Students’ Unrests and University Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines a major problem confronting higher education in contemporary Nigeria, namely, the frequent student crises and violence. The paper is predicated on the fact that in spite of the serious negative impacts of these unrests on the nation, there is low intellectual concentration on the subject. More worrisome is the neglect of the challenges that the phenomenon poses to the nation. The paper argues that the causes of students’ unrests are rooted in economic factors, welfare issues, leadership problem, and excessive interference in the affairs of the students.

Introduction

Students’ unrest, has assumed a serious dimension in Nigeria. Every university has had its share of unrest, if not independently, through collective/nationwide unrest since the inception of the university system in 1948. Unrests often provoke bloodletting, destruction of property, goods and services with the resultant disruption of the university system and with consequences for social and political stability of the country. Its outbreaks can be likened to an epidemic. Universities are shut and then re-opened with students being required to be good behaviour in the future. The issues that generate the crises may or may not have been resolved but students normally go along with this approach. The university authorities and government perceive the outbreaks as deviant behaviour requiring a mix of sanctions and a period of cooling off. The circle simply repeats itself.

Literature Review

The literature on students’ unrests can be subdivided into three broad areas: those that deal with the phenomenon of student protest in a global setting that provide a broad theoretical and universal frame of reference; (ii) those that examine them in the context of Africa; and (iii) those that focus on Nigeria. Within the global setting, the exploration of the subject is a relatively recent experience. The pace was set by the student explosion in Europe and America in 1968, which threw up heroes like Cohn Bendit and Bob Dylan. Lapedz (1968) noted “Ten years ago, hardly anyone devoted himself to research on students and politics”. He attributed this reality to the transitory character of students’ movements and fewer records that were
left behind. Fever (1968) adds that the subject was not as fashionable as other aspects of political sociology.

Paris of 1968 and the critical role of students in Anti-Vietnam’ demonstrations changed things in this regard. As Lipset (1974) stressed, the 1960s witnessed the great surge in student activism, as they became absorbed in solving not only their “material problems” but also the societal problems of injustice, oppression, and greed. As a result, the literature on the subject grew substantially.

There are two mainstreams of analyses: those that view the phenomenon as positive or negative. On the positive side, students are credited with directing attention to the problems which people have taken for granted: the negative aspects of industrial life, bureaucratization of institutions, authoritarian ethos of governance, the commercialization of values and the materialism of modern society. “If the students’ revolt has done nothing else” declared Manders, (1968) “it has certainly rebuked our complacency”.

This transformational thesis finds resonance in the critical analysis of Marxist scholars who stress the notion of alienation. Savio cited in Fever (1969) argues that:

The most important concept for understanding the students movement is Marx’s notion of alienation... we have too many bureaucracies, the mechanical functioning makes for splits in people’s personalities...students are frustrated. They can find no place in society where alienation does not exist where they can do meaningful work. Despair sets in. The students revolt against the apparatus/Jiff the university.

The alienation school has two major subdivisions. There are those who perceive alienation in “isolationist” terms and those who insist that the locus of alienation is the socio-economic arrangement of the society. Hence, the school or the faculty or other isolated area where it manifests is only area of its objectification.

The Marxist perspective was repudiated by prominent Western intellectuals who were strongly critical of its challenge to the status quo. In the post Second World War setting where ideology was prominent in every calculation of social activity, a great majority of these intellectuals resanip the “leftist leanings” of important student activists, the radical overtones of protest and associated rhetorics of social warfare.

However, a problem that could be associated with the literature in the global setting is its ideological impulse. Most perspectives are coloured by ideological overviews, which tend to restrict the candour of analysis and depth of penetration. The “Student rebel” is hardly given legitimacy in his own rights. His demands are not measured for value and social reaction is often prejudiced by an obsessive search for hidden significance. One by-
product of this tendency is that the intricacies of university administration or faculty politics are often obscured. More than that, the cultural roots of dissent and variations are ignored. The advantage of studying the problem within the context of developing countries, particularly Africa, is that it brings such issues into a sharp and bold focus.

