
Adam Habib

Bold Moves

Professor Adam Habib, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, talks candidly with Zahira Asmal about the tough decisions that need to be made in order to achieve a more equal society in Johannesburg, and South Africa in general. The conversation took place at the Vice Chancellor's office at Wits in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, on 27 July 2015.

ZA: South African cities have overtaken Brazilian cities as the most divided and unequal in the world. How and why has this happened in our democracy?

AH: Firstly, it's worth noting that inequality is growing across the world. We have spoken more about inequality in the last 40 years and we have established more NGOs globally, all of whom are targeting inequality. Yet, inequality continues to grow. There is clearly a disjuncture between what we are doing and what is really happening on the ground. South Africa is simply a microcosm of what is happening globally. However, South Africa, it seems to me, is the most acute manifestation of that growth. We inherited an unequal society and that inequality manifested itself between white people and black people. When the democratic transition happened, the major emphasis naturally focused on ways to close the gap between white people and black people.

But it is precisely in the act of closing the gap between white and black that we increased the inequality even further.

We focused on lifestyles and stated that we want to make sure we non-racialise those lifestyles so that a good number of black people will also have good lifestyles. In the process, that has increased the inequality within the black population itself. And precisely because the inequality within the black population grew and the black population constitutes the majority, the overall inequality of the society grew dramatically. Thereafter new elites emerge and they develop a stake in their own reproduction – they make sure to protect their privileges and those privileges begin to enhance the inequality in society. For example, in the case of Alexandra township, it is certainly far better than it was in 1990. And in 1990 it was far better than it was in 1975. So as a township, it's become a much better place. However, Sandton has grown even faster than



Alexandra. So the inequality between Alexandra and Sandton has increased exponentially. Although there have been improvements in Alexandra, the movements in Sandton have been even greater. Therefore, the inequalities within Alexandra have narrowed but the inequalities between Alexandra and Sandton have widened. It's a movement typical of South African cities; it is the movement between the Cape Flats and certain suburbs in Cape Town. It is the movement between the northern parts of Durban and the city centre. It is the reality of how South Africa developed in the last 20 years.

At a national level, we've been able to address poverty but inequality has increased. If you look at Marikana, which is the most graphic manifestation of this inequality in the last 20 years, miners are earning more than they've ever done in history. But they've also never been as angry as they were in 2013. The question you've got to ask is why is it that people who are now earning far

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more than 20 years ago are even angrier than they have ever been? The answer is that while poverty is eroding, inequality has become worse. The reference point of what is acceptable has changed. In 1994, those miners didn't have the local head of the ANC branch driving around in a fancy car. Now they do. They get far more pissed off because they feel they've got the short end of the stick. This is also the story of violent service delivery protests, violent worker protests and violent crime. And, most recently, it's the story of the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement. Why are young, middle-class students, the born-free generation if you like, in places like UCT and Wits, even angrier than they've ever been? Because, in a sense, the moment of post-apartheid South Africa has inflated their expectations and then dashed them.

ZA: Could it be about political freedom? Social movements and their respective causes have changed dramatically over the years...

AH: Political freedom has been important in enabling these protests. In other words, in 1985 you couldn't express it in exactly the same way. For all my grumblings about student protests, I will not bring in the police to beat up students. That was done in the past. In a lot of ways our students in the born-free generation take their rights for granted and they express those rights – this is the way it should be. But at the same time there is a more enabling environment. In the social movement literature, there is theory called political opportunity, and basically it is the political opportunity of the moment that allows you to express the anger.

There are thousands of young black kids who are going to UCT or Wits and who constitute the majority, yet they don't feel at home at these institutions. Despite being the majority, the institutional cultures remain so foreign to them. They feel alienated in the very place that they constitute a majority. UCT graphically manifested itself around RMF and the fact that there is this architect of colonialism who sits at a central place on campus and overlooks who they stand for and what they stand for – he became the focus of a rebellion. It is not unique to UCT. At Rhodes University and Wits there are different manifestations; each has its own flavour.

But again, it is an example that, despite all the great success of 1994,

we are, I would say, approaching a moment of reckoning. But the great successes of 1994 have been done; we've plucked all of the low-hanging fruits, the political settlement was done, it bought us 20 years. But unless we're capable of re-defining the economic programme, we run the risk of this thing unravelling. And that's what we're seeing in this upsurge of social protests.

ZA: In what ways does urbanisation influence inequality? In particular the rural-urban migration.

