

SOUTH AFRICAN STATE-LED PRO-PALESTINIAN ACTIVISM AND THE RELUCTANCE OF THE ACADEME TO SHOW SOLIDARITY

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ABSTRACT

South Africa's higher education landscape remains fragmented and uneven, shaped by a long history of colonialism and apartheid. In this context, this article interrogates the inertia and silence of many South African universities in response to the escalating humanitarian crisis in Palestine, particularly the destruction of educational institutions and loss of academic lives. While the South African government has adopted an unapologetically pro-Palestinian stance—pursuing legal action through international courts—this principled political position has not filtered meaningfully into higher education institutions or the wider public discourse. The article explores the reasons behind the sector's divergent responses, which range from muteness to active solidarity, and questions the thresholds of tolerance that seem to govern academic inaction. It argues that universities have an ethical and political obligation to engage in development activism as a form of academic activism.

Keywords: academic activism, coloniality, Gaza-Israel, educide, ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The South African higher education landscape is far from homogenous, given the country's emergence from over three centuries of colonial rule in which systematic and orchestrated

separation of people along racial and ethnic lines was the basis of its apartheid policy. This article addresses the issue of inertia and reluctance by some South African higher education institutions to recognise, through public commitment, solidarity with the affected people of Palestine and the plight of the education system. There is compelling evidence that Israel is consistently violating International Humanitarian Law (Soni, 2023), yet South African universities' tolerance thresholds have yet to be reached for any decisive action from South Africa's intelligentsia. We engage with the varying responses of the South African higher education sector, which range from muteness to concerted activism. It is not unexpected that the South African academe will have different proclivities, levels of awareness, and sensitivities to the Palestinian crisis. The complete obliteration of educational institutions and the killing of academics and students (educide), it might be argued, presents a compelling rationale for some level of academic activism on the part of the South African academe.

The South African government, on the other hand, has demonstrated unapologetic solidarity with the people of Palestine (Akbar and Genovés, 2024), leading legal initiatives via the world's judicial organs (International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court) in a bold political position in the face of the consequential wrath of the state of Israel and its Western allies (Southall, 2025). South Africa, having emerged relatively recently from repressive colonial occupation and governance, one would expect solidarity with the oppressed people of Palestine – people whose current horrendous condition of existence has reached the limits of description. It must be noted, though, that the post-apartheid state has not always acted consistently and from a principled position as it relates to human atrocities committed by other dictatorial regimes across the world. Economic imperatives have been known to trump the need to call out culprit nations. However, in this article, we argue that while the state-led pro-Palestinian activism is unprecedented and commendable, such activism has not filtered down in any substantive way to the South African public in general and South African universities in particular, whose responses have been largely that of muteness and indifference. We examine the reasons for varied responses from higher education institutions in South Africa and offer insights into how the dispersed and fragmented development education fraternity might consider development activism as academic activism.

In the euphoria of South Africa's transition to democracy, social activism in all its variants, including in higher education spaces (some of which were vibrant locales for anti-apartheid activism), had quelled/subsided/receded in the spirit of shedding or exorcising 350 years of antagonism, in favour of social cohesion and nation building. The reasons for the relative muteness and indifference on the part of higher education institutions are complex and multiple. Historical associations with Israel are one reason, and the domestication of self in the

neoliberal university (and its associated performativity regimes) is another. Moreover, critical scholars and social justice activists may be experiencing intellectual and ethical fatigue. Writing in different contexts, Braidotti (2019) refers to intellectual fatigue as weariness of continuous critical engagement, being overburdened by the need to theorise, analyse and respond to geo-political and socio-ecological crises. Ethical fatigue relates to the exhaustion of the ongoing demand to respond and act ethically and justly vis-a-vis unending crises such as wars, global pandemics, environmental catastrophes, etc. We shall respond to these fatigues by suggesting that intellectual and ethical stamina is needed by those who inhabit the university and that inhabits them.