Within the regional context, student activism was an integral aspect of the resistance to colonial rule. Among the intellectuals who led the nationalist movements, students were a very notable group. Eisenstadt (1956) noted that “the leaders of these (nationalists) movements came from sectors of more westernized professional and intellectual groups, from among students, lawyers, journalists, most of whom had been directly exposed to Western values and active in modern institutions, but either had not been fully absorbed by them, or though indoctrinated in western ideologies and values, could not accept their realization with the colonial setting.” Likewise, Benda (1962) admitted that the students were among the “sizeable group interested in political change.”

The consequence was that several students nationalists returned home as leaders of their respective countries. The list includes Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikwe and Obafemi Awolowo of Nigeria, Patrice Lumumba, Joseph Kasavebu, Moise Tshombe and Antonio Gizenga, all of the Congo, Hastings Banda of Malawi and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya. Wallerstein has also pointed out that students were in the forefront of Pan Africanism which culminated in the Organization of African Unity (now known as African Union) - the largest concentrations being the West African Students’ Union (WASU) founded in Britain in 1925 and the Federation des Etudiants d’Afrique Noire en France (FEANF) based in France since 1950. The essential point is that these were students in the Diaspora, though Europe was the base of their activities, they were not restricted there. Pan African Congresses were held in Kampala in 1958, Tunis in 1959, and Nairobi in 1964. In Nairobi, the Pan-African Student Movement was established. By then, of course, indigenous universities had blossomed and the locus of student activism had shifted back “home”.

The growth of indigenous universities set the pace for analysis of the role of students in the post-colonial society. Inevitably, the issue of student activism was associated with the process of national growth and independence. The first set of contributions on the subject by Ashby (1964) concentrated on the character of the growing intellectual tradition vis-a-vis Western experience. However, the impact of nationalism and the nascent intellectual culture subtly began to nurture a tradition of protest and challenge in the national setting, which had obtained recognition in the literature.

It was significant therefore, that students played a vanguard role in the agitation that led to the abrogation of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact. The Leader of the Opposition in the Federal House of Representatives, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who led the attack on the pact, chose the platform of a lecture delivered at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and
Technology, Enugu on February 4, 1961, for the most logical, incisive discourse on the subject. The appeal was an orchestrated exercise directed at the nationalist strings and fiercely independent minds of the budding educated elites and could well be located in the framework of the growing intellectual tradition which was the focus of the literature on the school system at the time.

However, the tempo of student activism had become diluted by the crosscutting influence of the general society as issues of power, privilege, and socio-cultural cleavages became intertwined with the problems of university administration. By the end of the sixties, Van De Berge (1973) set the trend by highlighting the problems of Africanisation and ethnicity at the University of Ibadan, with the pseudonym of ‘Ilosho’ student politics. Van De Berge (1973) saw Nigerian students at the time as conservative but explains that “they certainly are not passive or quiescent; on the contrary, they are quite often vocal, turbulent and indignant, traits that are sometimes mistaken for radicalism”. According to him:

The students know that the university degree is his passport to elite status, even though the returns on the, educational investment tend to decline over the years as the number of university graduates increase. Thus the students, while often from a background of poverty or near poverty and frequently in severe financial strains during his stay at the university, is also an heir presumptive to elite status. He knows that only three years and his final examinations stand between him and lifelong security and comfort. This ambiguous situation of temporary indigence combined with a high likelihood of future affluence accounts for much of the collective behaviour and attitudes of students.