AH: It has two sets of manifestations. The one is the inequality itself – it is most markedly expressed in the urban-rural divide. There are places in South Africa's rural hinterland that are not very different from Burundi. There are places in South Africa's urban hinterland that could be Beverly Hills. When the post-apartheid movement happened, poverty was addressed and not inequality.

The second manifestation – as people are confronted with this inequality, as they find their conditions unsustainable or unbearable – is that people begin to move. They move in multiple ways. They move to urban areas and they enter parts of the urban space for their own livelihoods. As they do that and because they don't have the resources, those urban spaces become grotesque manifestations of poverty and inequality. They become the shanty towns. The favelas in Brazil and the townships in South Africa. These are the marked expression of that rural migration to the urban areas

and its expression in reproducing the inequality. Previously, in apartheid, the inequality divide existed, but it existed in the rural and the urban. The rural was pushed out. You couldn't see the rural until you went to the rural. What the rural in democratic South Africa said is, 'We refuse to be classed, we refuse to be unseen. The political opportunity has enabled us to be seen'. Thus the inequality has manifested in the shanty towns in urban South Africa. So, unlike apartheid South Africa which had its inequality hidden, democratic South Africa has its inequality shown. And this creates an interesting kind of schizophrenia in the urban elite. On the one hand they're horrified by it, dislike it and so they want to run from it or it provokes the kind of extreme reactions in the emergence of riots. On the other hand there are people who are appalled by it and actually intervene by addressing it.

They are both interesting – they are both the product of post-apartheid South Africa. And precisely because they're the product of post-apartheid South Africa, they are its most vocal and rebellious critics. They refuse to be inheritors of this logic. The university is becoming an explosive embodiment of this. Because universities bring together the rich – both white and black of the post-apartheid South Africa, both politically and economically – they also bring the poor. This is the democratic part of the post-apartheid South Africa, the opening up of the environment – the enabling of access. And when those two collide they become an explosive mix into the university system. And they

develop a camaraderie – a camaraderie that says we rebel against this inequality.

ZA: Urbanisation is a factor to consider in the delivery of services. Johannesburg and South African cities in general are urbanising at a slower rate than China or Brazil, but it appears we are either not coping well with urbanisation or are ill prepared. Do you think Johannesburg is doing enough to plan for urbanisation, both formal and informal? In reference to Alexandra and Sandton, for example, where people – through urbanisation – could enter either of these places upon arriving in Johannesburg, do you think the City of Johannesburg is doing enough to 'welcome' and accommodate people arriving in Joburg? Through safe places to live, services and work?

AH: No, I don't. I've said it before and I will say it again: I think that the city is too focused on reading textbooks and trying to apply textbook models rather than grappling with this. Let me give you an example. Let's take the collapse of Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital. There is a flood of people into the hospital every day, and not simply from Johannesburg or not simply from Gauteng. They come from the rest of the country too. Johannesburg is the fastest growing city in South Africa. Not only is there massive migration from other parts of Gauteng, but also from Harare, Lusaka and Maputo. If you are ill or your child is ill and you need a service,

a twenty-first-century service, what do you do? You jump on a bus and you head for Johannesburg. When you reach Johannesburg, you go to Chris Hani Baragwanath. Every health expert in this country knows that. Yet we don't factor migration from the southern African region into our projections on the patient numbers in Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital. We know that, for all our failures, we are in a well-endowed place in a substantively under-endowed subregion. And so people get attracted to this city and will flock to it whether it is for healthcare, education or for jobs. We are not adequately dealing with these movements and prefer to stay out of it. Then we get angry because we don't quite understand it. Then it feeds the xenophobia that we experience in Johannesburg. We are not considering these movements in our spatial planning, service delivery and cultural engagements.

ZA: Does South Africa's democracy work in creating an equal society?

AH: I think democracy can work in creating an equal society. I think South Africa's democracy until now has not done that. It has gone after poverty, but it has not gone after inequality. It is trying to de-racialise at the apex of the system but hasn't tried to de-racialise across the system.

ZA: Do you think that government has worked out the difference between poverty and inequality?

AH: I don't think that government has figured out the difference. I think that parts of government are starting to believe their own propaganda. They thought that if they go after poverty, sooner or later they would get into inequality. In 1994 there were a large number of economists saying, 'If you do what you're doing, you are going to create a much more unequal society over 20 years'.

