chapter 2

Muzi Sikhakhane
University of the Witwatersrand, SRC president 1994/95

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Brief biography

Advocate Muzi Sikhakhane SC is a practising advocate and senior counsel in Johannesburg. He was the first elected group leader of Victoria Mxenge Group of Advocates, which is a group within the Johannesburg Bar, from 2011 to 2012. He is currently the national chairperson of the recently formed Pan African Bar Association of South Africa (PABASA). He was admitted as an advocate in 2000, joined the Johannesburg Bar in 2002 and took silk in 2015. Sikhakhane has served as an acting judge of the High Court on several occasions.

This chapter is based on an interview conducted by Denyse Webbstock and Ntokozo Bhengu on 31 July 2018.

Early influences

Childhood

Advocate Muzi Sikhakhane’s involvement in student politics began when as a young man fresh out of school he entered Indumiso Teacher Training College. It was to continue for many years, most notably as the president of the SRC at Wits in the immediate post-apartheid years. Asked about the factors that influenced him to become a student leader, he traces his motivation to the experiences of extreme inequality of his early childhood that engendered an abiding need to fight the injustices he felt and saw around him.
They are very unusual influences, in the sense that I come from a rural place that was completely apolitical when I grew up. It’s a far-flung rural area in Bulwer [in KwaZulu-Natal, or KZN] with no anti-apartheid struggle history. I come from what I would call one of the poorest families in that village. It was, and still is, a staunch Catholic family, surrounded by farms and mountains. We lived in a rural area with no services, and many that were lucky to work did so as labourers on the white-owned farms. I saw my mother work on a farm for about 60 cents a day and my father doing odd jobs. It was also what we as children did during school holidays. The flat, leafy vast land belonged to two or three white farmers, while the small rocky area was for hundreds of indigenous rural villagers, all of whom were poor. That contradiction, that stark reality always surprised me – that I lived in a village that was terribly poor, but three farms surrounded this village with just three white men owning probably 20 times the village where we lived. And our parents worked for them, and I think that was the influence.

I was, and still am, a Catholic. There was a Catholic mission in the area. The priests were white German priests mostly, and every time we went to this church, it always surprised me that the farmers, who were rude and harsh to our parents, had a special place in the church. When I was an altar boy, the priests allowed white farmers and their children to have a separate queue for the holy sacrament. Black people were to wear jackets when they went to church, but white kids and their parents from the surrounding farms always came in their sleeveless shirts and vests. Observing those things in a poor area made me question the way things were, and why it was that Africans – who as far as I knew were the original people – always lived a hard life. This reality was striking to me and seemed unjust and odd. My father and many of his peers lived a hard life. He died when I was 11. I saw my father work for SAPPI Forests, chopping trees for a wage that never seemed to make us live better lives. He was chopping wood from 6am to 6pm, with a teenage white supervisor calling him names. So I think that lived reality, that rural poverty, that blatant injustice, shaped how I saw the world and inspired me to rebel against it. Unlike many in the area, I was lucky that I was able to go to school. I think that is how we survived what I think was the dehumanising poverty of our family. We went to school in order to change that sad reality that humiliated us. A lot of my peers that I grew up with didn’t go to school because, I think, they were not as poor as we were, and I think, they had some false sense of security as their parents had some cattle or worked in the cities. I was personally able to survive that mindset and environment through my mother’s desire to get me to school. And I think when I went to school, I met other influences. My mother’s sense of justice and absolute honesty were the main influence. I can’t talk about my father that much. I saw him suffering and then he died when I was 11. My mother’s sense of justice, and the fact that
my mother – as poor as she was – made it a point that whatever we had, we shared it with villagers who were poor, is what taught me to think I must fight for others. I still have an obsession with justice and fairness to date.

Family
Sikhakhane’s mother’s placing importance on the value of education was central to his development, and allowed him to escape the narrow confines of his surroundings, both physically and mentally. As he explains:

I am lucky, because a lot of people that I grew up with – through no fault of theirs – couldn’t escape. There is a book about Oliver Tambo, *Beyond the Engeli Mountains,*\(^{31}\) that I associate with, because I was really surrounded by mountains. Those mountains are physical – something you can see – but a rural area is both physical and psychological, because it hides you from the world. There was no TV, we had no radio at home until I finished standard 10… you actually had no direct contact with any other world, and so your ambitions are also limited – I think I once entertained the idea of working in the mines after standard 8 because those who were richer, were guys who had gone to join the mines in Joburg and would come back looking a little sophisticated. Having lived in Johannesburg all my adult life I came to know that the view I had of the mines was a little distorted.

That was as far as it went with the good life. I had never seen anyone who was a nurse or anything else. A teacher, or someone who worked in the mines, were my sort of reference point. I think you are lucky if you can get out psychologically, you can escape the psychological prison of rural poverty. And, if your parents like school, they are not seduced by short-term desires to have their kid work. My mother didn’t want me to work for any white farmers. Against my will sometimes, I thought. Self-reliance was very important to her.

Sikhakhane attributes many of the values he holds dear to his mother’s strong guidance and discipline in moral matters.

My mother was firm, had a good sense of justice. I think the idea that you must never steal somebody’s money comes from my mum. We would walk down the street, and I would find a R10 note and be very happy because that meant that day we would eat, and I would give it to my mum proudly. Up to today, I could never steal public money, or any money, because my mother would walk back with you for two kilometres and ask you, ‘Where did you

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pick up the money?’ and you would say, ‘Here,’ and she would say, ‘Put it back there.’ And you stay hungry, but with your dignity. You don’t take somebody else’s money.