The “ambiguous situation” also dominates his relationship with the larger society and affective orientation towards students. “The student enjoys a standard of living which is very considerably above that of the mass of his fellow countrymen, a fact which provokes envy and criticism. The press, for example, often attacks students, especially when they demonstrate against housing conditions or food at the university on the grounds that they are pampered, spoiled, elitist children behaving as “hooligans” (a favourite press epithet against student demonstrators)”

But why do they demonstrate? Van De Berge (1973) identifies two main types of issues that traditionally impel students’ to demonstrate in the immediate postcolonial period namely,

(a) Political issues such as political corruption, electoral malpractice, the civil war or 1967-70, - political issues pertaining to student unionism.
“Bread and butter” demonstration in protest against living conditions, notably overcrowding in the halls, the quality of food, the conditions of facilities and services available to students, bursary and loan programs and university rules regulating students behaviour. “Students politics... are animated and hotly contested but take the form of conflicts between halls or between ethnic factions much more than of political alignments of right or left or platforms for the defense of student interest against other groups... Class position is clearly not an important source of conflict among students party, as already stated, because students are relatively privileged to start with, but also because, as in the other segments of the Nigerian Population, ethnicity and locality are still more important “bases of social solidarity than class”

Van De Berge’s (1973) analysis is very important because it underlines the particularistic dimension of student politics in a specific culture setting at a certain point in time. Beyond this, it locates student activities in a precise national setting and suggests that changes in the social landscape which is an inevitable part of the process of development would intimate changes in the character and form of the students’ movement. The Nigerian experience lends vigour to this analysis.

The literature on the Nigerian experience is rich in terms of empirical data but not developed in theoretical terms. Even so, it reflects the changing anatomy of conflict and violence on Nigerian campuses and the dynamic character of the students’ movement that is associated to it. In essence, there are two categories. The first is documentary, comprising official reports on students’ disturbances such as The Kazeem Commission’s Report, Akanbi’s Commission Reports.. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU)’s Recent Crisis in Nigerian Universities and The Killings at ABU. Each of these reports chronicles each of the crises, identifies the main actors, and highlights the issues in contention. The bulk of these works is valuable reference source.

The second category consists of more embracing intellectual works including research dissertations, books, seminar and conference papers which attempt a more penetrating analysis of the subject. Among the dissertations, Adekanmbi’s (1970) Ph.D. and Apkofure’s (1985) Ph.D. theses deserve mention. Both are nonetheless of limited value because the time span of consideration is limited to the first decade of independence. Hence, they have little to offer in terms of insight beyond Van De Berge’s study. In fact, sometimes they offer far less.
The unpublished conference papers of Clement Tobi (formerly Deputy Registrar of the University of Ibadan) especially “Students’ Participation in University Administration” submitted to the Fakayode Committee and “Student Welfare Administration and its Problems” delivered at the induction course of Assistant Registrar and Administrative Officers in Benin in September 1980, develop the context of analysis further because it sheds light on how the growth of the University in Nigeria and the declining status and privileges of studentship in tertiary institutions generated conflicts about welfare facilities which in themselves reflect the increasing marginalisation of students in the national setting and growing concern about the “World Beyond the Campus Wall” and what it offers. By the 1990’s, this had become a critical problem, as reflected in Albert’s (1991) report which related the issue of students activism to the dire economic straits of the country. At this time, the issue of student revolt had become inextricably linked to the nation’s bleak economic status and “Would be graduates” into the unemployment corridor were necessarily catalyst of social grievances. However, their posture was not messianic. The students were themselves hard hit by the cruel economic circumstances and policies that aggravated it. It triggered structural violence free from parental control. As a result, they are and able to take risks which others in society saddled with family responsibilities could not take, and their anger found quick outlet in demonstrations and protests expressing popular concern. Ogunyemi (1994) and Ujo (1994) focused on students’ crises under the military and the response of the University authorities. The only theoretical paper is Onyeonoru’s (1996) exploration of the nature and management of students’ conflicts.

