



Sakhela Buhlungu

in conversation with
Ann Bernstein

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To mark 25 years since its establishment, in November 2020, CDE initiated a series of discussions with global experts and prominent individuals in South Africa on important questions on democracy, business, markets and development. The series was relaunched in 2022 as CDE Conversations. This is the 38th event in the series.

Ann Bernstein: Professor Sakhela Buhlungu is the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Fort Hare, a position he has held since 2017. His second term was confirmed in late 2021. He is a sociologist by training, with a PhD from Wits University. He previously served as the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and as a deputy Dean at the University of Pretoria.

Sakhela, welcome. Tell us about your motivation for wanting to run the University of Fort Hare, and a bit about the history of this famous institution.

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: The University of Fort Hare is an historic institution, founded in 1916. On 8 February 2026, we celebrated 110 years of existence. The university produced its first graduate in 1924. Z.K. Matthews and many others studied here at a time when there were very few avenues of higher learning for black South Africans. I never set out to be the Vice Chancellor here but was persuaded to take the position. Fort Hare has a proud history, but it has also experienced some very difficult times.

Ann Bernstein: How many students do you have? How many professors, lecturers?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: This year we enrolled 18 000 students and we have 400 academics across the university, supported by administrative staff and service providers.

Ann Bernstein: When you arrived in 2017, what most surprised you about the institution?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: I was alarmed by the systemic weakness I found, coupled with weak, outdated or non-existent controls. Living in Alice and working on this campus from the beginning was perhaps my saving grace. I experienced the reality on the ground and got a sense of how things really worked.

Ann Bernstein: How did the university reach a point where criminal networks could embed themselves so deeply in a public institution? Were there warning signs that had been missed before you got there?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: These challenges evolved in various ways over time. The apartheid government institutionalised a rigid top-down structure, which meant the wheels came off once those controls were removed. In the late 1990s, UCT's Professor Stuart Saunders wrote a scathing report about how extensively Fort Hare had broken down. The finances were depleted and ethical norms had disappeared. Over time, unions and students started taking over the management of the university, leading to dysfunction. In this context, patronage networks embedded themselves, a process that continued unabated after I arrived. As I tried to deal with the situation, I felt like the house was flooding while I was trying to scoop water out with a bucket.

Ann Bernstein: You have talked about systemic governance collapse rather than isolated misconduct. How did you tackle that reality?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: In 2019, I led a delegation to see Department of Higher Education and Training Minister, Dr Naledi Pandor. We asked the minister to dissolve the university Council and place it under administration.

Factions were meeting independently and making decisions on behalf of the entire 27-member Council. In one instance, nine members of the Council, including two students and two trade unionists, resolved to suspend the Vice Chancellor.

This environment generated what assessors in 2019 called 'perverse incentives'. In one case, research funding, which the national department disbursed to incentivise publications, was funnelled into private bank accounts. Rent-seeking was pervasive.

I had to clear the institution, and that implied getting rid of some members of the executive. I felt like I had a noose around my neck. One way of creating breathing space was requesting the Minister place the Council under administration. She did that and it gave us room to breathe. We hired an administrator and undertook a lot of policy reform. Things worked exceptionally well. In that one year of 2019, we did work that one would expect to do in three years.

When I felt the noose tightening again, I secured a presidential proclamation for the Special Investigation Unit (SIU), which uncovered deep-seated irregularities and fraud in the institution. Despite widespread criticism for the university being under administration, it helped us survive another day.

My other focus was on the academic programme. I set out to deal with duplication and clean up the Programme Qualification Mix, to bring the university's programmes into better alignment with the National Qualifications Framework. We split up teaching and learning and set up a separate portfolio for research.

Ann Bernstein: What was the hardest decision you had to make?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: Going to the minister to ask her to put the university under administration was a very difficult decision. But I have always believed that if you are a heart surgeon healing a patient with heart problems, then some blood will have to be shed before the patient recovers. The decision to place the university under administration and to call in the SIU can best be described that way.