STATE-LED PRO-PALESTINIAN ACTIVISM AND THE TENSION WITH MEDIATION

In December 2023, in an unprecedented move, South Africa applied to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of contravening the fundamental principles of the Genocide Convention (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide) because of its (Israel's) military activity in the Gaza Strip. It can be argued that while many of the Palestinian Authority's close allies (the regional Arab States except for Qatar) were weighing up their options, they, in the main, were caught off-guard by South Africa's categorical stratagem. Jeenah (2024) argues, however, that this decisive international political move (the charge of criminality) was, in fact, the outcome of a rapidly growing antagonistic relationship between Israel and South Africa (despite rhetoric to the contrary about possibly playing a mediatory role). In essence, the South African state was already on a project of pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel activism for more than two decades, with different levels of intensity over this time. South Africa's action, therefore, should not be viewed as unexpected or surprising. What is telling is that this state-led activism had not been communicated effectively to the various constituencies within the country, who it might also be argued were "surprised". This disconnect between state-led activism and the populace is an intriguing phenomenon, as it is somewhat antithetical to orthodox forms of activism in which the citizenry lobbies a reluctant state to act. The South African state's activism, it can be argued, is strongly related to its peculiar history, the genesis of the African National Congress as a liberation movement, its transition to the leadership of democratic South Africa and how it conceives of achieving its national interests.

Under apartheid, South Africa's national interest was narrowly defined in a manner that secured the exclusive interests of the white minority regime. This position alienated the country

from the international world to a large extent. The new democratic government, to position the new South Africa as a new constitutional democratic state on the international political and economic stage, began advancing its national interests, guided by the country's constitution. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) is tasked with formulating, coordinating, managing and implementing South Africa's foreign policy and international relations.

Post-apartheid South Africa's track record in confronting international human rights violations might be described as somewhat checkered. It is not unreasonable to expect that South Africa, as a fledgling democracy, might rightfully have been preoccupied with attempts at streamlining its inherited fragmented social, economic and educational infrastructure in the post-apartheid era. As such, it might be "forgiven" for not having the capacity to be equally vocal on all major conflicts involving the violation of human rights across the globe, such as the Rwandan and Bosnian Genocides in the 1990s, the Rohingya Crisis and Uyghur Repression that started in 2017 and continues at present.

However, Jeenah (2024) asserts that South Africa's decision to institute legal proceedings before the International Court of Justice, accusing Israel of contravening the Genocide Convention, should not be viewed as a surprise event, arguing that it was the outcome of a severely deteriorating relationship with Israel well before the fateful October 7 "event". In tracing back the history of this faltering relationship, he contends that the new democratic government that came into being in 1994 in South Africa had inherited a set of international relations from its apartheid predecessor (Jeenah, 2024), which included agreements on trade and the sharing of military and nuclear intelligence with the state of Israel. Jeenah (2024) reminds us that apartheid South Africa's relationship with Israel dates to 1948, almost immediately after Israeli independence, with Prime Minister HF Verwoerd publicly recognising Israel as a fellow apartheid state – an apartheid sibling of sorts whose diplomatic ties extend over forty years, despite UN calls for sanctions against SA at the time.

In contrast, the new post-apartheid SA government, led by the ANC, proceeded to strengthen and consolidate its relationship with different Palestinian factions, considering continuing attacks by Israel and the struggle of the Palestinians for recognition and independence from Israel. The nature and extent of military trade with Israel during South Africa's post-apartheid period remain a moot issue, with reports of private arms companies still doing business with the Israeli government (Jeenah, 2024). South Africa's foreign policy related to political conflict was to opt for a "quiet diplomacy" disposition with mediation as *modus operandi*. Its effectiveness, especially in response to crises in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, was a political predilection widely criticised for its ineffectiveness

(Landsberg, 2016). Jeenah (2024) takes a critical perspective of the post-apartheid South African government's engagement and diplomatic ties with Israel, viewing it as expedience on the part of Israel, as it constantly held South Africa to neutrality that comes with assuming the role of mediator when it (Israel) demonstrated a limited inclination for the recognition of an independent state of Palestine. This Israeli manipulation took the form of sustaining and strengthening economic ties with post-apartheid South Africa, including strengthening academic ties. The South African government, under the leadership of the ANC, having recently discarded its erstwhile pariah status, began to realise the benignity of its aspirant mediatory role and Israeli unwillingness for SA to play this kind of role or consider the notion of an independent State of Palestine. The killing of over 230 Palestinians during a protest march in 2018 was a critical turning point in the deteriorating relationship with the state of Israel. It marked the commencement of a substantial decrease in the number of high-level SA diplomatic personnel in Israel and a significant reduction in trade between the two countries. South Africa was also instrumental in denying Israel even observer status in the African Union in 2021 (Jeenah, 2024).

