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Students Union, University Administration and Political Development of Nations

Akinboye, Solomon O.

Professor, Department of Political Science
University of Lagos

&

Eesuola, Olukayode 'Segun

Department of Political Science
University of Lagos
Lagos State, Nigeria

Abstract

Many countries have not appropriately interpreted the role of students union in effective administration of their universities and the development of their polities in general. Nigeria, particularly, has some universities that still, in this century, regard students union as an impediment to peaceful administration; with old ones proscribing and new ones avoiding it; while the government does nothing to check the situation. After a content analysis of literature on global reasons for establishing universities, the peculiarity of university students as elites in training, as well as a trajectory of students' union activities in university administration and political development around the world, this paper asserts, resting on the reciprocal determinism of the social learning theory, that students union makes university administration smooth. It also strategically assists university students to acquire the skills they need for developing the politics of their countries. The paper recommends, among other things, that universities all over the world,

whether owned by governments, individuals, trusts or even religious bodies, should be mandated to have students union for effective administration of their institutions and continuity of their countries' political development.

Introduction

Students union means an institutionalized group of students for synergy of relationship among themselves as well as between them and other social stakeholders in a nation; stakeholders that include university authorities, the political class, the press, governments' Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), corporate organizations and the state. In standard global practices, a student union is "saddled with the responsibility of managing the affairs of students ... to represent the interest of students" (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009, p. 52), and it is often instituted in higher institutions where most students are adults. Depending on countries, students union is often created by institutional laws or regulation, and is funded either by authorities that create it or student members themselves. The university is the focus of this paper, so, students union will conceptually refer to university students union.

Prominent members of students union often have the opportunity of interacting with the top echelon of the university, with some of them represented in policy making bodies up to, in some cases, the level of the university governing council. This often creates easy administrative link between the students and the university authorities. The students union often runs like "a typical government; it has senate and also examines legislative procedures", and is always the platform where students practise political roles (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009:052). The students union also serves as a training ground for political leadership. Of all agents of interaction/socialization primary or otherwise in the university therefore, it is the students union that provides this kind of opportunity, which, as Alada (2011) notes, often "helps students to develop their organizational ability and strength of character that prepare them for higher responsibility in the near future".

It is based on this dual role of smooth university administration and political transformation that this paper discusses students union. The first part examines the university and the reason of its establishment, as a prelude to exploring university students too, and positioning them as peculiar and major stakeholders who necessarily need to be organized in form of union in order to help in easy university administration and socio-political development of the nation. A few cases of students unions proactive roles in university administration and the political development of countries are highlighted; few, because, as Babatope (1991: v) observes of Nigeria, "the history of students' unionism in this country is a particular area that has not attracted the attention of research students". The conclusion is that students union

remains a strong instrument of effective university administration and socialization of young adults for the overall socio-political development of countries.

Universities and University Students

It was Newman who first made an attempt to comprehensively conceptualize university, and that was in his 1854 classic, 'The Idea of a University'. Newman was convinced that "Mutual education, in a large sense of the word, is one of the great and incessant occupations of human society, carried on partly with set purpose, and partly not". Newman further asserts that "One generation forms another; and the existing generation is ever acting and reacting upon itself in the persons of its individual members". It was based on this that he described a university as "a place of communication and circulation of thoughts by means of personal intercourse, through a wide extent of country"; a school of "universal learning" and "knowledge of every kind" (pp.1).

Though this submission was made in 1854, Ian Ker revisited it in 2011 and reinforced its relevance in the 21st century, further analyzing that the university is a place where all branches of knowledge are different and at the same time same (Ker 2011). Another position is that "the university is a training ground not only for cross fertilization of ideas but for knowledge development whereby the three domains of education such as cognitive, affective and psychomotor are developed" (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009:051).

The university remains a universe for learning, a *Studium Generale* where every form of knowledge meets their seekers. It is perhaps based on this that universities world over are established to perform two major functions. On one hand, "they teach, train and examine students in variety of scholarly, scientific and professional fields, and they confer degrees and provide opportunities for some of their students to do original research" (David 1688, cited in Eesuola 2012) and on the other hand, universities "must transmit, in a more differentiated and more specific way, the cultural heritage- the history, the scientific knowledge, the literature of their society and of the world culture of which their society is a part; they must train persons who will become members of the elites of their societies" (Lipset, 1967:3). This is in line with Newman's thesis on one generation developing the other.

