

Students in South Africa Protest Slow Pace of Change

By Norimitsu Onishi
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Students at the main campus of the University of Cape Town. Black South Africans make up 24 percent of the student body. Credit Joao Silva

CAPE TOWN — It was only when he landed at the University of Cape Town, a bastion of the fight against apartheid, that Ramabina Mahapa became truly conscious of his race.

Mr. Mahapa, 23, grew up in a village with only black South Africans, and he graduated at the top of his high school class. But when he got to the University of Cape Town, the gap between black and white students became clear to him: Of the 15 people who owned cars in his dorm, only one was black. When the first test results came in, the black students ranked at the bottom.

“That’s why I then started feeling black,” said Mr. Mahapa, who was born two years before the end of apartheid and is now a third-year psychology and

philosophy major, as well as the president of the university's student government.

“Even when I occasionally would see pictures on TV about apartheid, you never internalized it or thought about it — up until you come to a space where you actually experience it,” he added.

Mr. Mahapa stood recently outside the student government office, which demonstrators had occupied in the latest of a series of protests that have made this liberal campus a potent symbol of the lack of change in post-apartheid South Africa. The numbers, in a country where 80 percent of the population is black, are stark: Black South Africans make up less than a quarter of the university's student body, and they account for just 5 percent of members of the faculty.

The protests that roiled this campus, the country's most prestigious public university, have quieted for now. But they have spread to other institutions with similar problems, including Stellenbosch University, whose campus less than an hour east of here has been dominated by demonstrations in the past week.

The student actions have shed light on a much broader national dissatisfaction with the glacial pace of transformation, as South Africa's policy of giving blacks equal representation is called.

In today's South Africa, forged in negotiations between the African National Congress and the former apartheid government in 1994, whites retain disproportionate power over the economy and other important sectors, like higher education. Transformation is widely seen as having greatly benefited a small, politically connected black elite, while bringing much less to the broader population.



A statue of Cecil Rhodes, a British imperialist who donated land to the University of Cape Town, once stood on the campus. An unknown artist painted the shadow of the statue where it once fell. Credit Joao Silva

“During the protests, you had a lot more people questioning the project of 1994, and condemning it,” said Rekgotsofetse Chikane, 24, another student leader at the University of Cape Town, adding that the criticism extended to former President Nelson Mandela. “If Mandela wasn’t safe, no leader was.”

Mr. Chikane took part in protests and in the occupation of administrative buildings, where students held marathon reading sessions of Frantz Fanon, an anti-colonialist author, and Steve Biko, the South African leader of the black consciousness movement.

The protesters’ rallying cry is the need to “decolonize” the university. They are calling for more black faculty members, continued affirmative action policies to increase the number of black students, and a curriculum that is less Eurocentric and more African-oriented.

“It’s a combination of national, political unresolved issues and the students’ own personal search for issues of identity and meaning,” said Xolela Mangcu, an associate professor of sociology at the university and one of the national leaders in the debate over transformation in higher education.

The slow pace of change at the nation’s 26 public universities — where only 14 percent of full professors are black — has more far-reaching consequences for South Africa than does transformation in other institutions, critics say.

Malegapuru William Makgoba, who leads the government’s transformation oversight committee on higher education and was formerly principal of the University of KwaZulu Natal, said that white administrators and senior faculty members, who continue to wield power over hiring, promotion and the curriculum, resisted change. A generation after the end of apartheid, in 1994, white South Africans want to keep molding the nation’s future leaders, he said.

“The only way they can legitimize themselves is to befriend black people who can be their spokespersons and who can drive their values,” Mr. Makgoba said of white South Africans. “What happens, in essence, is that you change the government from white to black, but you choose the blacks” who will protect white values, he added.

Here at the University of Cape Town, widely considered the continent’s best institution of higher learning, discontent among black students had been brewing for years. But the recent protests here — as well as elsewhere in the country — were set off by an unusual act of defiance.



A cafeteria courtyard in the main campus of the University of Cape Town. CreditJoao Silva/

In March, a student threw excrement at a statue of Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist who donated land to the university. Students here and elsewhere call their movement “Rhodes Must Fall.”

The statue, at the heart of the campus, had long been the object of student protests. But things were different this time.

Dr. Max Price, the vice chancellor of the university, said he had been surprised by the enduring reaction against the statue, given that earlier demonstrations had fizzled.

“It tapped into — and a statue was a perfect way of articulating — the sense of alienation that black students feel on this campus,” he said. “The culture of the place feels white. The architecture is a European, Oxbridge architecture. Obviously, the language of instruction is English. The culture of what’s held up to be excellent universities and excellent science, and what we emulate and aspire to be, are the Ivy League universities and European universities.”

Dr. Price pointed to signs of progress since the end of apartheid. The number of students from other African nations has risen sharply, highlighting the university’s increasing ties with the rest of the continent. The percentage of black South African students has also risen, to 24 percent last year from 18 percent in 1994, although the increase has been held back by South Africa’s weak primary and secondary schools, he said.

The single area in which the university has “failed completely,” Dr. Price said, is in hiring more black members of faculty. Talented black South Africans do not gravitate to academia, he said, but are often plucked instead by the government or the private sector.

What’s more, Dr. Price said, it simply takes time for an academic to rise through the ranks to become a full professor. It would take one more

generation for blacks to make up a majority of full professors at South Africa's public universities, Dr. Price said, and two generations to match the percentage of the South African population that is black.

Mr. Mangcu, the sociologist and a leading critic of the lack of change at South Africa's universities, agreed with Dr. Price's assessment. But he said that changes in hiring and promoting could quickly establish "a critical mass" of black faculty members who would change the environment and intellectual discourse on the campus.



Lindokuhle Patiwe, an 18-year-old student, grew up in a poor township outside Cape Town. Credit: Joao Silva/

The recent protests drew a diverse group of black students, and class divisions simmered below the surface.

Lindokuhle Patiwe, 18, grew up in a poor township outside Cape Town. He lived with his family — his mother, a brother and two cousins — in a public housing unit that his mother, a child-care worker, bought in 2000. On the 25th of each month, the mother's payday, the family went out to eat at McDonald's.

"For someone from the townships, coming from there to here is a huge change," Mr. Patiwe said. "No one goes into your face and says, 'You're not welcome here.' No one says that you don't belong here. But it's just that the structure, and the environment itself, says that I'm not welcome here."

Mr. Patiwe's mother worried that participating in the protests would get him expelled. "She was not impressed at all," he said. "I don't have a trust fund to go back to."

For Mr. Chikane, the 24-year-old student leader, and his family, post-apartheid South Africa has brought great opportunities. The son of a famous anti-apartheid leader, the Rev. Frank Chikane, he grew up in Soweto, the

township outside Johannesburg. But he had attended private schools as a child, and his family had moved to a gated community north of the city.

Just as the protests drew Mr. Chikane and Mr. Patiwe, they also attracted the participation of gay people, students of mixed race, anarchists and other marginalized groups.

“The elephant in the room was class,” Mr. Chikane said. “Class was never discussed. It was neatly swept underneath the rug.”

“I knew that if you bring up class too early in this organization, all you would do is to split the black students,” he added. “Then it would be blacks-who-have and blacks-who-don’t-have. And at U.C.T., you can see that quite blatantly.”

The movement has held together, at least for now. The students realized their first goal by pressing the university to remove the statue of Rhodes. A few days later, though, students woke up to see that a shadow had been painted on the ground, as if cast by the fallen monument