

# YOUTH LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM STUDENT MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

KB Shai  
University of Limpopo

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the part played by student movements in boosting the prospects of youth being considered as prospective candidates in the electoral lists of democratic South Africa's political parties. The youth constitute the highest number of potential voters in South Africa's polls; and, evidence demonstrates that youth activism and energy is commonly sought by political parties during electoral campaigns. Despite this, the representation of youth as candidates for South Africa's political parties is below expectation; except for the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The poor representation of youth as candidates in the majority of South Africa's political parties raises questions in terms of their (political parties) commitment to youth development. As such, this paper is an attempt to find answers for the following two central research questions: (1) To what extent do the students influence party politics? (2) Are the student's active citizens? The author interrogates these questions using an Afrocentric research methodology, which reinforces the dominant qualitative paradigm. This article concludes that most of student movements in South Africa are used to fight factional battles and in the process; do very little to push for the inclusion of youth candidates during the elections.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Political Parties, Youth, Student Movements

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, youth constitute a large portion of most countries and regions. In the case of Africa, it is estimated that 65% of its 1.1 billion populace is under the age of 35 (African Youth and Governance Conference Initiative, 2015). In South Africa, Tracey (2016) notes that during the first Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa's (IEC) voter registration weekend for the 2016 Municipal elections, young people under the age of 30 accounted "for as much as 78.6% of new registrations". This positive development on South Af-

rica's political landscape is something that political parties and observers cannot afford to overlook. It also reignites the interest on youth matters by both politicians and scholars following the #fees must fall campaign across the entire sector of South Africa's higher education since the last quarter of the year 2015 (Buys, 2016; Mancu, 2016; National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union, NEHAWU 2016).

The impressive registration of youth during the IEC's March 2016 registra-

tion drive is a departure from general voter apathy among youth ranks and South Africans at large (Kivilu, Davids, Langa, Maphunye Mncwango, Sedumedi & Struwig, 2005; Shultz-Herzenberg, 2014). That is to say that since the second democratic and inclusive elections in 1999, the number of South Africans and youth in particular, with an interest in electoral matters has dwindled. This dwindling in terms of the total number of potential voters and voters among the youth category is concerning especially if one is to consider that vote franchise is a right that Africans have been deprived from exercising before the dawn of democracy in the early 1990s. It is also worrisome if one is to consider the fact that so many people have sacrificed their lives so that all South Africans across the colour, aged 18 and above could be afforded with an opportunity to vote for their government (Shai, 2009).

One of the dominant narratives of voter apathy among the youth has been the fact that most of them (current crop) have not experienced the wrath of the inhumane and evil system of apartheid. Hence, it is not surprising that to a reasonable extent; they do not appreciate some of the opportunities availed by the new democratic dispensation. These opportunities include the right to vote. No matter the merits and demerits of the youth's disinterestedness on electoral matters in the recent past; it is the well-considered view of this article that the dominant narrative highlighted above only offers a partial guide to understanding the changing voting patterns and culture of South Africans. It is argued that the

renewed interest of the youth on electoral matters can be understood within the context that issues that are directly affecting them (that is, education) are dominating the agenda of the present public and political discourse in South Africa (Mancu, 2016; NEHAWU, 2016).

From the developments at the local, continental and international level, there is no gainsaying that the wave of democratisation has presented both challenges and opportunities for the youth in South Africa, Africa and the world at large. Some of these challenges are new and others are historical, but they represent themselves with modern features. As such, different countries have identified various months for bemoaning challenges faced by the youth and for celebrating the opportunities enjoyed by the youth.

For instance, in the Caribbean islands, February is considered as a special month in the political calendar of Cuba. Thus, it is in this month in 1959 that Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro became the country's youngest ever Prime Minister *cum* President (Thaba, 2016). This milestone has served as an inspiration, courage and a lesson that young people also have a "transformist" role in their countries. In South Africa, June is generally regarded as the youth month. It was in this month during the year 1976 that students in Soweto and South Africa at large; waged wide range campaigns rejecting Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in teaching and learning (Vuma, 2013).

Some of the post-1994 prominent leaders in South Africa belong to the "1976 generation of students". Considering this, it is befitting to argue that their elevation into the political and government circles of the democratic state has also carried hopes for the expression of the interests, aspirations and frustrations of the youth. Although the political, material and socio-economic conditions of Cuba and South Africa differ; the two countries have a lot of lessons to learn from one another because both nations are developing countries. Against this background, this paper employs the triangulation of Afrocentric and qualitative research methods to: (1) determine the extent to which student movements influence party politics (2) establish the role of students in the various activities of their allied-political parties. It is emphasised that the epistemic location of this paper is the Afrocentric paradigm as articulated by scholars such as Asante (2003) and Modupe (2003), *inter alia*.