Ann Bernstein: Looking back now, did you make any mistakes or do things that you would do differently today?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: I made many, many mistakes. In an imperfect environment such as this one, if you do not want to make mistakes, then do not take up the job. I trusted a lot of people. And I believe one should trust people unless they give you reasons not to. Unfortunately, in many instances, my trust was misplaced and many people let me down.

Ann Bernstein: One of the most startling things when I was reading about your situation at Fort Hare was the involvement of political players in the university, from most politicians in the Eastern Cape to the local councillor for Alice. I understand the SIU is about to release a list of 33 high-profile, politically connected people, allegedly implicated in academic fraud. How did this all come about?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: Let me go back to 1990 when the space opened for all political currents. Rather than Fort Hare being a home to all political currents, one or two political currents dominated over time. That is the first part, but I do not want to reduce this to today's politicians, because it is much more complex than that.

In Alice, and in the Eastern Cape, there is an attitude of political entitlement to Fort Hare. In the recent protest, for example, people were demanding that 60% of jobs and tenders must be awarded to residents of Alice. Now,

this is all fuelled by a councillor who is completely rogue. In 2021, the Municipal Demarcation Board demarcated the campus of Fort Hare in the town of Alice as a municipal ward, which I think was misguided. Basically, this means that we have a councillor who sits there and does nothing because we fix the potholes, the waterworks, the buildings – everything, really. All the councillor does is dabble in internal politics and plot to push the Vice Chancellor out.

Regarding the academic fraud issue, since the SIU reports to the President and not the university, we are awaiting the finalisation of the process. The President announced the matter would be finalised before the financial year end.

Ann Bernstein: I read that the Premier, for example, wanted a master's degree, and he didn't slog it out like most of us. He wanted to do it the short way. Can you give us a feeling of how this academic fraud works?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: We had a rogue professor who earned his PhD from another university without obtaining the first degree in his home country. Thereafter, he joined Fort Hare and became a professor and later, the head of his department. His modus operandi was very simple. He would go and scout around for people who wanted a degree without doing any work. Once the candidate chose a topic (or it was chosen for them), a ghost writer wrote the dissertation or thesis. And before you knew it, the student's dissertation would be submitted, examined, and passed.

Ann Bernstein: I presume you fired him?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: Firing him was one of the easiest decisions I ever had to take, because we had incontrovertible evidence. It is concerning that he did not even have the legal papers for citizenship in the country.

Ann Bernstein: You said when you arrived, certain people on the Council were corrupt. Have you been able to turn this situation around?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: We have a newly constituted Council now. But I believe the council model of governance across all public universities is outdated and in need of reform.

Ann Bernstein: Why did the Student Representative Council want to get rid of you? Why did they go to Parliament last year?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: In any university, workers and students have legitimate grievances. Problems arise when legitimate grievances are combined with untruths. That was the case with the "memorandum of demands" which students presented to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training last year. They claimed the extension of my contract beyond retirement age was unlawful, when in fact the Council had approved it.

Once students bypass management, Council, and the minister – going straight to the portfolio committee – then steps are skipped and wires crossed. When you have the chairman of the portfolio committee coming to the university to receive a memorandum from marching students, or when a local government councillor (who should be focused on a town in dire straits) is wrapped up in students' issues instead, that is a problem.

Money was used to sponsor unrest during the October 2025 protests. Fort Hare students have protested before, but this time seven buildings were torched. Buildings were targeted because of their strategic importance to the

university, and obviously, this reflects deeper issues. Politics has corrupted the system, and money has messed up politics. Those with money buy influence, outcomes, and votes. I have no doubt that the arson and malicious damage to property were orchestrated.

Ann Bernstein: I understand that at some point in this period, shots were fired at your car, and your bodyguard was killed, and shots were fired at your deputy's house. Tell us about these personal threats to you. What happened, and is anybody being charged for these unlawful attacks?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: It started with the assassination of the fleet manager, Mr Petrus Roets, in March 2022. He was killed after uncovering procurement irregularities, including inflated invoices. After his murder, we hired a private security company. Soon after, shots were fired at my deputy's house and my house, and more officers were brought in. After my bodyguard was shot dead in January 2023, more officers from this private company were deployed. It turns out this company was in cahoots with one of our employees to intimidate, shoot, and even kill people so that the university would require more services from that company. Some of the money paid to this security company was used to transport and pay hotel fees for the hitmen who assassinated my protection officer, Mboneli Vesele, in January 2023. This was a racket.

