

# **An Open Letter to Colleagues Critical of Campus Safety and Security Arrangements**

**Adam Habib**

Dear Colleagues

I write to you in my capacity as Vice-Chancellor and Principal, with the full support of the Senior Executive Team (SET).

In the past week, some of you have bluntly expressed concerns in public and directly to me about the decision of the Senior Executive Team to bring private security onto campus. For those of you who have raised these concerns, please allow me the privilege of being as bold and blunt in my response, in the interests of identifying the options that are available to us as a university community. Please also forgive me for the length of my reply, but I do think that it is necessary for everyone to comprehensively understand from where we are coming.

One of you has suggested that you cannot understand why we would have brought private security and police to the university. It would have been useful – perhaps even necessary – for this person to have determined this before pronouncing so categorically on our decision, and attempting to begin a global campaign on the issue. Nevertheless, let me provide some details. On Monday this past week a small group of students were not simply peacefully protesting and dissenting. Instead, they were actively preventing registration from taking place. They were abusive of people, threatening them, and in some cases people were locked up in their offices. There was one male protester who told a female staff member that he knows where she lives and will take her out. In addition, I received a number of written requests, including one from a student leader expressing fear about being violently targeted by the protesters. These actions represented 'violations of rights' and the abuse of other members of our university community. These actions and countless others by the protesters forced us to bring an end to face-to-face registration.

## **Consequences of postponement of registration**

Let me explain the net effect of stopping the registration process. We have two forms of registration, online and face-to-face, with telephone registration as a back-up to be instituted when required. Forcing us to cancel face-to-face registration adversely affected the poorest of those who wanted to register. Online registration enabled the middle and upper middle classes to continue with the process. They have online facilities and they have credit cards. They were not adversely affected, even if some may have been slightly inconvenienced. But the old man from Limpopo, who scraped whatever monies he could raise from family, friends and his community to ensure that his grandson registered, was severely impacted. He and his grandson travelled for hours, only to be told that he could not register because some group of activists had decided that they would shut down registration unless all historic debt had been cancelled and free education immediately granted. There were many such people on that day, and there were many more throughout the week. All attempts to get protesters to allow the registration to proceed came to naught.

## **Protecting the rights of all**

Were this grandfather and his grandson, as well as the countless others, not victims? Do they not require our sympathy and outrage? Do they not require our best institutional support to register and embark on an academic career? I have heard some academics express unhappiness at our use of private security both now and at the end of last year, but I have never heard any of these same academics express public outrage at the violation of the rights of others – whether those be the staff member whose life is threatened, the ill staff member who could not make a doctor’s appointment to obtain medication for a life threatening disease, or other student leaders who have been threatened and now feel silenced and unsafe. Are these not also members of our University community? Do we decide to ignore them simply because they do not carry the correct ideological line? Maybe it has to do with the fact that these individuals do not figure prominently within our networks or community, from whom we draw political affirmation. Is this why some of us are not concerned about their rights?

For those who have raised the security concerns, the challenge that we believe you need to consider is: how would you have enabled the grandfather from Limpopo to register his grandson? How else would you have protected the staff members and students that were being harassed and threatened? In fact, we are aware that some concluded in private conversations that took place regarding the security arrangements that they did not know what should be done and had no alternatives to suggest. Nevertheless, they still remain opposed to the security arrangements that have been made. The net effect of this position is that the poor student must be denied the right to register, and that the interests of staff and students who have been threatened should be ignored.

We are aware that this view is reflected by a minority of our academic colleagues only. The vast majority of our academic and professional and administrative staff have expressed support for our actions and we have the emails and correspondence to prove this. We know the typical response to this: they are seen as conservatives, opposed to the transformation of the University. Is this response not a tad arrogant? Should we allocate ourselves the right to label all those we disagree with as conservatives? And even if they are conservatives, why should their rights not be protected by the university like those of all others?

## **Decisions around security arrangements**

I want to assure you that we did not make the security arrangements lightly. I understand the disempowerment that one experiences from security arrangements that are outside of one’s control. I probably understand this more than many colleagues because I personally experienced what it meant to be imprisoned under state of emergency conditions. I experienced what it meant to be in solitary confinement, to be interrogated and to feel the fear that you may not see your loved ones again. I understand what it means to be deported by a foreign government without any just cause, or to be strip-searched in an airport in another country. I understand about being disempowered by arbitrary security actions. Other colleagues on the executive have had similar harsh experiences. Professor Tawana Kupe lived in Zimbabwe and has an acute understanding of the arbitrary use of power. Professor Zebon Vilakazi grew up in Katsheho and has very real personal

experiences of arbitrary violence. This is why we collectively would not make decisions like this lightly.