Of the two functions above, the second is key. Matter-of-factly, learning takes place in all schools and colleges, even in all social formations, but the university is unique because it is designed to mold students into what Lipset (1967) calls "members of the elite". For any university to live up to the foregoing dual role, its administration must fashion out policies and practices that will not only teach the students the skills they need to function in specific industries, but also socialize them, irrespective of their chosen fields, into becoming such elite that will take over

the mantle of socio political leadership of their county. Lipset, (1967) asserts that “A university system which fails to perform these functions, however useful it might be in other respects, is not doing its job. It will become parasitic on the university systems of other countries and will be unable to cope with the tasks of national development” (pp.3). This perhaps is why Boyle (1999) declares that university schooling has the civic purpose of “facilitating the sharing of values throughout the society...and preparing citizens for political participation” (pp. 4).

Of another great importance is the university student. The foregoing establishment of the university as a unique learning environment, and the fact that "individual political behaviour and thoughts are consequences of their environmental influences, that is, those influences directly relating to political influences as well as forming the general character (Mezey 1975), makes the university student a unique actor in every society. Unlike school pupils who are yet to be in the mainstream of the society, and the working adults who already are but may fade out soon afterwards, university students occupy a “stage in life in which they are being transformed from predominantly members of a family, to predominantly members of society” (Lipset, 1967:59), and they rely solely on the university to support them in this experience.

As individuals going through this stage of life, university students are essentially inquisitive, highly speculative and full of experimentative ideas. They are also strongly concerned about the dominant socio political and economic activities around them and the impacts of such on their future. University students receive special political education through societies, clubs, and the students union on campus, as well as from civil society organizations outside (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009).

Furthermore, students are usually the main stakeholders in the universities. In numerical terms they are in vast majority. In purpose, almost all programmes, structures, offices and facilities in the universities exist for their use. Directly or indirectly, therefore, students are the center of any university, and administration of universities often revolves around them. There is little possibility that any university will be effective and efficient in its administration if it does not collaborate efforts with students to interact with all its structures. University students are as unique a people, as the university itself is, as an institution.

It is therefore dangerous for any university administration to leave blank, the minds and manners of such important part of her population- the main stakeholders really- the students. Doing so is an invitation to institutional cacophony and administrative hullabaloo, and to avoid such, history has shown, is to systematize the process of building the students into organized associations and unions.

Associations and unions avail students the opportunity to interact beyond the four walls of their classrooms. It builds their reasoning and sense of engagement. It

helps the university administration to fill the wide gap between professors and administrators who run the university, and the students for whom the universities are run. Through this, as Lipset (1967:5) asserts, university students “do not just prepare themselves for future roles in political life; they play a significant role in the political life of their countries even during the student period” (pp. 55). Students union therefore becomes a tool for systematizing and organizing university students in a bid to maximally coalesce the assorted learning they have towards developing the socio political framework of their country.

The role of students union in effective university administration and political development

First, students’ union helps university administration to maintain openness to students, gain their trust and that of the entire university community. The setting of a university is such that makes mutual suspicion inevitable between university students and university administration, especially because the administration charges fees, imposes levies and formulate policies on such issues as accommodation, transportation, admission, scholarship, examination, discipline and others that directly and critically affect students. In addition, because the higher institutions are known for where ideologies are formed, and tertiary education in particular is fundamental to the construction of knowledge (Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009), university students often have access to such information and ideas that they can use to articulate issues and criticize policies of university administration as well as the state (Olugbade 1990, in Adelabu and Akinsolu 2009). So, it is necessary to have students' union as umpire between the administrations and the students to avoid misread policy intention, destructive rumors and propaganda.

Students union also enhances openness and trust that make students see the university administration as *illico parentus*. Some disoriented lazy students who have phobia for examination can easily post certain comments in the social media one week before examination: “your tuition is half a million next semester” or “the senate has approved that all students pay 50,000 naira each as penalty for late registration”. Where there is no students union, this type of posting may lead to bridge of trust between the administration and the students, and a needless riot may be the price for it. Succinctly put therefore, students union serves as a tool of communication and information dissemination that can create and reinforce trust and openness in university administration.

Second to this is the issue of reciprocal accountability and respect. The university has to be accountable to the students and the entire community while students themselves should periodically render accounts of their actions and inactions to the university community for smooth running of the system. In doing this, principal officers and administrators represent the university authorities; the students

union needs to represent the students too. At all times, somebody must be accountable to who does what, when and how, and the students need to be represented by their union to provide this accountability.