High school
There were other influences too, particularly at the boarding school he attended, Polela High in Bulwer. There he met a boy who later became a bishop of the Lutheran Church, Bishop Emmanuel Nzuza, who had a profound influence on Sikhakhane’s intellectual development as a political activist.

When I met him in standard 9, he was this young fellow – we were both like 16 years old or he was slightly older than me – we were sort of ‘black consciousness’ at the time, and we discussed politics almost every day in the dormitory. This fellow, in solidarity with me, would even wear school uniform with me at social functions, just to ensure that my poverty did not stick out. I didn’t teach him much, but he taught me a lot, and we became close. We went our separate ways at the end of ’83. By that time, both of us had been wrongly accused of organising some food boycott or something related to food, and the boarding master thought it was me and him behind it, because we always discussed politics …

But this was unrelated to me – in fact I wasn’t even there when it happened. I had gone out. I had been asked (by the same boarding master who accused us) to leave as I was owing boarding fees. I think that shaped my political views, and just generally, if you go to Pietermaritzburg and you see the poverty in the surrounding rural areas … So, in ’84 when I got to Indumiso [Teacher Training] College, I joined AZASO [Azanian Students’ Organisation] almost in the first week of getting there. That was the beginning of my formal involvement in political activism.

As he explains:

It [AZASO] was at first a Black Consciousness student movement which was one of the first to jump ship and join the UDF [United Democratic Front]. The name has always been misleading to other people because they think it is part of AZAPO [Azanian People’s Organisation]. It wasn’t, they were called charterists. I joined a boycott that was happening in the first two months at college, and I think it’s my activities around that time that made me a student leader even in my first year at College and I led that throughout until I left in 1986. I had been part of that, I had been detained I don’t know how

32 Formed in 1979.
many times – I lost count – and that is how I knew Peter Kerchhoff. Peter Kerchhoff and I were dragged from a meeting in his offices and detained for no reason in Pietermaritzburg and released on a Sunday. I still don’t know what we had done; they didn’t tell me what we had done.

**Context of getting involved in student politics**

Sikhakhane’s experiences as a political activist – he had joined the ANC when he was about 19, and later the UDF – and an AZASO student leader at Indumiso College in the mid-1980s in KwaZulu-Natal, were to prove even more traumatic and led to him, as he puts it, being ‘kicked out of’ the province. The context of the time was the violence between the ANC and the IFP. At the time, Sikhakhane was working together with Cassius Lubisi and Reggie Hadebe, an ANC leader in the Midlands. His time in KZN ended brutally, with him being attacked and shot by members of the IFP.

The story unfolds as follows:

When I finished [college], I realised I couldn’t teach in KZN because I couldn’t teach in a KwaZulu government school. All of us at AZASO had been detained at some point or another. We didn’t know why they said they couldn’t employ us. I went to a high school near KwaMashu, and after two hours the principal came back from the regional head office and said he had been instructed not to employ me. And then I ended up in Bulwer, in a KwaZulu government secondary school, where I taught from February to October 1987, until I was told that the KwaZulu government wanted me to leave. I was expelled. I was suspended for no reason. I was just teaching. I loved the rural community and worshipped with them every Sunday. Of course, I had been in the UDF in those years. But there was no politics in the school.

I was just teaching and hoped to make a difference in the upliftment of that community. One day the principal told me he had been instructed to let me go. I left only briefly, as there was a boycott and students demanded that I stay because there were exams coming, and I taught more classes than were allocated to me. I was teaching English, Zulu, and history because there was a shortage of teachers. It was a rural area. I was also the choir master and music teacher. I was then attacked on 12 November 1987 by a group that purported

33 Organiser of the anti-apartheid organisation Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA).

34 Cassius Lubisi was a student at the time and is now director-general in the Presidency. Reggie Hadebe was an ANC Midlands executive committee member who was shot dead when the car in which he was travelling was ambushed by named members of the IFP between Richmond and Ixopo, Natal, on 27 October 1992.
to be Inkatha members, accompanied by police, and that’s how I left KZN. I survived the battle with them.

How had Sikhakhane understood the motivation for the attack?

You know, it was just Inkatha. I had refused to join the Inkatha Party – most teachers in rural areas there joined – and I had made it clear that I was not going to do that. I had clashed with Inkatha people who frequently came to take kids from the school every day, as I thought it was anti-education to take kids to rallies or meetings during school hours. It was not because I wanted them to go to an ANC rally or UDF – there was no political activity in KZN, except Inkatha activity.

I had raised it with the principal that this idea that someone from Inkatha walks in, kids must leave classes and assemble, it’s a bit anti-freedom struggle. So, there was the clash, and that is how I left and how I ended up in Joburg. I can tell you about sleeping in the streets of Joburg and all of that. But, ja, I was injured – I was stabbed and shot by those people.

Sikhakhane had to leave KZN in a hurry, and was helped to make his escape by train within two days by Reverend Lund, who had sheltered him after the incident.

So that’s how I got here. Anyway, when I was here, I was already a member of the NEUSA. That was a union of teachers called the National Education Union of South Africa led by Reggie Hadebe with Thami Mseleku. I could only teach in a Catholic school because had I gone to a government school I would have been followed and I would have been arrested or killed.

