

Three South African Universities Closed Due to Student Unrest. ANC Charges “Regime-Change Strategy” Implicating US

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Global Research, March 01, 2016

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

During the week of February 22 North-West University (NWU) at Mafiking in Potchefstroom, the University of Pretoria (UP) at Hatfield and Groenkloof as well as the University of the Free State (UFS) in Bloemfontein were closed after arson attacks and student clashes erupted.

At NWU buildings were burned after protest over tuition costs and the removal of the elected Student Representative Council (SRC). University officials removed the student council group led by Benz Mabengwane, who is associated with the opposition political party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

Some reports suggest that the ousted Council was expelled because of their role in recent protests on the campus.

Chairpersons of Council sub-committees were appointed to take over the SRC at NWU prompting unrest. Supporters of the Mabengwane group disrupted the inauguration ceremony for the appointed council members.

University security personnel later used teargas and rubber bullets to break up demonstrations.

EFF spokesperson of the dissolved student council, Rebaone Pudi, said management was “quick to appoint those who will succumb to their demands. They have appointed their own people and they can’t expect them to be acknowledged by students as their leaders and trust them to represent their interests. Management wants leaders who can agree to financial exclusion of students and we’re not going to accept that.” (City Press, Feb. 24)

Pudi went on to say that “The university has also been spending money on armed private security while they wanted poor students to go back home. We demand the demilitarization of our university so we won’t see any more live ammunition being used on students.”

NWU spokesman Koos Degenaar told students to “leave the campus immediately for their own safety and return home. It is likely to take a considerable period of time to restore operations. Students will be given at least a month’s notice of the re-opening of the campus.” (Independent, UK, Feb. 25)

Another campus organization, the South African Students Congress (SASCO), which has historically supported the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, also disagreed with the removal of the SRC group led by Mabengwane.

“We can’t have a student council that was elected by management representing students. They will obviously represent no one else’s interests but those of management,” Karabo Kau, SASCO chairperson at NWU. (City Press, Feb. 24)

“Today’s protest was due to the unhappiness of the general student population, and for raising their dissatisfaction the response they got were rubber bullets and live ammunition. A pregnant lady miscarried right after she was shot and at least 10 students were taken away for medical attention, Kau said.”

University of Pretoria Closed After Clashes

At the University of Pretoria fights broke out between Black and white students over the continuing instruction in some course in the Afrikaans language of the white settlers under colonialism and apartheid. Although many Africans due to the legacy of white domination speak Afrikaans as well, many feel that the language should not be utilized in the various universities in numerous classes.

Universities in South Africa offer courses in both English and Afrikaans. However, with the concerns mounting over rising tuition costs and the continuing disparities in income and wealth between Black and white populations groups, these social variables are fueling tensions over access to higher education.

Those who are not fluent in Afrikaans face a fundamental disadvantage when there are lectures delivered in classes where only the language of the settlers is utilized. Consequently, such a language policy within higher education serves as a means of reserving a quota of faculty positions and university student admissions for whites who are of Afrikaner descent.

On February 19 at the University of Pretoria Hatfield and Groenkloof campuses, student supporters of the opposition party EFF Student Command fought with members of AfriForum Youth, an Afrikaner cultural group, which took opposing sides over an amended language policy of instruction. Over 20 people were arrested in the disturbances prompting the suspension of classes for six days.

This proposal was that English be used as a primary language of instruction in all classes, and that Afrikaans and Sepedi be used for additional support to students in tutorials and practicals. Afrikaans-speaking students protested that it was a direct attack on their culture and heritage.

Classes resumed at the UP campuses on February 29 amid tight security.

University of the Free State Erupts

At the University of the Free State (UFS), Black and white students fought during a rugby game after tensions flared. African students have accused the administration of failing to transform the campus to reflect the majority population inside the country.

Classes resumed at UFS on February 29 while student leaders said they were still committed to demanding the resignation of the Vice Chancellor Jonathan Jansen at the institution. SRC President Lindokuhle Ntuli said that students would not disrupt any classes.

“We are not against the university or the white students; we are against the oppressive system. The university still has a predominately white image and culture and we want the university to reflect all races,” Ntuli said. (news24.com, Feb. 29)

On February 23, protesters toppled and damaged a statue of Charles Robberts Swart at the University. C.R. Swart was the last Governor General of the Union of South Africa until 1961, and was president of the Republic of South Africa from 1961 to 1967.

Demonstrators burned tires at the statue while using hammers and rocks to tear it down.

Later on February 25, campus security personnel were deployed to prevent the statue of Marthinus Theunis Steyn from being damaged. Steyn was the sixth and last president of the Boer-dominated Orange Free State from 1896 to 1902.

ANC Charges Regime-Change Strategy Implicating the United States

These developments have been condemned by President Jacob Zuma who said “No amount of anger should drive students to burn their own university and deny themselves and others education.” (Associated Press, Feb. 25)

On February 19, ANC Secretary General Gwede Mantashe, accused the U.S. embassy of fomenting violence inside the country aimed at the overthrow of the government while speaking before a large crowd of party supporters. The ruling party had organized a gathering of 87,000 in Pretoria to “defend the revolution,” according to the Mantashe.

He cautioned South Africans about listening to advice from “the enemy.” The Secretary General said “We are a majority. We should be able to take decisions and enforce them.” (News24.com)

Mantashe said the South African government was aware of a program which sent youth to the U.S. for six weeks and then “plants them everywhere” when they re-enter the country.

“As we mobilize our people, we must be vigilant. You must see through anarchy and people who are out there in a program of regime change. We are aware of the meetings taking place regularly at the American embassy, Mantashe stressed.”

U.S. Ambassador to South Africa, Patrick Gaspard, made light of the accusations from the ANC saying “I’m so disappointed as I always imagined that if I organized a coup it would look like Mardi Gras – food, music, dance.” (News24.com, Feb. 22)

In relationship to the accusations made by Mantashe, News24.com said “Gaspard pointed out that the program to take young South Africans to the U.S. for six weeks was the Mandela Washington Fellowship, which forms part of the Young African Leadership Initiative. It was launched by President Barack Obama with the aim of supporting young African leaders to help strengthen democratic governance and enhance peace and security across Africa.” (Feb. 22)

The South African economy has continued to suffer amid a drastic decline in commodity prices and the devaluation of its currency.

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