I also want to assure those who are concerned that claims that security assaulted students are untrue. We have viewed the video footage of last week's events and we have not found anything that supports these claims. On the contrary, there is video footage in which students can be seen to be engaging in threatening activities against security.

Many have asked why private security was brought in and not public order policing? The answer is simple: public order police would have immediately required a court order to become operational on campus. More importantly, once they are invited onto campus, one is not allowed to limit their operations or influence their tactics and strategies. With private security, such limitations can be imposed. We have insisted that no guns must be used in any operations. We therefore decided to deploy private security on campus, with public order police on standby. For those who were worried about this arrangement, would they have preferred that we brought the public order police onto campus immediately? Would that not have allowed for the use of rubber bullets and other actions as have happened in other university settings in recent weeks? Or would they have preferred that we simply have no one, and deny protection to both the staff members and students who were threatened and the grandfather from Limpopo who wanted to register his grandson?

Some may ask why we did not use our own campus security? This answer is also simple: they are not sufficiently trained for this scale of protest. We could bring in a more adequately trained campus security team but do we truly want a 'militarised' campus all year round when this scale of security and protection is not required? Does it not make sense to use the campus security that we have – perhaps more efficient and better trained – and bring in the enhanced security arrangements as and when they are required? This was the case this week and given this, we simply cannot accede to the request of some to remove our security arrangements, at least until we are guaranteed that registration will continue without disruption and that the safety and security of all staff and students will not be threatened.

Some of you have also requested that we should publish the contracts with the security companies, including the associated financial costs. We are not averse to making these contracts available at the appropriate time given that we are a public university. This information should be received bearing in mind that we have to balance our expenses on security with the academic, financial and reputational consequences of not having had any. It is also worth noting that a significant portion of the associated costs of our security arrangements may be covered by our insurance cover.

### **Complacency around violence**

I should perhaps sign off now that I have responded to the immediate issues, but I beg your indulgence to also raise some related matters. Many academics, now and before, have been involved in solidarity actions around the student and worker protests. This is legitimate and should be respected and valued at a university such as Wits. All of these individuals have also been critical of the executive's decisions around the management of this protest and our willingness to accede to the demands. Again this is their right. At some point we need to engage on how we understand

social action and how social outcomes are realised; the balance to be struck between protest and institutional engagement; the necessity of trade-offs and who should be responsible for these; and our response on the rise of racial essentialism within the midst of the protesting community. But those are debates for another time.

More immediately, I want to engage all of you on the complacency of some regarding violence or the threat of it within our protesting communities, and the political project of some actors to delegitimise institutional structures and replace them with revolutionary alternatives.

Many have stood firm against the presence of private security and public order police on campus, but have been shockingly sanguine about violence within the community of protesters. Many have simply turned a blind eye to violence or threats thereof, and some have even advocated violence as a legitimate means in a revolutionary moment. Really? At a university? In this moment, in a democratic era, whatever our criticisms of it? Is there not a romanticising of violence by middle class activists and academics? Have we truly considered the consequences of allowing violence to prevail within our community?

I worked in the townships around Pietermaritzburg – Mpophomeni, Sobantu, Imbali and Edendale – at the height of the ANC-Inkatha wars in the 1980s. The near civil war decimated the communities and undermined the possibility of any egalitarian project. If this is true of communities under economic pressure, how much more is it true of the University itself which is meant to be a free and safe space for all ideas? Can we truly extrapolate that because of the presence of structural violence as a result of neoliberalism and racial exclusion, personal violence can now be justified both within and outside of a university community? Even if one holds this view, is one not in violation of one's implicit and explicit social compact with the University community to protect all within it, and its broader project of learning?

