

#FeesMustFall

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#FeesMustFall is an ongoing student-led protest that began in October 2015, as a response to the increase in university fees throughout South Africa.

Though the protests ended in 2015 after the government announced there would be no fee increases for the following academic year, they eventually began again in 2016 when the South African Minister of Higher Education (Blade Nzimande) announced on the 19th of September 2016 that there would be a capped fee increase of 8% for 2017 (eNews Channel Africa, 2016).

The #FeesMustFall movement wants “Free quality decolonized education,” as stated by their official website (see <http://feesmustfall.joburg/>). The African National Congress (ANC) government is seen as being responsible for the mass discontent amongst students as a result of their insufficient investment in tertiary education. Students believe their inability to fund tertiary education is due to the consequential socio-economic disparity of the apartheid government laws. Though one cannot discard the economic effects of the strict segregation laws, it is clear that the black population still feels the idea of ‘white privilege’ is prevalent. Therefore, many South Africans believe the government has a duty to ‘level the playing field’ in regards to tertiary education.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have used #FeesMustFall to their political advantage to further reduce support for the ANC, preceding the 2019 general election. The EFF have pushed for free education, as opposed to the ANC and Democratic Alliance (DA)’s agreement on the mid-term budget plan which states an additional R9 billion will be added to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, thereby raising its funding by over 18% annually (South African Broadcast Corporation, 2016). It is clear that the government wants to focus on helping lower-income families as opposed to removing university fees completely, which has caused more dissatisfaction amongst the students. The ANC has been seen as being “ineffective,” since 1994; most recently revealed by the multiple votes of no confidence passed against President Jacob Zuma since 2009, with two being passed between March 2015 and March 2016. These decisions have tainted the ANC’s reputation even further amongst the population.

This financial decision has ultimately been read as a lack of response by the government, and so has resulted in violent outbursts amongst the protestors. A vicious cycle has occurred between the students who are failing to protest in a peaceful manner, and the government who has been forced to increase the police presence on university campuses, namely the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town. The use of teargas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades to subdue the violence has caused further retaliation. This has resulted in 831 arrests by the 28th of October 2016, and this figure is for the protests in 2016 alone. The lack of control seen by the perpetual nature of the protests has presented the government as fragile and ineffectual. This manifested itself in the reduced support for the ANC in the 2016 municipal elections when their political swing fell by 8.04%.

Not only have the protests caused violence and in some instances, death, but they have also disrupted the academic year for those who have chosen to continue studying. Preventing

students from taking exams as well as the burning of campus libraries, for example the University of KwaZulu-Natal's law library at Howard College in September, has caused major disruption. There is a general consensus by the public that the #FeesMustFall movement has lost all political credibility due to its shift towards a more violent and disruptive nature; many believe that it has become a hindrance rather than a help.

As a result of these protests, it is clear the government needs to invest more in tertiary educational facilities. In doing so, this will, for example, develop research opportunities for universities so they can compete on the international stage. According to research done by the DA's shadow minister of Higher Education and Training, Belinda Bozzoli, as of 2015, 0.6% of South Africa's GDP put towards tertiary education is dwarfed by the emerging economies of Saudi Arabia (2.3%), Argentina (1.4%) and India (1.3%) (Bozzoli, 2015). Hence it is evident that this is indeed a political issue that needs to be rectified in order to help develop the nation.

However, at the same time, these on-going protests are becoming more detrimental to the stability of South Africa. Although it can be argued that violence and protests is one way to order the government's attention, it cannot be justified as an effective means of changing political policy. There are still university fees in South Africa and an overarching shift in budget policy towards making education completely free is unforeseeable with the ANC in power.

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