That his home province had become dangerous for Sikhakhane is illustrated in the story he relates about having to bury his mother twice. She died in 1998, and even after the end of apartheid, he was not able to bury her near her birthplace but only in KwaMashu, to where they had escaped. It was only in 2007 that her body was exhumed for a proper burial in the Midlands.

**Becoming involved in the SRC at Wits**

That Sikhakhane went to study at Wits was not part of his original plan. Fleeing KZN, he had decided on 14 November 1987 to leave the country altogether. He was to meet fellow comrades in order to facilitate his leaving, but they had

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suggested that he work in the Transvaal UDF. With the help of his long-time friend, Aubrey Matshiqi, and Reggie Hadebe, he managed to get a position as a teacher at a Catholic school, St Mathew’s High School in Soweto, and there he started a period of intense political activism.

My political life as an activist was bigger in Soweto in the UDF Area Committee, but remember at the time, I was also an MK [Umkhonto we Sizwe] operative, and I joined the Transvaal-based units of MK at the time. And so I remained in Soweto as a teacher and a member of the UDF Area Committee and became more known as an activist in Soweto than in KZN. Because in KZN, I had left in 1987 when no one was watching – and that’s why most people think I am a Sowetan. I also regard myself as partly a Sowetan because the place allowed me to be an activist without harassing me. I am still indebted to Rockville Township, my second home.

In Soweto, together with many comrades, I formed branches of the ANC when it was unbanned, but it’s because fate brought me to Soweto. But as I said, that is not where I was born. It’s still an important part of my life because I think it was the first time I got to be active politically without being harassed. I am not saying it was easy, we were running away from the police, but KZN was a painful place for me. I was trying to help poor people, but the same poor people were calling people to kill us because we were regarded as terrorists for demanding that chiefs treat them with dignity. The same poor people we were trying to help. It was a contradiction in a way, because as I told you, the farmers – I resented the wealth they had at the expense and toil of our parents – but actually, it’s our neighbours who called us out, because they were convinced we were terrorists and all of these things. Soweto was a very different place for me. For the first time, I joined forces with other activists and we were all running away from the police, not our own neighbours.

Sikhakhane and Matshiqi were arrested in 1990 for MK activities. Sikhakhane’s MK unit was directly linked to Chris Hani, who arranged bail for them. Sikhakhane remembers that Hani had said to him that he must go back to school (study) because, having seen what had happened in liberation movements all over the world, it would be important to be independent when liberation came and not rely on government or liberation movements for a job. Sikhakhane declares he is still indebted to him for that advice.

That’s when I went to Wits. I had already been studying through UNISA [University of South Africa]. While I was teaching, I was studying at UNISA. So, I went back to Wits after I went on trial and Chris died in 1993, in April, and I think it was after that I put in my resignation letter without knowing where I was going. But I knew I was going to school and I went to Wits in
'94, and I didn’t want to be active at all. I went there to study and not do anything and I still attribute my involvement to Kenneth Creamer and the guy who is now the CEO of the IEC [Independent Electoral Commission], Sy Mamabolo.

I was sitting quietly as a student, and no one knew where I was from, but these comrades seemed to know who I was because I had been active in the area, and they asked me to be part of the student activism at Wits. I was tired, I had been an activist all my life, I had come from a trial and this time I wanted to go back to school to prepare for my future. Well, fate had other plans. And that is how, accidentally, I got involved in SASCO at Wits and then I was elected SRC president, together with a varied group of activists.

From activism to student politics
Sikhakhane was to spend five years at Wits, doing first a BA in English and history, but he studied political science and philosophy as well, before doing his LLB. For the term he was SRC president, Sikhakhane remembers that he did not take the usual sabbatical that SRC presidents took. Nor did he, on principle, accept any allowance that was available to SRC presidents who so chose. Sikhakhane’s life experience was very different to those of his peers in student leadership. Having had a decade’s worth of intense activism behind him, he had a different frame of reference from students who were new to activism. He relates how he had to balance his own activist experience with students who were now as radical as he had been in the 80s. This was his second round in student politics.

To balance that is very difficult, because sometimes experience teaches you to be wiser and cautious and it moderates you in a way, and I was trying to manage a student movement in a changing South Africa. And SA [at the time] was not only changing physically, it was changing psychologically. There is a Mandela, there is the ANC, but the lived reality of students in these historically racist, white institutions had not changed. Nothing much had changed – except hope. Yet, there was an expectation to tone down our historical anti-establishment posture and rhetoric.

And hope is a funny commodity, because it’s elusive. You are being told to tone things down but these institutions are still racist, they are still doing what they used to do, and I think the white liberal institutions are more difficult because people there almost don’t think of themselves as prejudiced. When you are at loggerheads with them, you have a tougher battle than someone fighting an Afrikaner in Ventersdorp because you may be fighting someone who has a reputation as a liberal, yet in your lived encounters with them, you face their prejudices head-on.

And at the same time, the historical conditions of white racism in institutions persisted. The country was expecting it was the end of protests,
because there is a new government. Conditions outside are not conducive to
protests, but your lived realities in these institutions are such that very little
has changed. Black students are still sleeping in the libraries, they have no
accommodation and they are excluded every year, so the conditions that faced
the students in 1990 are still facing them in 1994, but we have a government
that has credibility, and when you protest you face a barrage of criticism from
people who believe you should not protest because we now have an ANC
government. Mandela had been unleashed – he is still being unleashed now.
You can’t complain about something without people unleashing Mandela
on you. Be like Mandela, and all of that. So sometimes we were faced with
difficult conditions.

