

Lest we forget

Today's youth must create their own legacy and never forget those who came before – an insight into the significance of South Africa's national commemoration of Youth Day.

Friday will mark 41 years since that fateful day in 1976 when students and pupils in Soweto marched against Bantu education and were met by brute force and live ammunition.

By the end of the day official police reports had 23 people being shot and killed in Soweto – but unofficial reports put the number much higher at over 200. Hundreds more were injured. But instead of quelling the protest, it had the opposite effect and the uprising spread rapidly across South Africa.

By the end of the year about 575 people had died across the country, 451 at the hands of police. A further 3 907 were injured and about 5 980 people are arrested in the townships during 1976. And still the protest grew.

That winter of discontent was a seminal moment in the history of our country's struggle for freedom and equality. Like the march of women to the Union Building 20 years earlier, this was the moment when young black South Africans rose up en masse against the apartheid regime. It was a ripple that became a wave and ultimately a tsunami which could not be stopped.

But it came at great cost to many. Hundreds of lives were lost and tens of thousands of others were changed forever due to imprisonment or exile. Schools were burnt, property was damaged and the education of a generation was put on hold.

Countries around the world declare and celebrate public holidays to commemorate world-changing events. Many focus on commemorating the ultimate sacrifice of citizens in defence or pursuit of freedom. Armistice Day on 11 November commemorating the end of World War I is celebrated as a national holiday throughout much of Europe. The UK calls it Remembrance Day and it is Veterans Day in the US.

In Australia and New Zealand they celebrate ANZAC Day in April each year, originally to honour the members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli against the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

France's national day is Bastille Day on 14 July commemorating the storming of the Bastille prison which sparked the French Revolution.

Around the world these are solemn occasions in which all citizens from all political persuasions, of all ages, races, genders and cultures come together to pay tribute and to remember the sacrifices of previous generations.

With each passing year the memories and significance of those events become a little more distant, a little more faded. That is why every year it becomes a little more important to remind ourselves of the sacrifices made by those whose blood was shed to secure the freedoms and privileges we enjoy today.

One of the first actions of the democratic government in 1994 was to declare new national public holidays. 16 June was an obvious and unanimous choice to pay tribute to the youth of South Africa and the critical part they played in securing the freedom we enjoy today.

22 years later we must continue to keep alive their memories and to acknowledge the debt we owe to that brave generation for the rights and privileges we all enjoy today.

June 16 1976 was our storming of the Bastille, our Normandy D-Day landings, our Pearl Harbor, our Gallipoli, our Cuito Cuanavale. It was a day when brave young South Africans stood in defiance against the might of the apartheid machine.

“Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity” writes Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*. So was it to the June 16, 1976 youth, as it was to the generations before those of the 40s, 50s, 60s and subsequently after the 80s.

The youth of today must find their own mission. Frantz Fanon suggests that mission is the redistribution of wealth: “What matters today, the issue which blocks the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity will have to address this question, no matter how devastating the consequences may be.”

It is a view shared by Mo Ibrahim who warned in a recent article in the *Financial Times* that Africa is at a tipping point and whether it rises or falls “depends above all else on whether the continent creates the conditions in which its greatest resource – its young people – can shine”.

Quoting statistics that predict that Africa’s youth population will double from 230 million to 452 million by 2050, Mr Ibrahim says Africa’s youth are more adventurous, more entrepreneurial and better educated than any previous generation. But they are also more likely to be unemployed.

In finding and fulfilling their mission, the youth of today must take care to do so in a way which builds on the endowment left to them by generations past.

The legacy to us from the 1976 youth was the gift of freedom, of human rights enshrined in a Constitution based on equality, democracy and social justice. Part of this inheritance has been Constitutional institutions including the Electoral Commission is to safeguard this endowment for this and future generations.

Because of those who came before, today's youth have avenues to express themselves and to participate in democratic processes never available and not imaginable to the youth of 1976.

One way in which all South Africans and especially the newest generation can pay tribute to those who paid the ultimate sacrifice is to continue to water and nurture the tree of democracy whose seeds were planted by that generation and watered with their blood.

We must never forget.

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