

# The long road back for Fort Hare

**After nearly 30 years of repressive administration, the once highly-respected University of Fort Hare is taking its first tentative steps on the tricky path to democratisation. HERMIEN KOTZÉ reports.**



Students on Freedom Square at Fort Hare.

picture: ROB POLLOCK

**THE** world-wide tide of democratisation has reached the small town of Alice in Ciskei, opening up fresh opportunities for meaningful education at the once esteemed University of Fort Hare.

At one time the academic home of Nelson Mandela, Robert Mugabe, Govan Mbeki, Robert Sobukwe and Oliver Tambo, it has been under Broederbond control for almost 30 years. In 1987, the former president of Ciskei, Lennox Sebe, attempted to mould it into his very own university.

The sad history of this period is well known and needs little elaboration. Anyone who has been connected with this institution over the years – students, academic staff and workers – can weave long tales of woe over the many injustices, the racism, arbitrary dismissals and expulsions, the content of curricula, the general air of authoritarianism, the repression, favouritism and so on.

However, it seems all that is changing rapidly. Soon after the Ciskei coup d'état in March this year, a whole series of events led to the demise of the Fort Hare top management. The autocratic rector, Prof Lamprecht, his equally autocratic deputy, Prof D Moore, and four registrars (one of whom held a matric certificate whilst his black deputy was working on a Ph D) all left. Few people, even from conservative ranks, mourned the rector's departure.

The next step was the disbanding, by Ciskei "military decree", of the Fort Hare council and the election of a new council with Prof Francis Wilson of the University of Cape Town as chairperson.

Other members included Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Bishop Russell of Grahamstown, the Rev Fcinca of the Border Council of Churches, Prof John Dugard of Wits, Mr Govan Mbeki, the Rev Arnold Stofile and Prof Wiseman Nkuhlu of the University of Transkei.

The previous dean of the faculty of economic sciences, Prof Brian Gardner, has been

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appointed acting rector until June next year to give the council time to find an appropriate person for this very challenging job. A new chancellor still has to be elected and Mr Nelson Mandela is a strong favourite.

There seems to be a widely-held belief at Fort Hare that the democratisation of the top structure will have a "trickle down effect" on the rest of the institution. This is probably correct – already an environment for debate and critical analysis, which was not tolerated under the previous administration, has been created.

The need to democratise all the decision-making forums and committees is generally acknowledged.

The newly formed non-racial Democratic Staff Association (DSA) played a very important role in pressing for all these changes and it provides the central forum for debate on these issues.

The need for a realistic and sensitively applied form of affirmative action is very high on the agenda. DSA spokesperson Msi

Silinga assured me that there will be no crude and rapid policy of Africanisation and that all new appointments will be made on merit alone.

I did, however, pick up some mumbblings of isolated cases where black applicants with uncompleted honours degrees were short-listed while white applicants with doctorates did not make the cut. One hopes that such examples are only teething problems!

**SO IT** seems that a very different Fort Hare has started emerging, and this was borne out in a recent visit to Alice. The changed atmosphere on the campus is already almost tangible. There was a general feeling of enthusiasm and excitement in the air. Interviews revealed a common initial response – an immense sense of relief. "We can breathe now, it's like there is oxygen in the air again", said many.

The new openness and improved student access to the administration has also meant an almost total disappearance of class boycotts and similar forms of campus protest.

The students' commitment to non-racialism and democracy was amply illustrated when they protested against the appointment of a token black acting rector and insisted that the best person be appointed regardless of colour.

In a moving speech at the first post-coup graduation ceremony in June, Francis Wilson called it "a marvellous moment . . . a gap, an opportunity in our life, which we have not seen for many years". In spite of the atmosphere of hope and careful optimism, it is widely acknowledged that there is a long, long road ahead – or to use Archbishop Tutu's words, "it's a long way to get Fort Hare back to where it should have been".