For many, these protests are a struggle for free education for the poor. This is a legitimate struggle, as I and many of the Wits executive have so often argued. But many are also aware that for some, this struggle is more than that. It is a means to achieve other political ends, whether those are constructed around the upcoming elections, or to create a systemic crisis that collapses the Zuma administration. Again, those agendas are legitimate and allowed in a democratic environment dependent on how they are undertaken. I have personally also been publicly critical of this government, probably more than most have. However, as Vice-Chancellor of this institution, it is my responsibility to ensure that this University survives intellectually and is not a casualty in a broader political struggle within the society. Our individual social contracts with the University and with the broader academy are to protect the academic community and the learning project itself, whatever our other political agendas. We cannot sacrifice this institution or this academic project to the vagaries of our other political agendas. This is what governs our actions as an executive.

### **The need to learn from past mistakes**

Some may know that I worked at UDW in the 1990s. I was a general secretary of the union movement and an integral member of the concerned academic group. I, like some of you today, took positions against private security on campus, and to be fair, I too was sanguine about the

violence perpetrated by the protesters and dissidents with whom I associated. Then too, a moment emerged when some believed that they could replace the university structures with revolutionary alternatives, where non-violence was a bourgeois distraction, and where the university could be sacrificed to the broader political project for egalitarianism. Then too, colleagues ignored the capability and legitimacy of the state to respond. I did not believe in and was not comfortable with the tactics used, although I must say that I did share (and still do) the commitment to the broader project of egalitarianism and free education for the poor.

However, even though I was uncomfortable with the strategies and tactics, I was complacent about the violence and did not firmly enough register my opposition. Eventually the protesters did bring the university to a standstill through violence or the threat thereof. They did try to replace its statutory structures – the SRC, management, Senate and Council – with revolutionary alternatives. In the end, the state did move in, acted against the protesters and brought back stability to the campus. But the damage had been done. The university was intellectually decimated as its top students and academics had abandoned it. The middle and upper middle class student and academic activists, some with trust funds, slunk away. Some of the academics with second passports simply moved back to their home countries. By the time I left, the Faculty of Humanities had a single professor, who served as dean. The real casualties of this experiment were not the activists and academics who had romanticised violence, even though some of them individually suffered. It was the poor black students who had no other alternative but to continue to go to that university.

This is the real fear I have. I vowed then never to repeat that mistake. I will never remain silent and allow a culture of violence and ungovernability to prevail within an institution of learning. I will never remain silent when a university and its learning project is being sacrificed to broader political goals, however attractive they may be. I learnt then, through hard experience, the real responsibility of the academic in a transforming university.

### **Preventing an egalitarianism of poverty**

I urge you to consider one other point. Many of us had the privilege to study in the universities of North America or Western Europe, some even in the Ivy leagues like Chicago and Yale. But if we are to address the inequalities of our world, including those in the academy, then it is essential that we establish our own research intensive universities. Wits should be one of these, not only because of our strong intellectual legacy, but also because of the fact that we are far more demographically representative than any of our research intensive peers. For us to succeed in our research intensive goals, however, we need to protect this institution as we navigate the current turbulent political times. We need to ensure that we make decisions and undertake trade-offs that do not unravel the foundations of our research intensive capabilities. We must not pursue a strategy of realising an egalitarianism of poverty for it would reinforce the very inequalities of our world. To avoid this, it is important to know our history, especially in higher education. It is important to learn about our experiments, failed and successful, at transformation and institutional reform. It is important to know this simply so that we can collectively learn from the mistakes of our past. I have seen some of the proposals recommending institutional reform, and I was struck by how often they seemed ignorant of our past experiments and de-contextualized from our realities.

Finally, the issues facing the entire university system are access and funding. These cannot be resolved immediately and independently by Wits as an institution. We do not have the resources to do so. The issue needs to be dealt with in a coordinated way – involving students and management and other actors in the national system. The current strategy of shutting down the University is, in our view, detrimental to the task of building a transformed and academically excellent institution. While we support the overall aims and want to build a powerful alliance, the current strategy is not one that the University management can support. While we respect and will protect the right to protest, at the same time we have to ensure that the University is able to continue with its core activities. This is our responsibility. There will be times when protesters embark on actions that challenge the functioning of the University in ways that have far-reaching effects. We then have the unenviable task of making difficult decisions in order to protect the rights of ALL students but particularly the poorest students who cannot afford the loss of the academic calendar. We have to facilitate access of all students to the University, even while protest unfolds.

I urge you to think through some of these issues, and I would be happy to engage further with any of you should you want to do so.

Sincerely

*Professor Adam Habib on behalf of the Senior Executive Team of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

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