South Africa's initial response to the Hamas incursion into southern Israel was to draw attention to how this was a consequence of years of the carceral status of the people of Gaza, a position it subsequently changed to the total condemnation of this violent attack (Jeenah, 2024). SA joined the chorus of international condemnation of Israel's disproportionate response to the Hamas attack. Disapproval of the Israeli Defence Force's incessant killing of civilians deemed collateral damage has been widespread, coming from various world organisations (the United Nations) and a host of humanitarian support organisations. What is clear is the wholly disproportional response of the Israeli Defence Force and the total annihilation principle being applied. The effect on ordinary Palestinian people, including women, the elderly and children, has reached the limits of description. Once active and vibrant communities that included functional education and health facilities were reduced to rubble on a mass scale.

In his assessment of the extent of the Israeli response to the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, Sultany (2024) asserts that Israel has long crossed the threshold of what constitutes a proportional response to the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. In his analysis of the utterances of senior Israeli politicians and military personnel, Sultany contends that the genocidal intent is brazen and that the pace of civilian deaths has been unprecedented in the history of international conflict. He argues that mainstream Western media commentary in the weeks and months that followed 7 October "portrayed the eventual destruction of most of Gaza as an incidental outcome of urban warfare rather than the predictable outcome of a policy" (Sultany, 2024: 2). About South Africa's involvement, Western propaganda machinery is at

work with researchers like Max Primorac (Senior Research Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom at The Heritage Foundation), unequivocally stating that “South Africa has long taken political positions that are grievously antithetical to the national security interests of the United States and its allies. South Africa does not qualify for further U.S. foreign assistance. The U.S. should end its aid to South Africa until the country aligns with American values” (Primorac, 2024, 2). This backlash was to be expected and marks an important reason why the South African formal business sector and the academic sector have not been forthcoming in pronouncing on the Palestinian crisis. If anything, conservative elements in the official opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, have openly voiced support for the right of the state of Israel to protect itself, even in the face of the wholly disproportionate Israeli response.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM: AWAKENING FROM POST-APARTHEID SLUMBER

During the apartheid era in South Africa, Black higher education institutions, despite their apartheid-informed blueprints, were vibrant sites for political activism (Taylor, 1991) by both student cohorts and university academics. The enemy was clear – it was the minority white military government that had to be overthrown, given its unapologetic white supremacy and racial segregation agenda. While a small fraction of white liberal activists were present in white universities, these institutions were state-sponsored entities mandated to consolidate the hegemony of the white intelligentsia (Taylor, 1991). In the early years of democracy, with Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki as critical leaders at the helm of the African National Congress, South Africa’s peaceful transition was a remarkable success story. The state had taken on a reconciliation disposition. A telling feature of the country’s non-violent transition to a democratic “post-race” society was the ideologically laden narrative that under apartheid, all (oppressors and the oppressed) were victims of a repressive system. Protest politics, as practised during apartheid, was discouraged in the immediate post-apartheid period in favour of social cohesion and nation-building ideologies, with iconic leaders like Nelson Mandela and archbishop Desmond Tutu as powerful advocates for these national imperatives (Maistry and Le Grange, 2023). The effect of this was to anaesthetise overt activism, as this was deemed counter-productive – unwelcome optics that might discourage international investment and tourism. Growing domestic socio-economic inequality, however, remains a scourge, well-fertilised by a neoliberal grand narrative that has become naturalised in almost every sphere of SA society (Van Niekerk and Padayachee, 2019), giving rise to regular service protests by the nation’s poor across the country (Netswera, 2014). It is significant that South Africa’s poor, comprising over thirty per cent of its population, live below the poverty line (Ngubane,

Mndebele, and Kaseeram, 2023). It is not unreasonable to expect that people living under such precarity might not have ready access to the information on the crisis in Palestine, nor the infrastructure to register solidarity. The middle class, including the academic fraternity in South Africa, certainly does.