I don’t think it is criticism that is unjustified, but it came from ANC
people who are now in government – and they don’t understand why you are
protesting because they are trying to fix things, but you are also faced with
situations that are difficult for you and whenever you protest it’s regarded
as embarrassing the ANC. But you are protesting against administration at
these universities, and so it was a very difficult time to manage because the
contradictions, I think, were sharper in 1994. There was hope, and hope lived
side by side with the hard conditions that black people had always experienced
and found difficult to manage.

The SRC and internal organisation

The role of the SRC

The role of the SRC at Wits in the immediate post-apartheid years, was, according
to Sikhakhane, circumscribed by the external political conditions.

We learned to engage the African National Congress [ANC] as students
in order for them to understand that the only way you could bridge that
gap [between the hope and the lived realities] was by interacting with our
government, and the ANC in particular, to say, ‘Yes, you do expect us to tone
it down because you are now in power. Yes, we can do so, but we need your
help with these institutions that continue to brandish your name in our faces
when they continue with things which we feel we should challenge.’

And I think the ANC in 1994/95 was quite involved. As students we were
invited to Shell House to meet with the ANC, and we continued to protest,
but we did make the ANC understand what our issues were at the time,
and that it was not about them, but we needed them to help us by engaging
with the institutions of higher learning so that we could not just use the new
political dispensation to blunt student struggles, but use it to tell universities
it’s time to think differently. It’s time to confront their own prejudices.
Main issues
Among the main issues of the time, Sikhakhane lists student exclusions, student fees, and what he calls 'soft issues', such as the need for management and academic staff to reflect the demographic of society.

The biggest issue had always been student exclusions, particularly at white universities because what happened is that poor students found themselves in tough conditions because they didn't have accommodation, some of them just made it by the skin of their teeth to be there, and could not afford what a student needs in order to get on with their work. So when January came, a lot of them had failed and we used to intervene on their behalf just to see whether the university could be more compassionate about it. We were not encouraging that people should fail forever, but we felt that conditions of students had to be understood.

Secondly, I think students all the years had problems with fees. It's an old battle, so we always wanted the university to accommodate those who had travelled far to seek education and to find them accommodation. And there are soft issues, but they are big ones. That when people go to university or a school – it happens today when my children go to school – I worry that the only black person they see is the one who is cutting the grass and the teachers are white, and in their heads psychologically they draw a distinction that knowledge is white, and hard labour is black, and we engaged the university that as students we would also like to be in a university where management reflects our society, the demographic of our society. We engaged management about how we wanted to see more black lecturers. We wanted to see more black people in management structures. We confronted it, and formed a structure which included academics, administration and students – it was a transformation committee at Wits. While things were changing, our universities were not, but I think changes started to happen. Makgoba became the deputy vice-chancellor, and we saw more of that.  

There were things we didn't confront, and I wish we had. I am happy that students after us did. The students who led #RhodesMustFall are my role models sometimes. Because they challenged things we didn't have time to challenge, what are called institutions of whiteness in society. We had other, bigger problems, but I think we confronted the issues of the time which were management issues, and issues of black poor students. But we hardly had time to engage with the curriculum. We tried, but I wish we had done more

36 Prof. Malegapuru William Makgoba was the first black deputy vice-chancellor at Wits, appointed in 1995.
because the curriculum was important, but I suppose the issues we were facing were more bread and butter issues for us.

Communication
Communication with students mostly followed a direct strategy, and as SRC President, Sikhakhane made it a point to go to faculty council or house committee meetings, and would try to engage directly on matters of concern. One example he cites is when he had been called an anti-Semite as he had allowed Muslim students to march, and he went to the South African Jewish Student Body to explain that they would have been allowed to march against a position as well. In general, the methods of communication involved noticeboards, mass meetings and general lectures with invited speakers on specific topics.

As the SRC, we engaged more with students face to face. We went to their meetings, we called mass meetings a lot, and spoke to students and whenever there were others who differed with us, we would call meetings and go there. So I think that was the method we used at the time.

Choosing the issues on which to focus attention was also part of a strategy.

We tried to focus on issues that the students could relate to. You can call a march on Palestine all you like, or what's happening in Syria, and students will hardly understand that. I don't think we ever had a protest that did not include issues that students felt strongly about. Even there, you would smuggle in something about what is happening in the country – about NEHAWU, the workers – but basically, the march would be about students. It's about exclusions, it's about accommodation. Of course, it could be broader, you could have demands that talk about the curriculum, talk about management of faculties as well, but we dealt with those issues that students are faced with on a daily basis – as long as we won the issues that were immediate and close to the hearts of students.

We wanted a black vice-chancellor – you can't get that over the seven days of a march, we knew we were not going to get that, but we made the point that the management should change. And it's a very hard thing to do because you are faced with people who all their lives have been socialised to see you differently.

And so we were dealing with that at universities, you are dealing with people who don't believe that if you had black managers at the top, the university would not collapse. It was hard but I think students still face those things and new challenges. I am happy that students are not trying to be us. They are trying to confront the unique issues that they face now. I don't know
how they are going to deal with that fact that politics attracts people who are in it for themselves.

SRC processes
Sikhakhane explains how the SRC at Wits was run at the time. There was a university administrator, and logistics, structures and offices were provided by the university.

