

Shepherd Mutsvara: Rising Fees and the Right to Protest in Zimbabwe

Student activism in Zimbabwe has been pivotal in reflecting the effects of economic downturn and national politics of this southern African country. The higher education space, particularly in state owned universities, has deliberately suffocated academic freedom through laws that give the government an oversight role over governance of universities. However, despite the negative factors dampening the spirit of student activism in Zimbabwe, the institutions of higher education continue to be corridors of candid socio-political dialogue and produce competitive graduates.

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2016, Zimbabwe's higher education system is still competitive in southern Africa despite the steady infrastructural decline over the years. This has been made possible through donor funds from International organisations and certain academic institutions that have partnered with universities in Zimbabwe. The intervention of these organisations has assisted with grants and scholarships to disadvantaged students who are not well connected to the structures of the political hierarchy of the ruling elite. These financial resources have helped to prop up the tertiary education sector which has had to deal with numerous challenges that have spurred student agitation and antagonism.

The Unicef annual report on Zimbabwe (2015) provides a litany of challenges crippling the higher education sector. Chief amongst them is the “tremendous lack of human material and financial resources.” This in turn has negatively impacted on basic infrastructure and student accommodation. In most public universities students are forced to lead a primitive life, as they put up with sewage leaks, electricity cuts, water problems and chronic shortages of library materials. Such challenges have reawakened the spirit of student activism and has led to confrontation with the State when it has raised fees at a time when students have sought self-preservation and survival in an imploding economy. The recent newspaper reports on the expulsion of University of Zimbabwe medical students who protested against doubling of fees is an indicator that student activism has helped to confront unreasonable government policies that do not take into account genuine student’s grievances.

In a nutshell, student activism in Zimbabwe has always have been premised on government's shortcomings and aimed at realigning the socio-economic and political landscape. Many observers firmly believe that as long as the head of state remains the chancellor of public universities and the state continues to interfere with the institutional autonomy of universities, students will voice their concerns and confront the state. There is also a need for a review of laws that criminalise student protests and inculcate fear amongst University staff and students. This will cultivate academic freedom and harness positive energy from students as they help in the advancement of knowledge and realignment of the skewed social status quo in Zimbabwe.

References

Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2016 — Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016. Zimbabwe Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016.

UNICEF Annual Report 2015, Zimbabwe. <https://www.unicef.org> (accessed on 7 July 2017)