In the new South Africa, the inherited, quite fragmented South African higher education system had to be streamlined under the new dispensation with a national higher education policy framework that would apply to all public higher education institutions in South Africa. The issues of higher education institutional autonomy and academic freedom have been the subject of much debate in the post-apartheid era (Habib, Morrow, and Bentley, 2008), with institutions mainly expressing concern about an interventionist state imposing restrictions on autonomy and academic freedom through neoliberal managerialism and surveillance regimes demanding particular types and levels of performances. In the main, universities in the new South Africa were allowed to continue to do business as normal, as it relates to their international relations, research collaborations, and networking. The transformation and decolonisation of higher education remains an ongoing project, with scholars in the field of Critical University Studies sceptical of the extent to which especially historically white institutions (HWIs) have embraced the national transformation agenda as it relates to racial prejudice and historical inequality (Fataar et al., 2023; Maistry and Le Grange, 2023). These observations have salience as they suggest that higher education institutions in South Africa will likely react differently to world crises and the current Palestinian crisis.

As discussed above, a distinct disconnect exists between state activism and the populace. Concerning the higher education sector, while the state does accord considerable autonomy to universities, it can be argued that the peculiar Palestinian case might well be an instance in which a more forceful directive from the Ministry of Higher Education in South Africa regarding the suspension of academic collaboration with universities in Israel. The former Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology Dr Blade Nzimande, in a media statement, reacted with disappointment to Stellenbosch University's rejection of a draft motion that called for the curtailment of attacks on civilian populations by both Israel and Hamas and a condemnation of the destruction of the education sector and the killing of academics and schoolteachers. The Minister indicated that the

“decision by the Senate is both insensitive, blatantly racist and fails to appreciate that, at stake here, is a matter of fundamental human rights- the genocide and mass murder of Palestinians... This decision is, therefore, profoundly shameful and takes us back to the darkest days of apartheid, whose regime colluded with the Israeli regime to oppress black South Africans and Palestinians, respectively. Whilst I respect university autonomy and academic freedom, the Senate must be made to understand that there is no autonomy from racism, genocide, apartheid, and violation of

fundamental human rights. By taking this repugnant decision, the Senate of Stellenbosch University has essentially legitimised the mass murder and dispossession of the oppressed people of Palestine, including that of fellow academics. I call on all progressive members of Council, alumni, the workers, and the student leadership at Stellenbosch University to condemn this morally bankrupt and profoundly racist decision by the Senate. I also call on all South Africa's universities to make their voices heard in the global campaign of solidarity with the people of Palestine and condemnation of the crimes of the Zionist regime in Israel."

Whether this strongly worded condemnation of this university will have the desired effect on this or any other university's positions on the Palestinian crisis is a moot question. It begs the question as to the extent and intensity of the state's domestic campaign on this issue. What is clear, though, is that the status of the Palestinian education system is a matter of grave concern for the current generation and future generations of Palestinian scholars. Khan and Tinua (2024) capture this extremity as follows

"Since Oct 7, 2023, Israel's bombardment in the Gaza Strip has taken its toll on universities and scientific infrastructure. Two significant institutions, the Islamic University of Gaza and Al-Azhar University, have been destroyed, disrupting education for future generations. Many faculty members, academics, scientists, and students, along with their family members, have been killed or injured. The academic infrastructure in Gaza has been torn apart, and rebuilding it will take generations" (Khan and Tinua, 2024: 805)

Khan and Tinua (2024) offer a grave assessment of the potential of the Palestinian higher education sector's chances of recovery in the short term and signal the catastrophic consequences for the Palestinian academe. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2601 affirms the need to protect education in all its forms during conflicts, a condition that Israel has violated. The authors also contend that the underdevelopment of science and scientists from Palestinian universities in the past is directly related to the resource-starved context that higher education institutions experienced as a result of Israeli restrictions (Khan and Tinua, 2024). This is akin to South African higher education policy during apartheid – a case of academic apartheid, which saw the creation of conditions of epistemological barrenness and deliberate suffocation of the Black academe. In contrast, privileged, resource-rich white universities and their academics were allowed to thrive. Steyn (2012), in her analysis of how white prejudice sustained itself under apartheid, draws on the notion of "epistemologies of ignorance" – the deliberate creation of conditions in which "subjectivities must be formed that are appropriate performers of ignorance, disciplined in cognition, affect and ethics" (Steyn, 2012: 8). This conceptual heuristic is useful in the analysis of why historically white universities in South Africa have taken positions on the Palestinian crisis. It suggests that sustained acceptance of prejudice has reified with subjects reaching a state of oblivion, insensitivity and indifference. Friedman (2023) reminds us that the tolerance by the West for atrocities against

Palestinians is tinged with a strong racial subtext. He asserts that in the case of the West and its actions, International Law is readily applied in a way that accords Western subjects full humanity. People of colour, however, are subject to the Law of Nature – a condition where the powerful wilfully impose their (military) superiority over and subdue those less powerful. That strong white coloniser influence is still prevalent in historically white higher education institutions in South Africa, is without contention (Maistry and Le Grange, 2023).