When I was SRC president – I don’t know since then – but I really think it was a clean group of people when it comes to corruption. I don’t think we spent anything that we shouldn’t have. And I don’t think it was just me. I think I was lucky at the time. I had people like Ebrahim Hassen, Alex Khumalo and others. From the DA side now, Manie, Malcolm. We could differ with them on anything. But we all agreed that we had to run a clean SRC.

There was another important factor in ensuring what Sikhakhane considered to be clean governance at the time – the assistance he had from a group of people who guided him in management matters.

I had a couple of very conscientious people on the SASCO side who had been at university longer than I had been and who helped me a lot because they managed that aspect better. So, the office logistics – just the management of student affairs – was run by more people than just me. I think most of them were better than me at that level. I think I was a political activist – inclusive in my approach – but I think there were more talented people with experience who would be in faculty councils. It lifted my leadership. I was new, they had been there three or four years some of them. So, it worked well, I think they managed that office very well.

Sikhakhane was shocked in later years to learn that in higher education, some student leaders were engaging in corrupt practices and taking university monies, as in his day there had been systems, processes and people holding them to account. How does he account for this?

The struggle has been taking a hammering for some time. The type of activist you get when the benefit is death and detention, is different to the type you get later when being involved comes with certain benefits which are material. And I think what united the group of us in the 80s and earlier, in the 60s and 70s and possibly earlier, I suppose, was an idea and a passion for particular values. I tell people that I never thought of politics when I was elected, or thought what would I become. I didn’t want to be a politician. I was just an activist and I am sure what has happened is that – just as in all struggles – the
type of leaders we used to have is diminishing, because the values that inform what we do used to be about freedom and justice, social economic justice, and as you go on and get involved in becoming a leader with benefits, you attract a particular type of person.

I think in student politics too – like our leaders – celebrity became part of it. I have seen a lot of student leaders who became SRC presidents, and you could see just by what they say that they had become celebrities rather than activists. That came with a love for benefits, for money, for fun, and once people use positions they have for fun and for benefits, I think the temptation to use funds to fulfil those urges becomes greater. And I think that it continues.

The era in which Sikhakhane was involved in student politics was quite different, both from the current times, and from other countries, and in his view, it spawned a very specific kind of student leader.

The question comes of why you get involved in the first place, and I don’t think we ever check. When I went to South Korea once for a symposium for young leaders, I met students from Cambridge and I realised we were different. This was in ’94. I was amazed – I met people from Cambridge and Harvard – these are student leaders. But these were politicians, these were Democrats in the making, these were Republicans in the making, and we were activists. I was not an MP in the making, and I think in South Africa people don’t believe this when I tell them that in the 70s, 80s and 90s students and activists did not even think about what they would become. I say to my kids, my biggest ambition when I was an activist in the 80s is what I thought would happen to me … maybe a very big funeral where the ANC would speak, that was great to me … I didn’t see anything beyond being an activist. I think as people saw possible posts in government, it started attracting a different type of person. People get into politics to be wealthy. It’s a problem of postcolonial countries that are poor. There’s a psychological barrier. There is a lot of mind-shift that must happen.

Sikhakhane reflects further on what he means by that mind-shift. Speaking about the ambitions of many young people today to become employed in government, he has the following to say:

We need a different imagination. Memory is passed down from generation to generation, and so if I have always known that my father worked in Durban or Pietermaritzburg for a firm or whatever, I am going to school so that I can get employed. Being secure with a job is a very important thing in the minds of a lot of people because of that. I think it is the psyche that came with the lack of freedom, being seen as providers of labour in their own country rather than being part of the mainstream economy, that has created a particular mindset.
I see it here [at the firm where he currently works]. A lot of youngsters come here. [Being an advocate] is a hard job. It’s a very, very hard job to do. You don’t choose your clients. When I represent Ramaphosa or Zuma or Malema, I don’t choose them, they are clients. I do my job without any regard to their political orientation. It’s like being a doctor – it’s a hard job – and you get judged, and you must work hard. No one goes to an advocate’s chambers unless they think he or she is good for their case. A lot of people come here, and they are looking for the security they would get if they were employed by someone. They can’t have it. We must teach people to get out of that mindset and start thinking of themselves as part of the mainstream economy. Free people that must think independently of being charity cases. It’s a hard thing. Self-determination is the ultimate mindset of freedom. Just like love, compassion and courage are the only real pillars of being a revolutionary.

Governance and the SRC

Representation

The internal functioning of the SRC in Sikhakhane's time was complicated by the fact that there was a division in SASCO, chiefly around the issue of whether SRC elections should be boycotted or not. One group, led by Mamabolo, to which Sikhakhane was allied, felt that they would have let students down had they boycotted elections, so they decided to stand. SASCO’s reputation on campus had apparently suffered as a result of continuing to use tactics that had made them popular in the 1980s, such as tipping over dustbins, which, in the changed dispensation, had increasingly alienated them from the student body. As Sikhakhane remarks, a lot of them felt they needed to do a lot of soul-searching. Different tactics were needed.

Among these was the introduction of a student assembly, which included leaders from all the different student organisations, from political formations to sports and social clubs, to try to find some common issues and promote harmony, even though their ideological positions were very diverse. House committees were also important in understanding the problems students faced. Sikhakhane and his vice-president, Ebrahim Hassen, represented the SRC on Senate and Council. There were also faculty committees, which had not stood on political tickets but were included in the student assembly. How had this worked?

