and crony capitalism, student protesters have forced the intermittent closure of universities across the country. Their grievances range from high fees to the lingering colonialist mindset, institutional racism and lack of transformation at universities. Their disillusionment raises powerful emotions in the older generation as well. These young people were supposed to be the bearers of a better future founded on the sacrifices of their elders. The expectation was that the “New South Africa,” the so-called “rainbow

## STUDENT PROTESTS

South Africans seek solutions to a generational crisis, say Brunswick’s **MARINA BIDOLI** and **FARAI MOROBANE**

nation,” would be a more equal society. Instead, images of burning buildings, trashed libraries and young people faced off against armed police have shocked a nation. Some challenge the validity of the protestors’ evolving concerns, saying they have been hijacked by political activists. For everyone, these deep divisions strike a sensitive spot, pointing to the country’s fraught journey toward social equality.

Despite strides made by South Africa’s leaders, the country’s economy remains one of the most unequal of the world’s nations, registering close to 0.7 on the Gini index – a statistical scale where 0 represents all people having the same income, and 1 indicates maximum inequality. While affluent classes have grown more racially representative, South Africa’s poor remain mostly black. Reports by Stats SA show that youth unemployment is particularly high at over 50 percent. Economists and political commentators have long warned of a ticking time bomb.

“What we have now is a whole generation of people with far less hope than the democratic revolution was meant to give them,” says Dr Felicity Coughlan, academic director at private education group ADvTECH.

Leftist and populist political movements have been quick to capitalize on the disgruntled youth in a bid to gain new supporters. Drawing on the Black Consciousness philosophy of South African struggle hero Steve Biko and the more radical rhetoric of Martiniquais-French revolutionary Frantz Fanon, protesting students have made strident demands for the “decolonization” of education and institutions.

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall campaigns targeting universities have captured the global media’s attention. While public opinion around the world has been divided, solidarity protests have been held as far afield as New York and London. Meanwhile South African universities have been under prolonged attack.

Jonny Steinberg, who teaches African studies at Oxford University and is a visiting professor at the University of Witwatersrand, likens this to “Oedipal” politics – those in the student movement are fueling “inter-generational loathing” and waging war against those who brought freedom, he says. “For them, the generation of 1994 committed the unforgivable sin: it left intact the edifice of white domination and installed a kind of neo-apartheid order, thus cursing its own children,” he wrote in *Business Day*.

Poor communication between the generations exacerbates the problems. Some feel the born-free generation does not fully understand the difficulties faced in 1994, when the liberation movement opted for a negotiated settlement focused on reconciling all South Africans rather than fighting to the end.

“In the 1970s and ’80s, we were motivated by a common goal – the removal of the apartheid regime and an end to racial discrimination,” says Reg Rumney, former head of economic journalism at Rhodes University. “Today, the protests are about economic injustice and identity politics.”

On the other side, young activist Simone Cupido says media outlets, which portray only the violence and not the intellectualism of the movement, bear some of the blame for the continued unrest.

“For many, I think 1994 was supposed to mark an end to oppression. I unfortunately know that it was not,” she says. “I share experiences of brutality with the older generation. I also share experiences of exclusion and oppression.” Joel Modiri, a young academic who lectures on jurisprudence at the University of Pretoria, echoed the sentiment in the *Daily Maverick*. “When



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I see the student movement, I do not see a Boko Haram-like violent mob . . . or a terrorist militia,” Modiri writes. “I see a brave generation attempting to valiantly overcome a plethora of historical injuries.”

The older generation is much more critical. *City Press* editor Mondli Makhanya lashed out at “pyromaniacs masquerading as revolutionaries” who are sabotaging the progress of the black youth. David Everatt, head of the University of Witwatersrand’s Wits School of Governance, writes in *The Conversation*: “This is no longer #FeesMustFall as we knew it – it has become #StateMustFall.”

Despite such deeply polarized views, most agree that there are green shoots to be nurtured. While the unemployment rate remains significantly worse for blacks than whites, figures from the South African Labour Bulletin show that over the last seven years, at least 92 percent of graduates found a job. In October of 2016, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan announced a significant boost in education funding, saying government would work with corporations and financial institutions to expand scholarships, loans and work opportunities for students.

“We expect change for the better,” Gordhan said in a recent speech. “We expect progress in South Africa. Above all, we expect a better future for our children – particularly through education.”

Leaders from business, labor and civil society also are coming together in broader initiatives toward a better environment for job creation and to help more young people join the economic mainstream. These include financial and mentorship support for small businesses and internships for the youth.

Statistician-General Pali Lehohla recently highlighted that South African universities service nearly 1 million students representing almost 700,000 households. Yet 15 million households still don’t have children at a university. This represents another “lost generation” with limited career prospects.

With education and skills development the crucial ingredients that will allow for a fully functioning productive society, there is an urgency for these initiatives to succeed. Almost half of South Africa’s population is under 25, putting them at the heart of the country’s future economic growth. Finance Minister Gordhan has invited all stakeholders to participate with government in finding solutions: “We need a road map for the future, but not one on the basis of ‘I will burn the next bus or else.’”

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