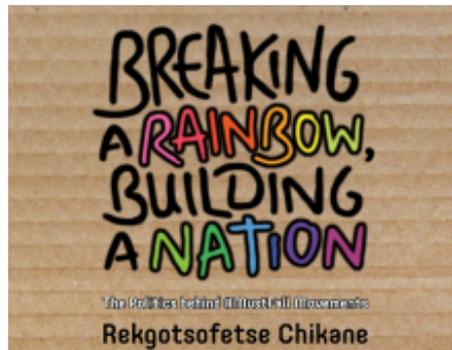


# Book Extract: Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation

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## Books

27 November, 2018

*Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation* is a first-hand account of the university protests that gripped South Africa between 2015 and 2017, widely known as the #FeesMustFall. Rekgotsofetse Chikane outlines the nature of student politics in the country before, during and after the emergence of #MustFall politics, exploring the political dynamics that informed and drove the student protests, and the effect that these #MustFall movements have had on the nature of youth politics in the country. This is an extract from the book.

Growing up within the private school network and subsequently finding myself at UCT, I was exposed to a lifestyle that has increasingly become common in South Africa. It is a lifestyle where being able to shift from the rural areas of Bushbuckridge on one day and end up in a high-rise allwhite party in Sandton the next is a norm. To traverse the globe on family vacations while simultaneously pleading that you are fighting for the economic freedom of others doesn't cause a single moment's pause. I describe it as the 'Pop Mabodlela' phenomenon. My issue with my generation is not that we live the lives that we do, but rather that we allow the world to expect that we would automatically be on the side of black people in the country. It is an odd assumption to make and one I do not believe is fully deserved.

In a variety of situations over the course of the evolution of #MustFall politics, from #RhodesMustFall to #FeesMustFall, this assumption has been shown to be shockingly brittle. How easy was it for students to lay blame on the shoulders of TUT for the events that played out at the Union Buildings and in the streets of Pretoria the day President Zuma announced o%? To throw them to the wolves and label their actions as 'typical of TUT'? As if the protests against fees that characterised #FMF before 2015 were somehow less righteous than our own. Why was it that in its inception, #RMF paid no heed to the economic plight of students at UCT?

Coconuts and the black elite continuously demonstrate their inherent bias to preserve their privilege yet seem to believe they are the great allies of the revolutionary cause.

However, it is not the way we implicitly stereotype that I believe to be the real issue at hand. Rather it is the use of our socio-economic advantage to gain, maintain and distribute power that entrenches this assumption as a norm.

Take language, for instance. In plenary sessions, English was the predominant language used. Its use was not only a tool to communicate but also one of control. Though some would swap and change between English and vernac, the dominance of English became quite pronounced. It enabled some to gain the trust of the masses by eloquently enunciating elaborate preambles and soliloquies in an elegant and enigmatic manner. Verbose? Yes, indeed. Effective? Most definitely. The purpose was to capture the imagination of the crowd and sway them in your direction. The dominance of English in South Africa is not a historical happenstance. It was a deliberate strategy to gain control of the populace by dictating which language had the greatest authority. An authority one would need if they wanted to move up the social ladder. Hence the use of English became an authority in the protest, although not without a level of pushback.

With the notion of decolonisation taking strong hold, it would become difficult for English to dominate entirely. English often represents an existential threat to most languages in South Africa and the desire to resist such a threat remains strong. One example is the repurposing of the national anthem that completely removes English and Afrikaans from the original.

A deliberate act and a protest in and of itself. Another reason for pushback came from the desire to be able to communicate as broadly as possible with as many students as possible. With English being more of a language of instruction rather than a home language, naturally English would be a mechanism to marginalise in specific instances. There are a variety of reasons why pushback happens, with these two being only the tip of the iceberg.

Some students find indigenous languages – ‘indigenous’ not being the word I would prefer because it presumes a lack of universality – alienating and English as the best means of communicating with them. The assumption that everyone speaks English fluently because they study in English is also false. It allows certain power relations to take hold and entrench themselves. Yet, for the black elite, for whom both English and another ‘indigenous’ language come naturally, this dynamic plays directly into their hands. English was often inadvertently used by the elite as a means of gaining authority in the protest, but, simultaneously, employing English as the dominant language was also pushed against. We become masters of English, yet also its most ardent detractors. This can be a dangerous dynamic and it plays out in many other ways too. English is only one site where this dynamic plays out.

Another site is the idea of staying woke rather than being woke – woke being the awareness of society’s constraints and impediments which adversely affect historically marginalised groups. Woke politics are interesting. They speak to the gladiator inside all of us. The desire, in situations of risk to one’s well-being, to be the greatest protector of yourself and others.

Being woke is the state of acknowledging that the world as it seems is often not what it is. To find yourself in this state is frightening yet enlightening at the same time. It is a rush once it is in full swing. Everything feels, smells, tastes and seems different. Relationships you once deemed immovable in your life now seem feeble. Foundations you had built your ideas on now have newly found cracks that quickly turn into chasms. Family members you once deemed cornerstones suddenly feel more like pebbles that need to be skipped away into the distance. With the help of others, through a process of learning and relearning, being woke opens the world to new possibilities and opportunities. However, it also opens you up to new threats as well as the perception of threats, creating a deep desire constantly to stay woke and keep your guard up. I define staying woke as the ongoing process in which you are constantly seeking out new weapons to not only defend yourself but attack those who you feel are a threat. The more weapons you gain, the more threats you perceive. It is another arms race of sorts, one that I don't believe is necessarily harmful, but which does have unintended consequences. Like any arms race, any new party that seeks to arm itself becomes persona non grata within the community. At least until the moment in which it achieves a level of wokeness that demands the community's respect. Even then, it is still under certain conditions. You see this play out the most when those still in the proverbial dark seek enlightenment and are told they should undergo this process on their own. Staying woke has evolved into being a gatekeeper of enlightenment rather than its torchbearer, bringing those in the dark into the light. The notion that bringing someone into the light is a tiring task is one that is not unfamiliar to me. It is a frustrating exercise. I wouldn't personally deem it violent, as some may, but it is arduous. When you begin the process with someone, the expectation is raised that you should end the process with them as well. You become, in the eyes of those you are trying to educate, a teacher not for a moment but for a lifetime. It is not a commitment you want to sign up for every single time you try to educate others.

As a result, it does become tiring for most. I would never force someone to educate others as they are well within their rights not to. However, what I do believe to be dangerous is the belittlement of those who wish to know more and crave enlightenment. It is a belittlement that is more vindictive than dismissive.

Find out more about *[Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation](#)*.