I am very pleased to say that through law enforcement authorities' efforts and the Political Killings Task Team, the three men who murdered Mboneli Vesele and the eight men who murdered Petrus Roets were arrested. The third case involves the service providers that were benefiting from all of this. There are 17 people, six companies, all on trial at the Specialised Commercial Crimes Court.

Ann Bernstein: Is anybody in jail or being charged for the seven buildings that were set on fire?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: There is an odd case of a student who was caught throwing a stone, but not a single person has been arrested for the arson, the violence and the destruction of property.

Ann Bernstein: Did you approach the President, the Minister of Police or the Minister of Higher Education to help you since October?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: No, neither the President nor the Minister of Police, because the matter was public knowledge. I assumed the law enforcement authorities would intervene. Nothing has happened. We do not know who burnt the buildings, and I suspect we may never know. But if you want to understand the subtext of the story, politics is behind the fires.

Ann Bernstein: And the politics is to get rid of you, to get somebody who doesn't enforce the rules so much?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: Let us imagine, hypothetically, what someone who wants to abort the SIU processes would do. They would remove the Vice Chancellor and appoint somebody else who would abandon the investigations. I am using that as a plausible way of interpreting this. Obviously, the next Vice Chancellor is not going to fight old battles.

Ann Bernstein: Do you believe Fort Hare can be turned around and that you can emerge out of this terrible corruption and violence? What would it require to do that?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: There are various stories about Fort Hare running side by side. There is not only a single story of corruption and rot. There is also the 'resurgent Fort Hare'. This is the Fort Hare people do not

see every day because the media is not interested in that. It is the Fort Hare that keeps my team and me here. The rigour of our academic programmes and research outputs has improved. Until recently, only 48% of our staff had doctoral degrees. Today, 65 % of our staff have doctoral degrees, significantly higher than many larger universities in South Africa. We have now appointed several research chairs; we have seven now, and five of them were hired in the last three years.

The turnaround is happening. The new vice Chancellor will inherit a solid foundation on which to build, provided they have a backbone.

Ann Bernstein: You are describing a story that feels like a lonely battle. How would you support people with a backbone who are trying to do the right things at your university?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: First, I would give them space to run the institution. I would fight to resist political overreach. Universities are generally self-regulating. Secondly, I would strengthen funding for historically disadvantaged universities. Thirdly, I would revive the town; Alice does not have a hotel or restaurants, and it is almost a wasteland. We spent R60 million fixing and running the town's water treatment works and infrastructure. The government needs to ensure the town is functional. Successful universities need successful towns.

Ann Bernstein: Do you want to say anything about how you see universities generally, or the universities that were Bantustan universities in the past?

Professor Sakhela Buhlungu: Two things concern me about Fort Hare. Demand for university places far exceeds capacity. Perhaps private universities will absorb some of the numbers in future. At the same time, I am concerned about the growing impulse to treat universities like civil service departments, eroding autonomy and academic freedom.

Two years ago, UCT invited me to give an annual lecture, and I spoke about academic freedom and the autonomy of the university. A year later, parliament interrogated me about my remarks. Surely, in a democracy, freedom of speech means you should be able to air considered views without fear of retribution? I fear that those going into university administration after me must brace themselves for a bumpy ride when it comes to university autonomy.

Ann Bernstein: Sakhela, thank you very much for your time. This is a story of courage and backbone. A lonely fight for the integrity and future of Fort Hare against all those who want to loot and destroy a national institution.

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5 Eton Road, Parktown, Johannesburg 2193, South Africa | PO Box 72445, Parkview, 2122
Tel +27 11 482 5140 | info@cde.org.za | www.cde.org.za