During my time it worked very well because I am an inclusive person by nature. I hold radical views, yes, but I do believe that when people can sit and persuade each other it works better. No matter how radical your view is, the more people you have around you the better. So, I think it worked quite harmoniously. We were able to reach students we had not been able to reach politically through those structures, just by making sure that in a structure of student leaders they can speak their minds. We would differ with them, but
they could speak their minds and people would come and speak. I have always believed in what Rosa Luxemburg once said, that freedom of expression should be the exclusive privilege of those who differ with you.

**Relationship with management**
The SRC’s relationship with management at the time was also generally open, although there were exceptions.

We were able to engage management meaningfully, and the entire student leadership. There would always be people who didn’t see eye to eye with the management, and there were those who didn’t agree with us, but they treated us with respect. I still remember Judge Carol Lewis, who is now a judge in the Supreme Court, and I had to appear before her all the time. We differed sharply, but one thing we did was engage with each other, and that was important. She was very good at that level, and when she differed with us, she would call us to a debate. There were others we never had a relationship with, those who humiliated students in those engagements. There were a couple of them, and students didn’t have a good relationship with some people … But the vice-chancellor, Bob Charlton, I found that engaging with him as a human being was more meaningful than my engagement with some of the people who boasted they have been liberals before. I found that as a human being, he was much more sincere to deal with than some professors who I found to be more prejudiced than they imagined. There is always a contradiction between what students wants and what management wants – it is never going to be smooth – but I think we were able to manage that relationship.

We were also able to bridge the gaps which existed amongst ourselves because of the climate in the country and I think that the SRC at the time – without being pompous about it – was able to unite students across ideological lines. I think we were able to do that. And also, we engaged with workers a lot – more than they had been engaged with before. I think NEHAWU, the union, was our closest ally at the university and there was a structure of academics that was close to us as well.

**Strategies**
Sikhakhane believes that the trust between SRC leaders of different political persuasions was important in dealing with issues honestly and openly.

I think you can transcend a lot of ideological differences with people if they know that face to face with you they can trust you, right. So that trust was there. I could call Malcolm Lennox – still a DA councillor today – close the door, and sit with him and say, ‘Malcolm, you tell me now why are you
differing with us on this issue. Let's leave politics now. Why? This is about black students,’ and when we had finished with that meeting, Malcolm would go to his meeting and persuade those people that it is the right thing to do.

So it was that engagement. It was not easy, but I think that engagement about real issues rather than just ideological waffling works better. Because all human beings, if you sit with them closely, they do want justice, they do want freedom. What curtails them is their own prejudices and their past that they bring to a discussion about the present.

We could go to have a bosberaad and we would spend the first day discussing politics and our understanding of society and what’s needed in society, and there are things you can remind people about. It doesn’t matter who they think they represent. If you ask anyone — go to Ventersdorp now and ask an Afrikaner racist you will find there what do they think is better between freedom and lack of it. They will tell you that freedom is better. They can then debate their notion of freedom.

We engaged a lot about those things and I think it was sometimes hard when we were taking radical stands, we were marching, and students who believe they are from a tradition that doesn’t do that found it hard, but I don’t think we had difficult moments. There were few moments of difficulty.

Sikhakhane’s pragmatism is evident in his view of leadership, which is about moderating between extremes.

I suppose leadership is never a position of extremes. Leadership by its nature is a centrist position, and it’s about managing contradictions better to achieve whatever it is you set yourself to achieve. Even if you are leading a group of soldiers in the bush, in the context of that group of rebels, the leader of that rebel group must be centrist in their approach in order to manage the contradictions. It doesn’t matter where you are. In that way, you accommodate people better, you manage their contradictions. Your ideal may be radical, but the way you deal with people must accommodate them.

**SRC and external structures**

Sikhakhane returns to the theme of the relationship of the SRC with external political formations. He explains that while some of his SRC were aligned to the ANC, others on the SRC from the South African Liberal Students Association (SALSA), whom he still sees occasionally, were aligned to the Democratic Alliance (DA). At the time, as student leaders, they did not feel that they had been deployed by their party, but operated independently, and sometimes challenged the party’s understanding of student issues.
I think [that relationship] has changed now, but it also depends on individual leaders. I didn’t see that we should take instructions, because the conditions we were dealing with were quite different. But let me put it this way – honestly, they [the party leaders] were influential. They had been our heroes for a long time, so I can’t say that when we went to meet Mandela that students were not awed and overwhelmed – they were. When we had criticised the ANC one day, and had said nasty things about the ANC, he said to us, ‘Do you think we must smell what you are doing at universities? You have not told us the issues. So how must I know? Must I smell that you have issues at Wits?’ Of course, we didn’t know what to say. He was right. We just thought they must support us in whatever we did. The more we engaged with them, the more enlightened they became about what we were facing and their own shortcomings in how they were dealing with universities. Through their engagement with students, they also learnt to understand it was not hunky-dory at universities just because they had arrived. So, I think they learnt something from us. We were at loggerheads with the ANC sometimes because comrades at the ANC felt they were trying to normalise the country, and we were making it look like the country was in turmoil. So, there was tension and co-operation, but I don’t think we ever took instructions.

**Lessons learnt**

In his reflections about the policy context of the early 90s with respect to funding higher education, Sikhakhane outlines a perceived disconnect between the policy intentions and the funding realities.

