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SOUTH AFRICA

International concern

Academics slam Desai varsity ban

December 28, 2005

By Carvin Goldstone

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's decision to bar social commentator Ashwin Desai from taking on any paying or honorary positions at the university has prompted international academics to question academic freedom at the institution.

The academics have criticised UKZN Vice-Chancellor Malegapuru Makgoba's decision to bar Desai from working at the university in any capacity.

Desai learned of his status when his application to be a researcher and his nomination by the university's Centre for Civil Society to be an honorary researcher were denied after Makgoba's intervention.

Makgoba has argued that barring Desai from UKZN was not his own decision but was made on the grounds that university records showed that a ban, placed on the academic in 1996 by then University of Durban-Westville Vice-Chancellor Mapule Ramashala, was never lifted.

Desai was banned by Ramashala after protests against UDW's management.

Makgoba has said there was a binding document signed in 1996 as part of an out-of-court agreement between Desai and the university council which barred him from the university.

He said this decision was over and above a decision taken by Ramashala's replacement, Saths Cooper, in 2003 to lift Desai's ban in preparation for the merging of UDW and the then University of Natal.

Academics and writers from Europe, North America, Africa and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Duke University in the United States have all expressed concern over Makgoba's decision.

The editorial board of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa has also come out in support of Desai, saying the university's decision constitutes a violation of a basic form of academic freedom: the right for anyone to be fairly considered for a position in the academic community that they are qualified for.

The committee's George Caffentzis urged Makgoba to lift the ban on Desai. He said Makgoba's reason for barring Desai was not credible.

Violation

"It is hard to understand why, if the two units that formed UKZN welcomed Dr Desai's presence and participation in their academic communities in 2003, a rescinded banning order from 1996 should trump the more recent decisions.

"Such justification is frankly not credible and the decision it is meant to justify is a blatant violation of Desai's academic freedom," he said.

Makgoba could not be reached for comment despite several attempts yesterday.

David McDonald, the Director of Development Studies at Canada's Queens University, said



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the barring suggested that UKZN was not interested in grassroots scholarly engagement which was critical of the state.

"To revert to the banning of academics on ideological grounds would be a massive step backwards. It (Desai's ban) has already raised eyebrows around the world," he said.

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