## 2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to provide a definition to the key concepts related to the topical question under consideration: (1) Student movements and (2) youth; it is observable that the definition of concepts in humanities and social sciences, in particular, is always a contested issue among academics, practitioners, analysts and commentators (Shai, 2013: 91). For the purpose of this paper, student movements refer to the organised networks of learners and/or students that agitate for political, economic and socio-cultural change at both the basic and/or tertiary ed-

ucational landscape. While the term "student movements" is generally tied to student formations at institutions of higher learning, it is worth noting that their struggles are traditionally waged around issues of student funding, accommodation and curriculum development (Vuma, 2013).

On the other hand, "youth" denotes young people in the age range of 14 and 35 years. These young people are found inside and outside the formal school system. Since university student political activists are also members of the society, it is notable that the membership of student movements and youth organisations outside the education sector overlaps one another. This development has also meant that student grievances also include unemployment, limited business opportunities, substance abuse, poverty, inequality and retarded levels of socio-economic development. This shows the difficulty in perceiving the youth as constituting a homogenous category. Contextually, an overlap in terms of the membership and challenges of both student movements and broad youth formations makes it difficult to separate them (National Youth Commission, 2002). To compound matters to an already worse situation, a trend is currently emerging on South Africa's political landscape wherein wider youth organisations including those of the African National Congress (ANC) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) contest Student Representative Council (SRC) elections at tertiary institutions of learning. This precedent means that these formations have assumed the dual identity, both as youth

movements and student movements.

## **2.1. Afrocentric Paradigm and Analysis of Qualitative Data**

In this paper a clear distinction between the theory of Afrocentricity and Afrocentric research methodology is drawn. While this article is located within the qualitative research methodology and it employed the Afrocentric research methodology as it enables in-depth and detailed analyses within the context of a limited number of persons, but reduces the potential generalisation of the findings (Mafisa & Mtati, 2009: 7).

However, this paper is critical of the mainstream research paradigms in social sciences due their location within the Western world view. Inasmuch as the Afrocentric paradigm is generally considered as a re-enforcer of qualitative research methodology, it is introduced in this paper as an alternative to the dominant research paradigms, which are largely rooted within a Euro-American world view (interview, University of Limpopo's Psychology Professor, 13 February 2015). The competing narratives about the dominance and location of mainstream research paradigms is well-captured by Scheurich & Young (1997: 9) who correctly assert that "dominant epistemologies are a product of White social history". Nonetheless, the Afrocentric research methodology and qualitative research methodology have shared characteristics in that both of them "assume that people employ interpretive schemes which must be understood and that the character of the local context

must be articulated" (Mkabela, 2005: 188; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013: 3). The foregoing argument is backed up by Mkabela (2005) who notes that the principles underpinning the Afrocentric research methodology and qualitative research methodology are common. However, the Afrocentric research methodology is driven by the ideals, interests and needs of Africa and people of African descent across the globe; but it is colour blind (Asante, 1990; Welsing, 2015). In this context, this paper largely relied on document analysis. This was complemented with interview data. The latter was generated through semi-structured interviews with 6 respondents, who were purposively selected from youth leaders and academics at the universities of Limpopo and Venda. It is important to note that for the purpose of this study, written and spoken text were not analysed separately because they are considered as complimenting each other and the possibility of treating and classifying them as mutually exclusive is dismissed (interview, University of Limpopo's History Lecturer, 12 February 2015).

## **2.2. Bridging the Gap between Policy, Theory and Practice in Party Politics**

In South Africa, students at both high school level and universities have been instrumental in deepening the struggle against the evil, inhumane and brutal system of apartheid. For example, historical and Political archives have it on good record that the 1976 Soweto Uprising was led by high school students. Furthermore, according to the State of the Youth Report (2002: 3) "what

started as student movement in 1969 with the formation of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) became a wider national youth movement against the hostile economic, social, political and educational conditions imposed by the apartheid system". Contextually, the 1976 generation that led the Soweto Uprising were influenced by the revolutionary theory and ideology of SASO and other liberation movements with cells or hide-nests in institutions of higher learning including then University College of the North (Badat, 1999). Linked to the discourse on institutions of high learning as the site of the struggle against apartheid, the University College of the North (now University of Limpopo) has produced and/or nurtured liberation pioneers such as Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro, Peter Mokaba, Cyril Ramaphosa, Barney Pityana, Mosiuoa "Terror" Lekota, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe and many others.

