

City of Johannesburg Opinion Piece by
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Are we there yet– Reflections on Youth Month 2019

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The theme for South Africa’s Youth Month 2019 is “25 Years of Democracy: A celebration of youth activism”. Youth day themes over the years have encompassed a range of topics, many related to economic freedom, some to the youth taking control over their futures and some to social causes such as eradicating drug use. A return to the theme of youth activism may seem almost too obvious, given the myriad of challenges facing our young people in 2019 South Africa, and yet, after turning over the concept in my mind a few times, I believe it is indeed time that we re-examine the role of youth activism in this country, and think seriously about its future.

Where I question the theme somewhat is on the word “celebration” – the question that I grapple with is has youth activism in this country, since the dawn of democracy, been of a standard worth celebrating? I say this meaning no disrespect to those who have fought hard and achieved incredible results in various spheres which may be termed activism. There are youth groups in this country who have rallied communities in aid of causes such as education, drug abuse, abortion and access to sport, to name but a few. But what has the youth done on a more cohesive level, regionally or nationally, to push their agenda as a powerful, organised force?

The example that stands out above others is, of course, the 2015 Fees Must Fall Campaign. Whether we agreed with the demands and outcomes of the campaign, it was inspiring to see our youth unite, to put aside petty differences for a worthy cause, a cause that could change the course of their futures. There

was hope within certain circles at the time that the wave of Fees Must Fall would carry the youth forward to take a more prominent place in political decision making, in bargaining and in bringing their plights and agendas to the attention of the country. Unfortunately, however, the movement remained more or less within the education sphere and did not find its way into other areas of youth interest.

What has been interesting at a continental level has been the rise of young African leaders, challenging dictatorships and authoritarian octogenarians. Even within South Africa, we have seen younger leaders such as Julius Malema and Mmusi Maimane leading their parties, which inevitably results in some youth issues coming to the fore in party politics. This brings the promise of a better democratic future for Africa, but younger presidents still need to find ways to create the economic growth which their unemployed masses so desperately need.

If we step back from the political sphere, South Africa has many examples of incredible young leaders changing national and international dialogues. From Caster Semenya and her role in challenging gender roles within sport, to Kgothatso Montjane, a wheelchair tennis player who, in 2018, became the first black South African woman to compete at Wimbledon, to initiatives like “Blackboard”, where youth brainstorm solutions for problems faced by other young people, we seem to have no dearth of leadership and activism on individual or smaller-scale initiatives.

My challenge to the youth of South Africa moving forward, is how do we unite these great minds and talents, pool our resources and start taking steps big enough to move the needle on employment and economic development.



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Make no mistake, in 25 years we have achieved incredible things, and opened up opportunities for youth which were but distant dreams for their parents. Let us make the next 25 years about action, about collectively finding solutions to challenges faced by our youth, and creating a country which caters to the needs of all who live within it.

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