I think we were all caught up in this euphoria in South Africa, and I think we have that problem until today, I am afraid to say. Political leadership is the ability to balance all things that need to be changed. You change them – yes, it may not be at the same time – but you group things that you need to change and change them – and I think what happened in those days was that policy development was ad hoc and unstructured. So, you increase access, which is a good thing, but you are a bit scared of touching your budget to accompany what you say, right? At the same time that you are increasing access in education, in hospitals and everywhere, you adopt a macro-economic policy where you know you are discouraging social spending … [in the shift from RDP to GEAR].\(^{37}\) We are flooded with students who have better access, but there is very little progress, policy-wise from the state, to make sure they have free or affordable education and that access happens without compromising any quality in education.

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\(^{37}\) Reconstruction and Development Programme; Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme.
I think that disjuncture in the mid-90s was because it was a period of lack of clarity policy-wise, and, I think it’s a problem in the postcolonial world, that people take over a government and still go out there to western countries to beg them for policy direction. I don’t know what it was, but I think our leaders were a bit seduced by western types of economies. I don’t think they studied the conditions when they did away with training colleges for teachers – only to say there is a shortage of teachers a couple of years later. It tells you there was a lack of strategic thinking about it.

We were at the heart of things – 1994 and 1995 were difficult because you were dealing with a new government and a lot of things must happen, but a lot of things are not happening …

When you have had a history of colonialism and apartheid and racism, you must check which structures you can transform – white and colonial structures. But basically, my point is that I believe you must form new structures, fund them and create new values, rather than being trapped in old structures that were not designed for your new values. I think the new government was scared of doing these things, which has a lot to do with the nature of our political settlement. I am not saying the nature of our settlement was wrong. I am not sure there was an alternative. I am saying it’s a very, very difficult political settlement …

We always see a struggle as a struggle to undo physical things – poverty and access to education, housing. Those things are important, but I think one of the biggest postcolonial things to deal with is the mind. A lot of white South Africans tell you we were not there, and we didn’t oppress anyone. All black people pretended they were in the struggle. But basically, psychologically, our politicians still lead a free country trying to seek white and western validation for what they are doing, because they feel whatever they suggest is not good enough until western countries and white South Africans like it. It is for that reason, actually. I can give you an example. Our black people struggle every day. They have marches every day. It will take a march in Sandhurst for our politicians to do something. If people in the suburbs of South Africa did something like that …

We just have to deal with the vestiges of colonialism in our own minds – both black and white – and I think the problem is we are all very comfortable not confronting our own prejudices and how those things tend to affect what we do. I see it now, when people fight in the ANC about which leader is good and which leader is bad, we are all hung up with personalities and loyalties. Every conference of the ANC is a vicious cycle. We replace one group of people we dislike with the new group we like, but that group is not necessarily caring. All the divisions in the ANC have nothing to do with policy.
Reflecting on #FeesMustFall

Reflecting on the 2015/16 student protests, Sikhakhane speaks of being inspired by them.

#RhodesMustFall as an eye-opener

I can’t say I agree with all their tactics, but I was quite inspired by students’ #FeesMustFall yes, but that #RhodesMustFall thing for me was such an eye-opener – that students saw things we didn’t see. I think those students – particularly at UCT – are the only group who tried not to imitate us, and I think it’s because they were not necessarily aligned to existing political tensions and parties and they had space to think independently – as students must do. And I think they carved a niche for themselves. As an activist, I walked and sat next to Rhodes’ statue without thinking. I was quite impressed that students started engaging with a notion of white power and whiteness in the context of South Africa and what it means. Something we talked about, but we didn’t mind that we were sitting in this boardroom with old colonialist pictures. You know, we had other issues, so I was happy that they started thinking about issues that are different from those.

Disillusion with post-1994 and the fate of liberation movements

What does Sikhakhane view as accounting for that becoming an issue in 2015, and not, for example, in 1998?

I think it’s because ’94 overpromised and we are still going to see it. I predict a civil war in South Africa. I hope I am wrong. In South Africa, we like suppressing dissent. Mandela was a revolutionary of course, but there are people who are telling us a particular side of Mandela and it’s a side of understanding and reconciliation. Things that are nice, and it forces us not to engage head-on with things that are hard questions in South Africa.

And I think what happened was ’94 was papering over the cracks in certain instances. Our leaders were working hard on a solution; the world was changing. The Soviet bloc had collapsed and frontline states could no longer afford to keep us in exile. So there were lots of pressures, and our leaders were coming out of jail, and I think there was a rush to create an ambience of harmony, of peace and order to fit in with the modern, democratic world. But I think in doing so, we suppressed a lot of frustrations by black Africans in South Africa, and I think it came out 20 years later. I think if you study all of these liberation parties, they start facing that rebellion in 20 years or so.

The need for true freedom

I think it was that, and a generation of people who – it’s not that they didn’t
respect former leaders – but they started thinking differently. But also what I was telling you about what we faced in ’94, that sometimes at universities you are at the coalface of prejudice. I once engaged with a member of top management at Wits who was spewing racist things to us as student leaders and she stood up, went to her corner and said she is phoning the office of the then deputy president. I thought, ‘This is interesting – this person who is fighting us as black students and we regard her as a highly prejudiced individual – has this relationship with our leaders and wants to use that relationship to force us to retreat.’