I think government has begun to recognise that in different ways. I think it clearly was a message in Polokwane at the 52nd National Conference of the ANC in 2007, in part why Manuel and people like Mbeki lost. There was a rebellion from the grassroots structures of the ANC. But I don't think it was even internalised. The people knew that inequality was growing and something else had to be done. But they didn't grapple with what it meant and internalise what it required. And that's where I think our dilemma lies.

If we're going to make inequality our focus, we're going to be successful in addressing inequality in a democracy. Then we have to understand trade-offs. Then we have to understand the need for hard choices. Then we have to understand we are going to make hard calls.

ZA: We need to make bold moves...

AH: Let me give you some examples. Brazil was one of the few countries in the last 15 years that brought down inequality in the context of democracy. They invested heavily in the informal sector and formalised it. By formalising the informal economy, they managed

to create a series of new, small, formal businesses that began to absorb labour and made people at the bottom grow faster than people at the top. That brought down inequality as it brought down poverty. What did South Africa do? South Africa went after BEE. This got a couple of politically connected people on the NEC of the ANC and gave them shares. That didn't formalise the informal sector; it didn't create new enterprises. It gave the guys at the top access and that drove inequality.

We need to make a choice between broad-based BEE and the narrow-based BEE. That means if you are going to go for the broad-based BEE, there are people on the NEC of the ANC who are not going to get deals. There are going to be consequences. Don't think that it is just going to happen without somebody being miffed and losing out. Are we prepared to live with the consequences?

Let us take the university as an example. Where do the poor go? To Walter Sisulu, Venda and Fort Hare. Where do the rich kids go? They go to Wits, UCT and Stellenbosch University. How do we deal with this situation? We deal with this by giving poor kids access to Wits, UCT and Stellenbosch. If we do this, we need to stop some rich kids from coming in. It means that someone will need to pay for the poor kids. Is government prepared to make the kind of investments into enabling poor kids? These are the kinds of hard trade-offs that I think we can make.

There's a third reason I think that we haven't been successful. I think dealing with inequality in a democracy in the twenty-first century is very

different to dealing with inequality in a democracy in the middle of the 1950s. We can't apply the same policy options that were typical of the 50s, 60s and the 70s and articulate it into the middle of 2015. That doesn't work, partly because the world is different. So, one of the big differences in the world in 2015 is that we have the Internet and social media. This allows people options, and power is much more diffused. And because it is more diffused, it can manifest itself in ways that you are unaware of.

ZA: What about inequality and quality at academic institutions? We often hear that the standard and quality of education has dropped or that the quality of graduate is not what it used to be. What do you have to say to this?

AH: Firstly, employers relate to degrees in different ways. They relate to Venda degrees, Wits degrees and UCT degrees in different ways. Secondly, I think it is true that some people are going through the system without the adequate skills and standard requirements. I will be very amazed if it wasn't true. In a system of more than a million people in universities, there will be graduates who do not particularly meet all of the requirements. But I don't know if that is peculiar to South Africa. It is common in many other places globally, but I don't think there is a level of prejudice associated with this. In South Africa, people say 'well, you know they can't write English'. If you came out of an Afrikaans university and you are a white South African,

you couldn't write English either. People mumble and grumble about black South Africans not writing well; white South African Afrikaners didn't write English well either, as much as I don't write Afrikaans well.

People look at society and the institution through their own particular lens. There are parts of our syllabus today that are far more complex than they've ever been. Even our medicine programmes, our software engineering programmes, our mining engineering programmes – what students do at universities today is fundamentally different from what they did 15 years ago. The top students who get into medical school today have an aggregate of 98 per cent with 11 subjects. There are students who got into medicine – white South Africans 35–40 years ago – on a D. What are we saying? We have a myth about quality. I think we have a romanticised delusion about quality. I do think, in some senses, we need a self-introspection as South Africans. Are we really judging and comparing contemporary South Africa with the past on an equal footing? Or are we comparing 2015 South Africa and its graduates with a romanticised illusion of what existed in the 1960s and 70s? People talk about how we produced great scholars and great disciplines – we still produce them. We still produce great doctors; we still produce big companies.

ZA: More competitive ones – now forming a part of the global community – the landscape is quite different today.

AH: That's right! So, in a lot of ways, I think we need a real introspection about what we mean. But what are the movements that it seems we could do? For instance, in the medical faculty, we reserve 20 per cent of our seats for rural students – that's addressing inequality, because those rural students come from marginalised communities. They still must meet a special minimum. But they will be given direct access. When you allow one of those kids to come in, you basically create a ripple effect of impact within their communities. We need to start thinking about admissions policies that allows us to address that. But you can't expect Wits to do that if you don't force Stellenbosch and UCT and other academic institutions to do the same – we have to respond as a system to that challenge. I suggest that not only with medicine, but multiple programmes.