As a counterpoint to the gloomy scenario painted above, it is refreshing to note that the Palestinian crisis has, in fact, rekindled civil society activism in South Africa, albeit sporadic and somewhat uncoordinated. Several Palestine Solidarity groups have emerged in different regions of the country. Social media platforms have also been used to effectively galvanise support for the Palestinian cause. The protracted assault by Israel, a nine-month ordeal, has meant that the intensity of protest activities is likely to wane. The academic community in South Africa has reacted in varying ways, hosting seminars and public lectures on this issue. Of significance, though, is that much of this activity has not been sanctioned as an official activity by university managers. On October 19, 2023, two weeks into the conflict, the South African Educational Research Association's Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group hosted a public seminar titled “Critical Perspectives on the Palestine-Israel Crisis” with leading political analysts and academics as panellists. The idea for this initiative was first presented for approval through the structures of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Anxiety at the time over the power of pro-Israeli lobby groups, who had pressurised the university into refusing such debate in the past, resulted in this seminar being hosted under the auspices of the research association. What becomes clear is that neoliberal university managers, conscious of the potential financial repercussions that might accrue because of supporting pro-Palestinian scholarly engagement, succumb to the power of the Israeli and Western government influence on their ability to maintain and secure Western funding for the academic research enterprise. Many university academics are, however, exploiting available academic spaces to pursue activism on this issue. The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Decolonial Winter School, the Stellenbosch University's concerned senators' group, and other efforts are distinct cases in point.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we offer an account of how, in the South African context, powerful state-led activism has its genesis in the ideology of the country's liberation movements led by the ANC. The South African government's decision to relinquish a mediator role in the conflict has been borne out of its fundamental mistrust of the Israeli government's commitment to a lasting

political solution that recognises the independence of a Palestinian state. In the world of protest politics, citizen activism is usually mounted to gain the attention of the ruling regime in the hope that it will take some action in the direction of the cause. The South African scenario, as it relates to the Palestinian case, is somewhat different. It raises the question as to the political will of the state (as custodian of the school curriculum, for example) to move to a level of more robust advocacy for the inclusion of social justice activism as a competence in the school curriculum. It also opens areas for future scholarship on the relationship between the state and public higher education institutions regarding international relations with hostile nations.

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About the intellectual and ethical fatigue referred to earlier, those who inhabit higher education institutions could respond to by building intellectual and ethical stamina. Intellectual stamina concerns the ability to think critically, consistently, and creatively in the light of complexity, indeterminacy, and change. For Braidotti (2019), it requires resilience in thought as planet and people are faced with growing inequality, environmental crises, socio-political upheavals, wars, technological advancement and so forth. It involves three key elements: ongoing critical inquiry (engaging deeply with troubling issues); endurance in unlearning and relearning (willingness to challenge embedded assumptions of coloniality); Openness to difference (transcending Eurocentric cultural forms of knowing). In the troubled times we find ourselves, thinking is not an indulgence but an obligation.

Ethical stamina is the sustained commitment to live ethically, it is about exercising response-ability (ability to respond) in a complex, interconnected, and troubled world. It concerns maintaining an ethical disposition when circumstances often invite apathy, cynicism, or detachment. We can generate three key elements of Braidotti's (2019) notion of ethical stamina: relational responsibility (understanding our entanglement with all of life/all beings); affirmative ethics (actively pursuing empowerment, transformation, decolonisation); endurance against nihilism (in times of crisis, e.g. environmental catastrophes, extinction, wars, etc., the refusal to give in to despair or inaction). In short, ethical stamina involves recognising that we are always inside, never outside any event/crisis – this means we have a response-ability to what is immanently present, including the genocide/educide in Gaza.

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