The securitisation of campuses flies in the face of open debate and the freedom of expression

COMMENT
Mia Swart

One of the astonishing features of the current wave of student protests is the fact that it took anyone by surprise that students, trapped in poverty and frustration, have chosen to do what students do worldwide when their voices go unheared.

But the protests did take university management by surprise. Management was as ill-prepared for the wave of protests as the Free State is for a tropical monsoon. When the storm did come, those in power took the path of least resistance. By inviting the police and security on campus, management opened the door for indiscriminate force and disproportionate use measures used against students.

Clearly, our universities are paying the price for more than two decades of management complacency.

But, instead of taking the modest and enlightened route of engaging students in effective communication and empowering them, they were treated with disrespect and disdain by police, private security companies and management. In many ways, poor students were punished twice: first for being poor, and second by the way they were treated during the protests.

The complacency itself is an indi- cation of the level of trust and confi- dence in public institutions and their manage- ment authorities. It is a truth universi- tally acknowledged that those propelled into positions of power and privilege often forget where they came from. Some vice-chancellors want their cake and eat it.

They want to flaunt their struggle credentials when it suits them but preserve the status quo when exist- ing structures are not profitable enough.

The relatively exorbitant salaries of vice-chancellors were recently poignantly highlighted in the media. Gauteng vice-chancellors are not doing too badly. Unisa’s rates in more than R4-million a year. These are the vice- chancellors who got their positions partly because of their struggle pasts. These are the vice-chancellors who should see themselves in the faces of the protesting students. But in some ways they have betrayed the struggle.

Every right-thinking South African should be critical of the aggressive incitement and policing of some of our campuses, notably at the University of Johannesburg and the University of the Witwatersrand. At UJ, where I teach, the police, who regularly barreled the entrances of the university, even on days when there were no protests. Masced men wearing black shirts from the private security company Fidelity are present all over campus. Peter Alexander, the director of the Centre for Sociological Research at UJ, calls them the blackshirts.

The mere presence of these men creates tension and hostility. Students without the requisite stu- dent card struggle to get on to cam- pus. It is one thing to call In security when violent actions are imminent or are taking place. It is quite differ- ent to populate campus with security and police on peaceful days.

It is simply not good enough to argue that they are there “just in case” violence erupts or because it is anticipated that violence might erupt. Such heavy security clashes with the ethos of universities and with academic freedom. Universities should be free spaces of experimen- tation and youthful inquiry. This is being stifled by the unimagin- ative way in which management has quelled the protests.

Management has also exposed their own fear and paranoia and exacerbated existing divisions.

For good reason, the South African Police Service is one of the least trusted institutions in South Africa. Why trust in management?

Today, 40 years after the 1979 upris- ings, management should know better. More than three years after Marikana, management should know better.

In a joint statement, Gauteng vice-chancellors have justified their actions by essentially using the “bad cop” argument. They state, in essence, that the majority of students should not be prevented from reg- ularly engaging and pursuing their studies because the minority has chosen to be disruptive.

To them the bad apples are cor- rupting the good. They should remember that, not so long ago, they were regarded as the bad apples.

In any police officer’s decision, the enfant terrible among our vice- chancellors, Adam Habib, writes that the “wicked man from Limpopo” who scraped all his money together for his grandson’s studies was severely afflicted. As Natasha Vally, a PhD fel- low at Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, cleverly points out, the FreeMuscFall movement is precisely that an old man should not have to use all his money. His grand- son should be able to study for free.

The old man from Limpopo argues that just doesn’t cut it. Habib is a man who can sell snow to the Eskimos. Let us not buy his ideas only because they are so charmingly packaged and presented. He would be the first to insist that his views should be vigorously challenged.

Wits hosts three different security companies. One company, Tactical Support Unity, has been described as a paramilitary force. Incidents of disproportionately aggressive action by security guards at Wits have been reported over the past few weeks. Security guards have interfered in incidents that had nothing to do with the protests. This casts doubt on the legality of the work of the guards. What is their mandate?

Jane Duncan, a professor of jour- nalism at UJ, has compiled a report on human rights violations dur- ing the police violence during the November protests at UJ. She docu- ments cases of hitting, punching, slapping, kicking and throttling of protesters by security guards and the police. Students were also intimi- dated, harassed, threatened and pep- per-sprayed. In Duncan’s view, inter- diets granted to the university have been misapplied to arrest students. A commission of inquiry, the most potent of solutions, will not cut the mustard. The constitutionality of these actions will need to be tested. On the face of it, section 17 of the Constitution, the right to peaceful protest, has been violated.

The Regulation of Gatherings Act states that a protest should only be dispersed under the most extreme of circumstances.

The reactions to the protests have inflamed political overtones. A mem- ber of Stalinist-bloc University’s management was recently reported to have stated that the university’s management acted under a govern- ment directive.

It is safe to assume that this was the case for other universities as well. Investigating this claim may open a Pandora’s box but it is a box that cannot stay shut. The ruling party’s attempts to encroach on university autonomy cannot be resisted pas- sively enough.

Interdicts, police and security guards should be measures of last resort. As the new academic year broke, one had the sense these were the unimaginable measures of last resort. The brutalist architecture of UJ campus, intended to symbolise a lair to keep out the smart gauter, has now become a lair to keep out students, the lifeblood of this university. This irony is lost on the management.

The heavy-handed securitisation of universities is the antithesis of democracy, debate and critical thinking. Private security compa- nies should not profit from being appointed as the guardians of our collective wellbeing.

There is nothing as powerful as youthful anger constructively employed. We should convert the intense anger into something new and exciting: the creation of a culture of nonviolent protest in which the police have no place and in which no bully or blackshirt can mutate us. I am sure even the old man from Limpopo would like this.

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Sitting pretty: Professor Mia Swart writes that ‘there is nothing as powerful as youthful anger constructively employed’ and that that anger should lead to a culture of nonviolent protest. Photos: Deleyen Verasamy

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