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Makgoba should fight for Desai

Prishani Naidoo: COMMENT

03 February 2006 03:00



How easily we forget what makes the present. In the current conflict between Ashwin Desai and Malegapuru Makgoba, old angers take their revenge under cover of procedural technicalities and formal institutional codes.

Ten years ago, a similar fight was unfolding at the University of Witwatersrand. Only then, Makgoba was under attack. Charged by a group of 13 senior academics and administrators with embellishment of his curriculum vitae, failure to execute his administrative duties and bringing the university into disrepute.

Makgoba quickly gained the support of black students and staff on the campus. As a student activist at the time, I was surprised by this sudden unquestioning support for Makgoba. While racism and the prevention of transformation were indeed plausible charges against Makgoba's accusers, we had little knowledge of Makgoba and no experience of him in the struggle. Instead, we did know that he had not been politically active as a student, and that he must have been palatable to the administration to have been head-hunted for such a senior position. In an article published at the time by *The Weekly Mail*, I argued that this support for Makgoba was misplaced as he represented nothing different from his accusers in the transformation of higher education. His proposals for Africanisation seemed rather weak and superficial. For this I was called to order. Naively, I swallowed my pride and joined the campaign. A few months later, the broad front, which had been formed on the campus to struggle on Makgoba's behalf, received a letter asking us to end the campaign.

Makgoba had struck a deal with the administration and his accusers — all charges against him would be dropped if he resigned from his administrative position and took up a research position at the university. Makgoba was not prepared to continue with the struggle for fair process. Rather, he would argue that the university would never be able to grant him a fair disciplinary process. And so Makgoba has never had to answer to the charges brought against him or to his supporters for the choice he ultimately made.

It is surprising, then, to note Makgoba's strict adherence to process in his fight with Desai. And also to note that while he politicised his own problems,

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Makgoba insists that Desai's travails are not political.

Especially when the charges that Desai are still paying for were made in the very same, untransformed era of higher education in which Makgoba himself was persecuted. Surprising, but understandable when one considers just how different Makgoba and Desai are.

I was part of the rebellion at the University of Durban- Westville (UDW) in 1996, when thousands of students and staff removed the illegitimate and incompetent management from the campus. For two days, an elected joint management committee ensured that the UDW ran as deemed fit by the broad collective, until private security forces and the police were called in to "restore order".

It was during this conflict that Desai, in order to ensure that several of his comrades retained their jobs, accepted a settlement with the university council not to enter the premises and to sever all ties with the university. But he should never have been asked to leave. While Desai was certainly a leader in this struggle, he was by no means representing his own interests or influencing a brainless mob to riot. Rather, he was an elected representative of a number of people, speaking the words and wishes of thousands of students and workers.

As a fellow black academic, one would have expected Makgoba to again waive process, this time in favour of collegial support and recognition of a role played in a struggle that was legitimately contesting the nature of the higher education system in 1996. Perhaps he has been called on to repay favours to buddies who see Desai as an enemy and would not grant him the freedom of academia to offer his critiques of their neoliberal policies.

What is clear is that Desai's ban is not just a technicality of process that has to be adhered to. Being a significant black intellectual means taking positions and defending them in the face of criticism. If Makgoba can offer no credible reasons for the continued ban on Desai, then he should take positive steps towards lifting any obstacles to Desai's work as an academic. As someone who claims to be committed to the development and support of black intellectuals, Makgoba should acknowledge the academic and intellectual worth of Desai and erase the ban. Not to do so would be to deny the value of someone who has contributed to the activist and intellectual work of communities in South Africa and internationally. It is a testament to the failure of struggles in higher education that the significant intellectual networks and spaces of production are being built outside of academia in South Africa. Makgoba should be fighting to have Desai at his institution.

What is at stake in this conflict is the old battle for the space of higher education for intellectual production and critique towards different ends. If Makgoba has achieved anything it is the Africanisation of neoliberalism in higher education. And, at a time when black student activists, like myself, would have welcomed support and advice from a senior black administrator, Makgoba was not able to separate himself from those who later became his accusers.

Desai, on the other hand, has used his position of privilege in the interests of those who have been excluded by unjust process and systems. He has distinguished himself as an intellectual by transcending not only the problems of apartheid but also the restrictions and limitations imposed by neoliberalism. In this struggle, we must ask who is the soldier and who is the Boer, the word used to describe not the colour of the autocrat, but the style.



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