

16026 PROTEST ON SOUTH AFRICAN CAMPUSES

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Protesters set tires on fire. Police sprayed rubber bullets and tear gas on university campuses. Angry students danced a special dance made famous during protests against apartheid. It was like a scene from South Africa during the chaotic years of the 1980s; instead, it was last month.

The echoes of the struggle era were striking: white university students even moved to the front of protests in the belief that police would be less likely to open fire on them than on black students. Yet the differences are also striking: these protests are not directed at a parliament devoted to upholding white supremacy but at a democratically elected government controlled by the African national Congress, the party that brought in non-racial democracy under Nelson Mandela.

The protests started as scattered marches against plans to increase tuition fees by 10% at two of the country's best universities. Trouble had been brewing on campuses for months as student activists marched against racism – real or perceived – while demanding the “transformation” of universities. They complain that universities have too few black staff or students. This is true, but largely because, thanks to terrible schools, black South Africans still do much worse in exams than whites, something the government has failed to fix.

The protests are about far more than fees. Many students, and those who support them, complain about government corruption and its inability to deliver on many of the promises it made before assuming power in 1994, among them to provide free education. ‘Our parents were sold dreams in 1994. We’re just here for a refund,’ read one placard held by students in a march on the government buildings. The protests mark a political awakening for a generation of young people who were born after the end of apartheid and are known in South Africa as the ‘born frees’.

Now that young people have taken to the streets, however, the government is shaken. The president swiftly gave in to the protesters’ demands that university fees be frozen this year.

The students’ success seems to have done little to quiet them and their protests have inspired others. The new ultra left-wing party that won 6 per cent of the national vote in 2014, marched through the capital demanding, among other things, that the government should nationalize big companies. South Africa’s summer is likely to be a hot one.

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