

Sunday Times on Ashwin Desai's 2003 Unbanning

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UNBANNED

Five years later, two expelled academics are allowed back on UDW campus

Buddy Naidu

The University of Durban-Westville has lifted a five-year-long ban on two controversial academics. Newly installed UDW vice-chancellor Dr Saths Cooper confirmed this week that sociologist Dr Ashwin Desai and Dr Logan Naidoo, chairman of the KwaZulu-Natal Cricked Union were now welcome on campus.

Desai and Logan were barred from UDW following a report by the Gautschi Commission of Inquiry, which was instituted by former president Nelson Mandela in 1997.

This followed a period of unprecedented unrest in the late 1990s during which the two were part of a group that opposed management and were accused of destabilising and crippling the university.

In a set of sweeping changes since taking over the helm at UDW, Cooper also lifted the ban imposed on the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC).

In May last year, former vice-chancellor Prof. Mapule Ramashala prohibited the TAC from operating and holding public meetings on campus.

Cooper said this week that he had met Desai and Naidoo, a former lecturer and administrator at UDW in January to inform them of his decision.

"I fully subscribe to the principles of our democracy, as contained in the Bill of Rights in our Constitution. I therefore have been unable to sustain the so-called banning of previous members of staff. They are, like other members of the public, entitled to visit and engage in the learning enterprise on our campus".

Cooper did not rule out the possibility of Desai, who is also an author, TV personality and community activist, resuming his academic career at the university.

"Should that opportunity arise, then Ashwin Desai is welcome to apply for whatever may be available. I have already invited him to submit proposals of programmes that he has in mind".

Cooper has said he had been unaware that the TAC had been banned from the campus.

On Monday, during the launch of the university's HIV/AIDS voluntary counselling and testing programme, he made the announcement of the TAC's unbanning to thunderous applause from more than 1000 students and academics.

Cooper has made a string of changes since taking over, including putting in place an all-black senior management structure and endorsing 47 key management and academic appointments. He has also made the resuscitation of the university's academic reputation one of his priorities.

Desai described his unbanning as an "incredibly generous gesture", as UDW was his "intellectual home".

"I have always regarded UDW as my intellectual home and it is a place that had a great influence on my politics. Incredible friendships were also made in that place".

But he described his isolation from the campus as a "very difficult time".

"Under the leadership of Dr Cooper, there has been a genuine attempt for the flowering of intellectual debate on campus. Being part of that is a big thing for someone like myself who has been cut off from university life for five years".

Desai, who is writing a book on the indentured Indian sugarcane labourers, confided that he had already been asked to guest lecture at UDW by, among others, the social sciences department.

"I'm definitely going to take it up. I have no second thoughts about that," he said.

Naidoo, a former senior administrator, said it was "nice to hear" of Cooper's decision.

"I don't know whether it's an occasion that I should celebrate. What has really happened is that they destroyed a career that I started as a 19-year-old kid. To destroy that career would not count just by Saths saying we are unbanned".

He said he never considered himself banned, although the university authorities had made his life a misery every time he went to the university.

"I go home via campus as it's an easier route, and each time I drove through, my attorney used to get correspondence in that regard. I was also a guest of honour for certain functions for which I had to see permission, which was not normally granted. In that sense, after giving 22 years to the university and to be treated in that way, was a problem for me".

The sports administrator, who started out as a junior clerk and now runs a management consultancy, said he would not rule out the possibility of working at UDW again.

“It’s now left to the university to say more than that these gates are open. Now they’ve got to put something on the table. I still have a contribution to make – never mind that they destroyed my career.”

Faizel [sic] Khan, a lecturer and head of the TAC at the university, lauded Cooper’s “participative approach to managing UDW”.

“He encourages debate and academic freedom, and this approach is positive as we tackle the problem of HIV/AIDS not only on campus but outside as well. In fact, since the decision, we have already held several meetings to discuss our national civil disobedience campaign,” he said.