**June is Youth Month**

In the global context of youth movements, there is no doubt about the critical role played by the youth at different epochs in the global historical timeline, with South Africa being no different. Young people, given their unencumbered view about the world, have, throughout history, proven to be catalysts for social change.

The prime example of this is the role played by the ANC Youth League of the 1940s by industrious, consummate and daring souls such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Dr Lionel Majombozi, Victor Mbombo, and Williams Nkomo (an active member of the Communist Party of South Africa and a medical student at the time). At the time, the young firebrands sought to inculcate a new political culture that would see the routine and timid deputations to the imperial Britain by the ANC’s top brass with strategies and tactics that were more action-oriented, brisk and militant.

In his autobiography, Mandela somehow critical of the strategy and tactics by the top brass was more emphatic in what he saw as a rather timid approach to a more brutal and repressive British colonial rule. In his criticism, which was widely shared by the young lions at the time, he chides that the leadership “had been susceptible to paternalistic British colonialism and the appeal of being perceived by whites as cultured, progressive, and civilised”.

Up until the ANC Youth League revolution of the 1940s, the ANC, as the young Mandela and his peers saw it, exuded the kind of manner and spirit commensurate with idiosyncrasies of the colonising centre. For this generation of youth, it had become apparent that in order to engage gainfully with the oppressors, they needed to adapt the oppressor’s methods to their own advantage. It was to be the tenacity of the young people at the time, most of whom students at tertiary institutions, that eased the liberation struggle into a new era and thus paving a way for the formation of the ANC’s armed wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe in 1961.

History is replete with examples of young people as agents for social change. Given the apparent lull in the political stratosphere as a result of the banning of the ANC and the PAC as well as other organised anti-apartheid formations including the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), it was again the young people of the 1970s that took charge of the political vacuum in the midst of apartheid repression. It was young people who took the initiative and heightened the level of political consciousness among the oppressed. It was these young people who looked critically at the black condition and concluded that in order for black people to defeat the demon of apartheid including its aspects of cultural imperialism, the black sense of self needed some serious affirmation by the oppressed blacks themselves. This paved the way for black consciousness movement, which, understandably at the time was meant to be an overarching political philosophy around which the black masses and their various political formations coalesced. The assassination of Steve Biko was meant to put brakes to what had already become a groundswell movement.

June 16th commemorations also are closely attached to the historical events of 1976 in Soweto, where hordes of learners took to the streets to protest against the arbitrary introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction for public schools. Of course, it also needs to be noted here that while on the surface, the issue might seem to be Afrikaans, the Afrikaans matter was only employed as a proxy for the broader struggle for liberation. Afrikaans was therefore used as a launching pad from which to challenge the apartheid government repression. On that day, thousands of learners from Soweto gathered at schools assemblies across the township for a student-organised protest action. At the very heart of the student mass protests also was the broader question around Bantu Education as an apartheid policy intervention while acknowledging that broader goal of total liberation also inspired the student movement of the time. The central meeting point on that day was 4

Orlando Stadium where a major student protest rally had been planned. En-route to the stadium, the students were met with a heavy police presence who tried to disperse the crowds through teargas and warning shots, then without notice, the police opened live ammunition, and in the process claimed the lives of Hastings Ndlovu and Hector Peterson. The shootings in Soweto sparked a massive uprising that soon spread to over a 100 urban and rural areas across the country. It is important to point out at this instance that although Youth Day has historical ties to the events in Soweto on 16 June 1976, the day is not an exclusive preserve for Soweto. Rather, Soweto is being used as a flag bearer or as an ideological/commemorative embodiment for the rest of the other youth struggles elsewhere in the country and the many innocent lives of young people that were lost in the process. Further, June 16th is a national commemorative day for all other youth struggles for a fairer and equitable society.

There is often a temptation to draw historical parallels between the events of June 16 1976 with the current turbulence and youth militancy in most of our tertiary institutions. While the sudden heightened activism explicates some level of political and social solidarity, themselves hallmarks of a healthy and vibrant constitutional democracy, there is some level of propriety that is worryingly somewhat absent in the current struggles. For instance, destruction of property, endangering of lives and blatant violation of fundamental basic human rights of others in the form of physical harm and intimidation have become characteristic of modern student struggles and this is a marked departure from struggle traditions of the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, while the #feesmustfall illustrated that human solidarity was still possible around a set of common goals, the idea that chaos must be a permanent modus operandi is worrisome as it has the potential to undermine the broader students struggle and the sound objective that undergird the struggle.