The problem with the Nigerian experience is that intellectual analysis is invariably episodic and writers concentrate on one experience or the other or engage in a short exploration. Where full-length study is offered such as in Babatope (1974), it tends to be propagandist and exhortatory. Tamuno’s (1989; 1991) writings are more developed intellectual works but are limited in contextual analysis. They have historical orientation and the first locate the students’ protests, within a framework of group violence; a perspective which limits the depth of analysis. The study on Nigerian Universities, their Students and Society make up for part of this shortcoming but the demerit is that Tamuno’s focus is broader than students’ unrest and only four chapters (chapters 5-8) are particularly relevant. In any case, given the dynamic character of the social setting, Tamuno’s work is also becoming outdated as the influence of secret cults on campuses and the conflicts they generated has now given shape to narcissistic violence in which the students have turned against themselves. The incidence of cultic violence and the, twist and turns of the students’ movement that produced it is sufficient indication that a full-length study of the subject, which is our explicit focus here, is now timely.
Method of Study

Four universities namely the University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, University of Lagos and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria were used as locations for this study. Certain factors influenced their selection. Firstly, University of Ibadan was chosen because of its status as the oldest university in Nigeria. Therefore, any analysis of students’ unrest before independence must necessarily focus on the University of Ibadan. Secondly, the choice of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife was influenced by the fact that the University, perhaps, has recorded more cases of students’ unrests than any other university in Nigeria, most of which were also very violent. The phenomenon of cultic violence made necessary the inclusion of the University of Lagos. Lastly, Ahmadu Bello University was also studied because of the general belief of being the hotbed of students’ radicalism.

Two main methods of data collection were employed in this study. Firstly, the research instrument comprised an intensive archival study. The aim of this was to ‘dig’ into the problem of students’ unrests. The study relied on reports in newspapers, outcomes of commissions of enquiries, students’ union releases, and newsletters of the institutions. Information regarding the causes, dimension, and extent of damage and eventual resolution of numerous students’ crises were collected through these sources.

Apart from the archival method, focus-group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted in the four universities. Four FGDs in each university (two for male students and two for female students) were conducted. The students that participated in the FGDs were those that had spent at least two sessions in the schools at the time of the study. This was done to ensure that data were collected from students who had witnessed incidents of students’ unrests in the past. One FGD each was conducted in four selected faculties in the four universities, with an average of seven participants per FGD. Also, two in-depth interviews were conducted in each university (one male and one female among university residents).

Causes and Perception of Students’ Unrests

The results indicate that most of the unrests that occurred in the 1960s and 70s were internal with exception of the 1974 and 1975 crises which demanded the return to democracy, the February 1976 crisis which was as a result of the abortive Dimka coup, and the 1978 “Ali Must Go” crisis. Most of the causes bordered on students’ welfare and internal politics of the universities. There is a sense in which one can say, as was indeed discovered, that the general economic stability of the nation at the time accounted for the trend.

However, externally generated factors were responsible for most of the crises that occurred from the 1980’s till 1992, although there were pockets of internally generated ones. The dominance of external causes during the period was due to the downturn in the economy of the country.
which had, and continues to have consequences on all facets of national life and development. The results from the focus group discussions also depict similar pattern. For instance, majority of the participants attributed students’ unrests especially between 1985 and 1992 to the economic problems of the country and poor leadership.

A male participant in an FGD said:

> The problem of the country is bad leadership. There is too much corruption in the land. There are very few people who are enjoying in this country, while the rest are suffering, and yet they still want us to continue to keep quiet... it is not possible.

Another male participant commented:

> The only solution to the problems of this country is to put all our leaders in the country into jail. They are our problems in the country. Their children are attending the best schools abroad, courtesy of government funds, and they continue to make life difficult for the masses.

However, another argued:

> There are students with ‘no future ambition’ here. They create crises whenever examination is fast approaching, of course, because they do not attend classes, some of them we learnt are not even students. They create problems under the slightest excuse.

Although majority of the participants in the focus-group discussion felt that students’ unrests are necessary within the present circumstance in Nigeria, there are few that suggested that students’ unrests are not the only instrument open to students for making known their grievances. The first category of students noted that past and present Nigerian Governments and university administrators are not wont to listen to, and often perceive students as ‘small boys and girls’. In other words, respondents generally believe that students’ revolts stem from a perception of discrepancy between their expectations and the value they think they are capable of achieving. Students believe that they are entitled to certain wants and desires in society. On the other hand, the college authorities believe they have the authority to maintain peace on the campus.

