

Chapter 10

Activation of Student Politics and Activism Through #FeesMustFall Campaign in South African Universities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter critically analyses the FeesMustFall (FMF) campaign led by tertiary students between 2015 and 2017 academic years and its impact in (de)activating student politics and activism at South African universities. Students through their various formations and movements went on a rampage. Considering the decline of students' activism compounded by the dominance of mainstream political parties on campuses, this chapter argues that the 2015-2017 FMF campaign revived the student movement and was fundamental in activating student politics and activism. The chapter argues that despite the sporadic activities led by students, the student movement's activism is in decline. Since this is qualitative study, data from secondary sources (books, accredited journals) were utilized, supplemented by empirical data from selected interviews with individual students and student movements involved in the FMF campaign.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter critically analyses the FeesMustFall (FMF) campaign led by tertiary students and student movements between 2015 and 2017 academic years and its impact in (de)activating student politics and activism at South African universities. Students through their various formations and movements went on the rampage demanding free, quality and decolonized education, thus challenging university management and the Higher Education Department to transform the higher education sector. The radical nature of the campaign made political and social commentators draw some similarities between FMF and the 1976 Students Revolt as both did not only look at students related challenges, but also highlighted issues pertaining to the broader socio-economic and political transformation. Considering the decline of students' activism compounded by the dominance of mainstream political parties on campuses, this chapter argues that the 2015-2016 FMF campaign revived the student movement. Students have endured harassment, detention and fatal death as part of the sacrifices for a transformed education. Their engagement in this campaign has also yielded some tangible victories. The establishment of the Heher Fees Commission (2017) and freezing tuition fees were some accounted victories won by the students. Of great importance to this chapter, is that the FMF campaign was fundamental in reviving and activating student politics and activism. The chapter argues that despite the sporadic activities led by students, the student movements' activism is in decline. The persistent and radical involvement in the FMF campaign did not only activate student movements and associations, but has also seen the radical EFF affiliated EFFSC ascending into student governance structures in universities such as Zululand, DUT and TUT. Overall, strategies utilized by students in the campaign were interrogated including those used by respective student movements such as PYA-SASCO, EFFSC, DASMO and PASMA. In addition, the militarisation of campuses with the presence of police has added interesting dynamics in these deliberations. The fierce competition mainly between SASCO and EFFSC formations for student governance manifested itself through the struggle to lead the FMF campaign. Since this is a qualitative study, data from secondary sources (books, accredited journals) were utilised and supplemented by selected interviews with students and leaders of the student movements.

BACKGROUND: PROFILE OF STUDENT POLITICS AND ACTIVISM

Student activism in Africa, including South Africa is attached to youth-student struggles pertaining to the broader socio-economic and political struggles as well

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