Of course, she phoned the office. You feel small and perplexed when that sort of thing happens. We were forced to retreat, and I think South Africa is like that. It’s like creating a false sense of progress and all of these things we cover up, keep coming out. It’s going to happen with the land question. It’s going to happen with all sorts of things, and I think it’s because we choose not to confront challenges head-on. Like the nature of our political settlement, we seek painless change, a contradiction in terms. We fail to be bold and radical about true freedom. I think the day we do, we will truly be able to get onto the freeway to true non-racism and progress. At the moment, I think we do that by asking formerly oppressed people to bend over backwards, to forgive people who have not asked for forgiveness and who, on a daily basis, insult us. South Africa is going to be in that vicious cycle all the time and we can confront it with better leadership. We can confront it with leadership that doesn’t side-track us from those painful issues. And I think that is why that thing happened and it’s going to happen again with the land question and other debates because I don’t think people truly understand what it’s like to be born of a race, a group of people who have been underdogs in society for centuries.

I don’t think people fully understand your emotions and what it means to sit with your white colleagues in Yeoville and eat olives, and then go back and see black people who are hopeless and have no future who are your relatives. It brings mixed emotions inside you. That is one of the things we are sitting on in South Africa.

I hope I am wrong about a civil war. I hope I am wrong, but I do think our political transition taught us to paper over our cracks and suppress things that we should deal with and confront head-on and move on.

**Impact of the student leadership experience**

What had Sikhakhane learnt as a student leader that he carried through into his later life?

I am a leader in my profession and that experience comes in handy as a member of the Bar Council, and I led this group [of advocates] when it started – the
Victoria Mxenge Group – and I think that experience, you can’t buy it. Just at the level of understanding contradictions that emerge when people are in groups and how to manage them. I have learnt better skills. My involvement has made me able to persuade a person from a different background about a radical view that one would have thought only black people would take, because those roles taught me to be receptive to other views. I think that is the thing you learn. You can’t lead if you can’t follow. That’s just me. I think you can’t lead people if you can’t follow. You must learn to follow them, and hear their views.

Student activism by its very nature is a temporary thing. It’s an episode in one’s life, and one can’t be a student activist forever. By its very nature, it doesn’t outlast graduation. But of course, there are things to be done in society and when you graduate, you must find your rulebook to pursue the values you thought you were pursuing. And they don’t have to be in political parties.

I find that I am much better now in going to a school in KZN and donating money and excluding politicians. I make more of a difference than I would if I were in a branch of the ANC. There they are fighting about whether they like Zuma or whether they like Cyril. It doesn’t make sense to me, because I don’t see how ideologically it advances freedom. So in a way I think we need to encourage people to find wherever they are going to make a difference. Become an advocate to make a difference. You must be able to say, okay, what he does [as an advocate] is consistent with what he was as a student leader. I don’t have to be in any other political structure. There was a move two years ago for all [former] student leaders to go back to Wits. I was quite critical, and I didn’t get involved. A lot of former student leaders were getting involved, and I was suspicious of it because it seemed to be aligned to what was happening in the country and the sides that people were taking. People had been quiet for 30 years, and suddenly there is a fight in the ANC and government about getting rid of some leaders, and people are going back to university under the guise that they are assisting in that debate. I could see that people were using student tensions to position themselves and people they support outside the university.

**Regrets**

Did Sikhakhane have any regrets about his student leadership, or is there anything he would have done differently?

I don’t regret my involvement at all. When I was SRC president at Wits, and I was managing all of these contradictions, I did regret that, why, after 10 years of being an activist when I had come here to hide and be a student – why did I get involved in this? I did regret it a bit. There I was, sometimes at loggerheads with younger comrades, whose radicalism was where mine had
been at a particular point of my political development. They were entitled to be what they were. Sometimes I did not handle it well but we were able to work together because we were united about our commitment to freedom.

I finished. I did my BA, I did my LLB. When I was SRC president, I was doing about 18 law courses at some point and I went out and I finished. But to come to your question: No, I actually don’t regret anything. I don’t regret being involved. It shaped who I am today. I was true to my commitment to justice and freedom. You asked me – you know hindsight is always better – would I have been a better leader if … well, it’s because I am using my experience now. I think I could do things differently. I don’t think it’s something to dwell on, because it was my time and I was in my mid-20s and I thought like a student who is that age. So I think I did everything right that a person of my age faced with the tasks then could do.

**Advice to others**

Asked about what he would like to convey to current student leaders, Sikhakhane is thoughtful, and then says:

I think the essence of student activism – what makes it – is its honesty and independence. If you sacrifice honesty and independence of thought, you are likely to lose the battle and align yourself with battles that are outside, and which are replete with contradictions and self-interest.

And I think students [should] truly, every day, as they did with the #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, continue to help us, because that is their road. To intellectually lead us into areas we fear thinking about. I think that is what students must keep doing for us. To identify those areas that we oldies fear, or are tired of thinking about, and with a new energy. To ignite us to think courageously about things we have become lethargic about, and things we have learnt to accept – even if they are wrong. They have been at the forefront of the much-needed project of decoloniality.

And I think that’s what student leaders must do – or students in general – is to keep honestly probing those areas that are wrong in society that we have learnt to accept. I think, if they do that, they will chart new ways of thinking for us. All of us tend to be aligned with certain things that are set. Only students can do that for us, because they have the courage to defy the accepted narratives in society. Only students tend to force society to think critically, even about those idols we have created. That is what I would ask them to continue to do.