The second thing I think we need to do is interface as universities with our societies. So we need to be part of the city. We need to engage the city. We need to provide policy options to the city. We need to be empowered citizens who demand of the city. I think we need to be much more integrated into our city than we are. If you walk to Wits you'll see it is completely cordoned off. Why? Because, in 1994, as the city began to disintegrate as we imagine, we put walls around the institution. But does it not make more

sense to drop the walls, to integrate into the city and create safety within the community itself? I think we need to rethink how we use universities to engage the city.

The corporate sector, it seems to me, has to answer some hard questions. Currently the corporate sector enables the inequality to grow and then offers some CSI on the side to deal with the inequality, that's all. You don't have to re-think business itself. And that means you have to grapple with the issues of how you build a sustainable business in the context of an unequal society. Because, if you don't deal with inequality, you undermine the very sustainability of your business in the medium to long term. And so the question becomes, are you prepared to symbolically take knocks in your own executive remuneration? Because you can't create logic in the system when you ask poor people to moderate their own salary increases. Executives are seen to walk away with millions. Corporates need to construct a business model that doesn't reproduce the very inequalities we are talking about.

ZA: It's about making the tough decisions and it's about accountability.

AH: That's right. The city needs to deliver services. I worry about the city that wants to be world class but can't deliver basic services: lights, water, electricity, etc. This doesn't make sense.

ZA: And deliver the services for all...

AH: And for all. If you can't make the lights work and you can't fix the potholes, you can't be world class no matter how grand your documents are. And that's something that municipalities have to come to terms with. They really think smooching with a couple of mayors from overseas kind of makes you world class. It doesn't. You've got to get the basics right. We also need to create neighbourhoods that you can service first. Create neighbourhoods that bring poor and rich together, that can force my son to interact in a local school with people who are richer or poorer than him. That has to happen, because if you can't create neighbourhoods like that, then we are not creating good cities. We need to create mixed neighbourhoods. Otherwise we are perpetuating the privatisation of the city where people buy their way into those cities and these micro-cities engage the city municipality and buy the services that they want, resulting in a class apartheid. Some politicians are taking credit for what they consider beautiful developments, referring to Steyn City and Waterfall Estate. This is a reflection of their failures, not their successes. This is a real fear I have because then we have not created an inclusive economy and we have not addressed inequality. If we don't address the inequality, then we don't address South Africa's core problem.

ZA: Private space disguised as public space is hugely problematic in South African cities and in Johannesburg in particular, as it is highly regulated. What happens to

Johannesburg if we as government, academia, big business and engaged citizens do not make the bold moves we need to bridge the divide?

AH: I think the real problem of South Africa today is social polarisation. It seems to me that this social polarisation will continue and if social polarisation continues, the anger escalates and will lead to explosions like Marikana and the RMF movement. As this happens, the elite will grow increasingly nervous, resulting in a citizenry that is bifurcated, with many privileged people living in part here and in part in other countries. It also results in places like Steyn City and other gated communities.

Johannesburg is turning into a privatised city – a segregated privatised city. Segregated in the sense that the poor will live in the inner city, the rich will live in privatised suburbs. We are already seeing more and more of this. In between these two, you'll have the politicians trying to straddle the divide. There will be institutions like Wits University and others trying to straddle the divide.

Do I think we're on the verge of a revolution? No. I think that in the next couple of years we are going to have sporadic explosions, we are going to have the bumbling along of public service. We are going to have privatisation of the suburbs for the rich and economic elite. But it is an unsustainable momentum. It is an unsustainable future unless we can break through the logic of the class

divide, which brings me back to the original point I was making.

I think South Africa is at its moment of reckoning. For 20 years we've lived off the fruits of a political compact that was built in 1993 and 1994. I don't think we can live off it anymore. We need a socioeconomic compact that brings together at a macro level business, labour and state and city life. At a municipal level, rich residents and poor residents and municipal governance that is capable of delivering services to both. That's the big historical challenge of South Africa in 2015.

Some people think we're going to collapse tomorrow. I don't believe we're going to collapse, but neither are we going to be a nation like Germany tomorrow. Unless we break through the logic of what has become the inequality manifestation of our society, we can't build a sustainable society.
