

## Chomsky opposes Desai's ban

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A national and international brouhaha has rapidly developed following the University of KwaZulu-Natal's (UKZN) decision to bar renowned academic and activist Dr Ashwin Desai from seeking a position at the university.

The decision has elicited letters of strong protest to UKZN vice- chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba from Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein -- among other well known figures from abroad -- and several South African academics.

The Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa has also written to Makgoba, asking him to reconsider the decision. And by this week an online petition in support of Desai had recorded more than 400 signatories worldwide.

All the protests refer to the decision as an attack on hard-won academic freedom in South Africa. But Makgoba this week told the Mail Guardian that the issue is "not about academic freedom", and that he is merely adhering to an agreement reached in 1996 between Desai and the then University of Durban-Westville (UDW) council.

At the time, Desai was a sociology lecturer and leading unionist at UDW, and centrally involved in protests against worker retrenchments and outsourcing then wracking the university. Under then vice- chancellor Mapule Ramashala, the university brought disciplinary charges against Desai. An agreement was reached during disciplinary hearings, and involved terminating Desai's employment and preventing him from entering the campus without the vice-chancellor's permission.

In 2003, Desai was appointed honorary research fellow in the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the then University of Natal. In the same year, the new UDW vice-chancellor, Saths Cooper, lifted the ban on Desai. And in 2004, UDW merged with the University of Natal to form UKZN, with Makgoba as vice-chancellor.

Desai remained in his unpaid position at the CCS in the newly merged institution until late last year, when he obtained funding from the Human Sciences Research Council for a research project on the history of black cricket. "Unusually," says the CCS's Richard Pithouse, "the university insisted that this contract work be advertised. [Desai] was the sole applicant. He was instructed to resign as honorary research fellow in order to be able to apply for the contract. He duly did so.

"The selection committee shortlisted [Desai] and was then informed by [Makgoba] that he was instructing them not to consider [Desai's] application ... The CCS then asked for him to be reinstated as honorary research fellow. This was denied."

Makgoba told the M that "Cooper did not lift the ban, he just allowed Desai to come back to campus". There is also "no written document or minuted record that testifies to this lifting of the ban". As a result, "the issue

is beyond the authority of a vice-chancellor, because when Desai's job [at UDW] was terminated the matter had been debated by the [UDW] council, after Ramashala had reported to the full council".

Asked why Desai could not be reinstated as honorary fellow, Makgoba said: "The more we employ him the more we create the impression that we're undermining the original settlement agreement. My position was to go back to basics, and that the matter must therefore go to the [UKZN] council."

Makgoba also said "Desai had never actually been banned -- there was a severance of the employment contract that was council-approved. A vice-chancellor has no power to overturn that."

But Desai says the UDW clearly approved Cooper's revoking of the agreement, "since they knew about it and did nothing to repudiate it". It is also "semantic nonsense" that "my not being permitted to be seriously considered for a post does not constitute a ban on my 'applying'". Makgoba has revealed "a personal and ideological opposition" to Desai and his work, he said, and that is the real reason for Makgoba's decision.