Given the prominent role of student movements in the struggle against apartheid, it is legitimate to expect political parties to consider youth representation in their candidate lists for municipal, provincial and national elections in the new democratic dispensation. However, age should not be the only criterion for this selection or nomination. Issues of political maturity, mental capacity and capability to engage with the policy discourse of the day must be used as a point of departure. The legitimate expectation to have youth representatives in candidate lists can be well and appropriately justified by the continual existence and relevance of student

movements in the new South Africa. Hence, student activists are generally considered as the sub-category of intellectuals (Mashayekhi, 2001). To this end, the intellectual orientation of the student activists puts them at the edge of leading the urgent task (at least theoretically) for the South African nation to embark on a National Programme of Political Literacy. Closely related to this, Nkondo (2012: 18) observes that "political literacy constitutes the only sure avenue of opportunity to build a responsible citizenry, the only way of combating most of the heated but blind debates that now condemn South Africans to anxiety, astonishment and bewilderment".

In the same breath, this political discourse was advanced by the former President Thabo Mbeki. While addressing African student leaders at the University of Cape Town in September 2010, he strongly opined that "Like the rest of the African masses, I am convinced that you, our student leaders and the students you lead, will not disappoint our expectation that you will use your considerable capacity as young African intellectuals both to comprehend and educate us about our African past and contemporary reality, to better empower us to understand what we need to do today and tomorrow" (Mbeki, 2010: 10). The dichotomy between Nkondo and Mbeki's convictions is testimony to the gigantic task lying ahead of the student movements and youth in general in terms of the reconstruction and development of South Africa.

Despite this, this article advances that the youth are included in these lists simply because they have proved to be “a special category of the voting population” in South Africa. This category (youth) can swing votes to go either way. Viewing the youth as “vote-swingers” speaks to the reasons why they are often included in political party lists. Young voters can simply vote a certain political party upon knowing that one of their own has been included on the party list. In contradistinction, in some cases the youth are used to fight factional battles within political parties (Intra-ANC; intra Cope, Intra EFF etc.) where they are included in election lists to diffuse or dilute these intra-party tensions or factional fights (interview, University of Limpopo's Sociology Lecturer, 14 February 2015).

Sadly, the prevailing cultural conditions in South Africa have produced a dominant mode of politics which does not have respect for principle and intellectualism (interview, University of Venda's History Lecturer, 13 February 2015). It is not uncommon to hear South African politicians in private alluding that “you can't eat a principle or morality”. Such narrow arguments have been politically and historically justified by others who proclaimed in public that they did not “join the struggle to be poor” (Mpumelelo, 2011). This moral dilemma should be understood within the context of Ramose's (2002) thesis that Ubuntu is the root of African culture. However, emerging trends in the practice of politics in Africa and South Africa in particular show that money and material benefits have eroded the humanist essence of Afri-

can culture (Ramose, 2002). This is a situation that makes it difficult for student movements to successfully agitate for the inclusion of development-driven young people in the candidate lists of political parties. This point was equally and succinctly captured by Isaak (1985: 272) when he lamented that “When a society values economic activities above all else, business leaders gain control”. This is an unfortunate situation that entrenches the dominant mode of politics which is in a crisis and ought to be transformed, as a matter of urgency if the democracy of South Africa is to be sustainable (Djanie, 2016).

It is for this reason that the envisaged generational mix of political parties' candidate lists is often invisible at certain levels of political contestation and not clear in others. This can be partly attributed to the fact that organisational interests are often sacrificed in favour of personal interests. Clientelism, patronage and *rent-seeking* have become the vices of modern politics. In most cases, votes are used in exchange for jobs, positions and so on (Nyawasha, 2015). In relation to this, one former student leader retorts that:

Students have always played a pivotal role in mobilising support for their mother bodies. Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) have the only one strongest and vibrant structure which is the Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania (PASMA). It relies on us for support. We have always fought for representation in the party. Our National PASMA president is the ex officio of the PAC NEC and this allows us to be

represented well. In the party list to the IEC, we elect at least five people from the youth ranks to be in the top twenty. Unfortunately, we have not had any young person in parliament as a result of the party's dismal electoral performance. There is also an internal democracy in the party wherein young leaders compete to be in the list and branches (including campus-based special branches) demonstrate support to their favourite candidate(s). This has again caused many problems for the PAC whereby the student movement is occasionally used to fight mother body's internal strife. We are then promised top positions or funding for personal or branch survival in return (interview, PAC leader, 14 February 2015).