Another major source of students’ feelings of discontent sprung from slow response to their grievances. A participant observed:
For about three weeks, residents of my hall made incessant complaints about the state of lavatories in the hall and the fear of impending epidemic outbreak. To our dismay, nothing was done until we went out to invite the media to publicize our predicament. It was then that the university authorities visited the hall and expressed their displeasure that we externalized the situation.

However, some of the students felt that students did not achieve anything from riots. What they got in return for unrests were indefinite closures, resulting in prolonged academic calendar. In many instances, the students had to pay for the properties they destroyed.

The results indicate that both male and female students support students’ unrests as effective for the articulation of their grievances. Where they differ is in the nature of unrest, as a greater number felt that violent protests did not yield any good result. Students’ unrests in Nigeria are characterized by militancy and violence. The university authorities were also wont to use the Police to quell unrests. Most students protest arose as a result of non-participation in decision-making processes in the matters affecting them. There was a general consensus that students should participate in matters affecting their welfare. They argued that this would remove suspicion and powerlessness among students and reduce sources of conflict on the campus. According to one male student:

How can people who do not feel the pain, understand and make decisions for the people. Unless students are involved in matters affecting them, there can be no peace on campuses.
Do they live with us in the hostels?
Do they know our living conditions?

Conflicts also stemmed from lack of communication between students and the authorities. However, some respondents suggested that their colleagues could be impatient and unsympathetic to the authorities’ before taking the laws into their hands.

The students by virtue of their divergent socio-economic backgrounds have strong feelings for the masses and would like to do something to protect their interest. However, other students are of the view that unrests are spearheaded by academically weak students. This assertion may not be farfetched because quite a number of unrests occurred around the time of examination. The majority of the students noted that the Humanities students and not the science or medical students are in the forefront of unrests.

We do not have time for those things. Our schedule is so crowded that the only free time you have, you want to sleep. Students in Arts, Social Sciences and Education do not have
busy schedule. They have the time in the whole world to demonstrate and they still pass. You cannot do that in the Sciences.

Another male said:

The students are usually new students. It is fun to them to witness and be involved in demonstrations. We all did it when we were new students. As you get to year 3, you begin to think of graduation.

**Patterns and Impacts of Students’ Unrests**

Students’ revolts exhibit patterns similar to trade union disputes. These patterns take the forms of consultation, consolidation, and confrontation. Each of these steps also has its own feature. In the first, a congress is called, and based on the support of the congress, the students stand is consolidated and the final action, confrontation. They are as follows:

- The search for the sacred
- The creation of issue
- The creation of rhetorical climate
- The collapse of authority.

Students’ activism involves a keen search for ideals or goals which they aspire to attain. The relentless quest for this objective imbues a strong sense of solidarity among the students. The creation of an adversary by the students, however presupposes that the authorities must play the role of the enemy. The issue may be an internal campus problem or an external issue. The issue may involve a demand which is a direct challenge to the authority. Examples of this can be found in the 1967 ‘Matred Students Programme’ in ABU, the February 1971 “Apampa Must Go” riots, the April 1978 “Ali Must Go” crisis among several others.

The third stage which is the creation of a rhetorical climate in the run off to protest against the school authorities. The latter in turn responds by clamping down on the students.

**Concluding Remarks**

This paper has examined students’ unrests. Given the concern of the public on this problem, the following recommendations are proffered: first, the problems of students are a microcosm of the problems of the entire nation. Unless these are addressed, students’ unrests are likely to continue. Second, both institutional and state authorities should maintain standing committees on riot prevention. It will help in (i) identifying potential causes or sources of conflict on the campuses; and (ii) maintaining, a permanent channel of communication with all students’ organizations on all campuses. Finally, the institutions should be democratized to encourage the
practice of representation/participation of students in the affairs of the institutions. Universities’ authorities should meet monthly with students’ leaders. This forum will afford each party the opportunity to be acquainted with each others problems.

References

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