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## LESSONS FROM THE JUNE 16 UPRISING

It is now 47 years since the eruption of the June 16 Uprising in 1976. It is a fact of history that in the late 1960s the young Bikos of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) had to reorganise the people and reignite the flames of the liberation struggle after the banning of the ANC and PAC in 1960. They were sacrificing and risking their lives to undo the political doldrums that set in as a result of the 1960 banning. Historians describe the ensuing fear and political inactivity as a political lull.

The aftermath of the 1960 banning saw mass arrests of the political activists, while many others slipped out of the country into exile. In a sense, the struggling masses were left organisationless and leaderless. In the alienating atmosphere of the white liberal NUSAS, a progressive Black Consciousness-inspired South African Students Organisation (SASO) was to be slowly brewed in mid-1967. However, it was in the University Christian Movement (UCM) that SASO was fermented and formed as the pioneer BCM organisation in 1968. Biko became the founding President at the organisation's launch at Turfloop in 1969.

Biko and his young Comrades had to move in haste and build institutional infrastructure that later proved to be instrumental for the June 16 Uprising. These organisations were formed across the sectors of society. The South African Students Movement (SASM) was one such sectoral organisation formed through the efforts of the SASO Comrades. It operated at high school level where it had Tsietsi Mashinini and Khotso Seatlholo as some of its leaders. SASM formed the Soweto Students Representative Council, of which Mashinini was the President. It therefore amounts to historical revision to plot to talk about the June 16 Uprising outside this institutional framework of the BCM and Biko's overall political influence.

A mistake is often made to reduce the June 16 Uprising to a reaction against the threat by the apartheid regime to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. For the record, the threat was never implemented. Though Afrikaans was colonised by the racist regime, the language was developed by the indigenous people as they resisted speaking the foreign languages like Dutch. As a matter of historical fact, there were economic, ideological and institutional factors that combined to bring about the Uprising. I have touched on the BCM and the Black Consciousness philosophy.

As a result of political pressure, the apartheid regime reversed its position of not building schools in the black communities. In 1972 they built new schools on the basis of the newly-introduced concept of Junior Secondary Schools with the result that there was a considerable increase in enrolment of students at that school level. At the international economic front, the Arab-Israel war caused an increase in oil prices. The global economy went into recession with the rise in oil prices coupled with inflation. The gold price took a nosedive in 1975 resulting in the worsening of the economic performance in South Africa. By that time, the apartheid government moved into belt-tightening mode at the expense of the Afrikan child. While it was spending R644 on a white child, only R42 was spent on the Afrikan child. The regime went into a knee-reaction mode and removed Standard 6 at the beginning of 1976. That had the chaotic result that the students that passed Standard 5 would go straight into Standard 7 at the secondary level. That overcrowding presented itself as a volatile situation that would be a factor in the mobilisation of the students.

The picture painted above shows clearly that the threat to impose Afrikaans as a medium of instruction was no more than a trigger mechanism for the June 16 Uprising. The socio-economic difficulties of the people and their high level of politicisation and mobilisation were more of the decisive factors. The mass exodus of the youth into exile played a pivotal role in reviving the exiled organisations in the wake of the ready-made recruits. Accordingly, the ANC's Umkhonto WeSizwe boasted to have a June 16 Detachment in its military ranks.

There are a number of lessons the youth of today could learn from their June 16 predecessors. The first lesson is that you are never too young to stand up and fight against landlessness and racism. Biko rose to lead the liberation struggle as a teenager. That's the reason why he was murdered in police custody at the tender age of 30. Moreover, the conscious adventurism of the June 16 youth never misled them to burn and loot the property of the people in the villages and townships. Their target was every property that was the symbol of apartheid. They never destroyed schools, libraries and clinics.

They never used their deprivation and plight as reasons to destroy their own souls and future by abusing drugs and alcohol. Instead, they used their plight as a motivation to stand up and fight for their rights as part of their communities. In fact, the bottle stores were their major targets for destruction. They never turned against their communities as the delinquents like today's "amaphara" who terrorise their own communities and parents. They used their adventurism as a positive energy to defend their communities and direct their stones and petrol bombs at the enemy of the people.

The positive influence of the June 16 youth spilled over to the youth of the 1980s. Youth organisations like AZAYO had slogans like "Asispini Elokshini – Asimkhawadi uDarkie, Siyamphilela", which could be summarised to mean "we don't terrorise our own communities and people".

It doesn't matter how tough the going could be, the young people should never turn their backs on education. Poverty and starvation are more the reasons the youth should demand to go to school. Learning and self-cultivation are part of the struggle for liberation. No rains or overflowing rivers should be allowed to come between us and our schools. Education is an effective weapon to fight our dehumanisation and lack of dignity that are a result of landlessness and oppression of centuries.

Racism does not end with the removal of apartheid from the statute books. It endures as structural racism to permeate all the institutions and systems of society. Similarly, colonialism does not end with the declaration of democracy, it stays on as coloniality, which sees the former freedom fighters looting the state resources, rather than driving the development of the people.

Once again, let us remember Alice Walker's words when she says "we are the ones we have been waiting for". It is about time that the young people rise to shape the world they wish to inherit. There is a need to be a bit more creative and constructive than the negative assumption that young people can only be economically active if the older folks desert spaces for the youth to occupy. We should never forget that the older generation are our parents, many of whom were systematically denied opportunities.