Conversely, it is also safe to argue that it is common practice within the South African political terrain for delegates (including those from student movements) to be given a particular mandate by off-campus leaders to vote in a certain manner, which may not necessarily be in the best interest of credible and fair representation of youth in the candidate lists of their respective parties. Ironically, such behind-the-scenes manipulation of voting during lists conference of various political parties are often characterised by total disregard for leadership credentials and experience in favour of attributes ranging from trustworthiness, solidarity and loyalty. Equally important, student activists are often bought with money, alcohol, promise of jobs and other material benefits in order to suppress the emergence of genuine representatives of the youth

on the candidate lists of various parties across the spectrum (interview, Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) leader, 12 February 2015). While this tendency constitutes the erosion of intra-party democracy and it is well known within the political circles, there seems to be no or limited practical measures undertaken to contain its escalation.

That there is no concrete action to end the unethical conduct which is characteristic of the relations between political parties and their allied-student movements and youth wings is analogous to the uncertainty of the future of democracy in South Africa. This should be worrying for all South Africans across the political divide. Hence, the erosion of democratic practices within political parties constitutes an overall threat to the sustainability of democracy in the country. This claim is guided by the general understanding that political parties are the key stakeholders for democratisation in the country and if its broader democracy is to be sustained, it ought to be rooted from within them.

While it is true that some student movements' capacity to influence developments within political parties is at times compromised by external forces, it is also correct to state that such movements are in certain instances also hesitant to rally behind and offer real support to certain potential candidates who did not rise within their rank and file. More importantly, student movements without an *umbilical cord* attached to a particular party often find internal resistance from the general membership in its quest to influence the content and direction of the lead-

ership of any given political party. In the same vein, the membership and leadership of established parties often do not accept nomination of potential candidates by student movements who are not affiliated to them. There is no gainsaying that the cauldron of the mixture of factors that incapacitate or disinterest student movements to be actively engaged with internal party dynamics to ensure real youth representation in the candidate lists of political parties robs South Africa of the wealth composite of new ideas, actions, values and victories.

The failure of the student movements to correct this abnormal situation within South Africa's political parties was well captured by the legendary Mphahlele (2002: 6-7), when he asserted that "[T]he South African ruling class believes innovation is equivalent to opposition – which it does not allow". Although, it may be difficult to find lasting solutions to the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality, the first step in this journey should be to stop the exploitation of student movements in order to serve narrow and selfish interests of individual political leaders or political party factions.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this Afrocentric paper has been to present and examine the role played by student movements in ensuring that youth are included as potential candidates in the electoral lists for democratic South Africa's political parties. Despite their limits in forwarding and/or seconding youth candidates for political parties' elec-

toral lists; the fact that non-political student movements (that is, fees must fall movement) are powerful and can alter the political agenda of South Africa towards a particular direction cannot be denied (Buys, 2016). It is on this basis that in certain circles, their genuine cause and activities have been deliberately described as a reflection of the work of the so called "third force" (Mancu, 2016).

For this author, the characterisation of the non-political 2015 national student movement as the element of the "third force", which seeks to engineer regime change in South Africa is devoid of truth. That "the doors of learning shall be opened to all", across the colour and class divisions have found expression in the anti-colonial/apartheid rhetoric of many countries including South Africa (Khapoya, 2010; Shai, 2013). Such a commitment has been legislated in the new democratic dispensation (Republic of South Africa, 1996). As such, it is politically, morally and historically justified for any student movement in South Africa to advance calls for "free education".

In the final analysis, the cessation of the exploitation of student movements for sectional interests is possible when fundamental principles such as "representativeness, openness, democracy and independence" find true and honest expression within such networks (Proteasa, 2002). This is an ideal situation which will re-affirm the relevance of student movements in both party and national politics. It will also give currency to Nelson Mandela's (2015) illustrative message to the nation that "[Y]ou,

the young lions (youth) have energised our entire struggle". Flowing from this, it is the careful conviction of this paper that student movements can also influence political parties to include the youth in their lists through an intense and sometimes adversarial process of political bargaining. This bargaining happens when movements forward their preferred names to parties for consideration. This is never a straightforward process; it can take many months to resolve. What we see is that the student movements do have the political clout (bargaining muscle) to bargain with political parties when it comes to candidate selection.

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