Is this our own Arab Spring?

Students have responded to violence on campuses around the country sparked by lack of funding and the slowness of transformation

Analysis

JO-MANGALISO MDHELELA

THE world can be a happy place when, in the words of Robert Nozick, "everyone has that to which they are entitled".

We could imaginatively think of Nozick’s having had in his mind the welfare of the South African resident students when he formulated his philosophy about happiness and entitlement to happiness.

Since its inception nearly 17 years ago, the objective of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) had been pitched at promoting “the twin goals of equity of access and providing free undergraduate education to students from working class and poor communities who cannot afford further or higher education”.

In recent years, the review committee was “broadly directed at rectifying shortcomings” in the system, committed to ensuring that the difficulties created by bottlenecks were ironed out so this did not disadvantage poor students.

There have been changes in the policy that regulates the NSFAS framework, including changes in the distribution formula for the allocation of the financial aid to students with the intention of improving the system, yet the nagging problems, in the eyes of the students, continue to persist.

The happy place for students envisaged by Nozick appears to be an illusion. The recent student uprising at some of the universities could be a bell-tale sign that the relief that NSFAS is expected to deliver to several thousands of students from the working class backgrounds remains an imperfect ideal.

Research has shown that students from poor backgrounds pin their hopes on good education to escape poverty yet, writes researchers Dr Pauline Machille and Dr Bernadette Johnson, such a dream may not be realised “without adequate financial resources” being provided to poor students.

Could it be that the pent-up emotions by the students as a result of the failure of the financial aid system, the NSFAS, is causing the students to be given to the violence gripping the country’s campuses?

Could it be that such frustration lends itself to political manipulation and exploitation by some who may be bent making political gains from the failure of the student aid scheme to “deliver the goods”?

Could it be true that racism, and the call for the Afrikaans to fall – and be done away with as a medium of instruction at the University of Pretoria – could be the real reason for all the violence emanating from the institution?

We may not know the real causes of these national crises, and so we may resort to speculation that might not be useful. Yet this calls for sound leadership from the government and all who are entrusted with the task of managing the scheme earmarked for the students “from working class and poor communities”.

The students, financially constrained, demand quick intervention by NSFAS to address their pressing needs.

The protests, which have often turned ugly and violent, may point to one thing, and only one thing, which is that the nation must, on behalf of the students, ask difficult questions as a way of finding solutions and in the way in which NSFAS is managed.

Could the slow process of transformation in our universities – issues that shook Stellenbosch University out of its complacency last year – be a pointer to all stakeholders in the education sector that working together could give the country a solution to its problems?

The incidents that manifested in the #RhodesMustFall revolt at the University of Cape Town and which are now mutating to most campuses in the country may be a tell-tale sign that the country could be having its own mini Arab-spring outbursts.

It may be that the country’s democratic project of reconciliation installed at the onset of the country’s democracy on April 27, 1994, is being challenged.

The unrest at campuses may be symptomatic of a greater political malaise facing the country.

Could it be that a society that has for a long time been waiting for the provision of a better life is now entering a stage of disillusionment and hopelessness, and is now resorting to violence because of loss of hope?

The right to education is enshrined in the Constitution. Our campuses are in turmoil and continue to be in that state of ungovernability because, in part, many impoverished students are let down by their inability to access it.

At the University of the Free State, the turmoil continues, with the students demanding the resignation of Professor Jonathan Jansen. On other campuses, the protests have taken different shapes, resulting in the burning down of libraries, laboratories and other infrastructure.

At the University of Cape Town, the protests were accompanied by the desecration and burning of artwork, including anti-apartheid artwork decorating the walls of the institution.

As the country goes through this vicious state of violence, the government and other leaders call for peace and calm. But what may becoming clear is that the reconciliation project propagated by former president Nelson Mandela may be taking a strain.

A character in Alan Paton’s novel, Cry The Beloved Country, said these words: “I see only one hope for our country, and that is when white men and black men… desire only the good of their country, come together to work for it… I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating.”

Could it be that Paton’s prophetic words are instructive, and we need to take heed, and that the country’s leaders need to work together to help ease political tensions that are dividing the country across the colour-line, breeding hatred and violence?

In the words of Nozick, South Africa must seek to build a happy country to which “everyone has that to which they are entitled”.

Jo-Mangaliso is a writer, commentator and head of the TNA/AN7t cadet journalists school