Mutual respect and understanding also matter in the smooth running of university system, and the students union is needed to achieve this. The relationship between students and lecturers for instance, should be based on respect and understanding since almost all students in the university are adults. Administration of a university is easier and less tiring where students and other stakeholders co exist with respect and understanding. Without students union, this may be a difficult task as some lecturers may become highhanded and oppressive towards the students; what may lead to series of conflicts and crises. The university as a place of universal learning requires mutual support and commitment between students and administration for smooth running of programmes and events that have direct bearing on the socio-educational development of the university community. The university cannot organize games and sports without the support and commitment of students, for instance, while the students themselves will find it tiring holding any programmes if the administration is aloof. Since students population is often the highest in the university, the students union is needed to liaise with the university authorities on issues that require students-administration cooperation.

Furthermore, there is a wide generational gap between the university administrators and the students for whom they administer the university. University administration cannot know students the way students themselves will: in terms of the latter's preferences, values, yearnings, aspirations and pranks. Since most of the problems and challenges confronting university administration are students related: examination malpractices, gangsters and cults, sex related offences and others that are symptomatic of youthful exuberance, a union of students is needed as primary source of orientation for students. Students union can also help apprehend their members in defiance of university rules and regulation. In addition to this, trial cases of students on issues of examination malpractices, gangster cum cult activities as well as other offences can commence from the students' union panels and the panels send their findings to the administration for decisions to be taken on such issue. This gives students sense of responsibility towards their colleagues and the authorities, and decisions finally reached are not likely to be challenged by anyone. This enhances effective running of the university.

Responsibility and control are highly necessary in any gathering of men, and the university is no exception. The opposite is anarchy. As earlier asserted, university students are a peculiar species of adults whose stage of live is vulnerable to all sorts of experimentations that come in forms of construction and deconstruction of social values, as well as questioning social issues. In the process of doing so, disagreement

may ensue between them (students), and the university authorities, and this disagreement may lead to protest. On protest the university administration has little or no preventive control - since it is inevitable in any social formation. The university will be safer if students union coordinates and controls such protest so it will not be hijacked by other forces. The recent riots in Bowen and Caleb universities that took high level of violence in Nigeria came as big surprise. It occurred because the students had no union or leaders to control and coordinate the protests. This point is so much valid when the two cases are compared to the 2014 University of Lagos anti late registration fee protest which was peaceful and casualty free. Although the University of Lagos also had no students union as at that time, a semblance of it was in place in form of Departmental and Faculty Associations (DFAs), and the university authorities quickly engaged them for the resolution of the crisis.

Students union in political development of a nation

Adelabu and Akinsolu (2009:052) have observed that the students union often runs like "a typical government; it has senate and also examines legislative procedures", and is always the platform where students practise political roles. More emphatically, most students unions have the three branches of government: executive, legislature and judiciary, and they practise representative democratic system through the different faculties and colleges as well as halls of residences (where they exist). This is why students unions often add the accolade government to their names in many parts of Nigeria, and apart from using such government to enhance smooth university administration, operating like a government also plays major political roles in the socio political affairs of their country (Eesuola 2012). Succinctly put, the students union can be a fertile soil for experimentative political skills and leadership.

It has been established that the first set of Nigerian universities and many others in Africa emerged following the recommendation of the Elliot and Asquith Commission that was set up by Winston Churchill in 1943. Coming from this background, "the Nigerian universities therefore, are, of heritage, the same tradition from medieval Europe" (Utomi, 2006:134). The dominant European university tradition was that in which students unions existed and were fully active in the administration of their universities and the politics of their countries. It is with such foundation and tradition that university students all over the world have played certain roles in the administrative and political affairs of their institutions and countries (Lipset, 1967; Califano, 1970; Jonas, 2000; Hu, 2004). Because of their unique position as 'elite in training', very early in their schooling days do university students begin to align with ideologies that may aid their playing certain significant roles in politics amongst themselves, and politics towards leadership and administration of their universities and countries at large. Sometimes the students are "constructively critical to be able to initiate changes", and they "cultivate the capacity

for leadership and a sense of responsibility to their fellow country-men” (Lipset, 1967:3). At other times they are conservative and passive: “they distance themselves completely from sensitive political issues and operate based on the principle of individual interest” (Hu, 2004:1). All over the world, students have established cases of defending their universities from external attacks and insurrections. They have assisted university administrations in waging war against cult and gangsters. They have served as communication link between their members and the authorities of their universities, and, for their entire fatherland they have assisted in providing political education through mobilizations, rallies and civil society activities in such a way that has enhanced socio political development, either directly or otherwise. The roles that students unions played in Russian, English, and French revolutions are good examples of this. Students unions also fought colonialism, imperialism and bad socio economic policies that they consider antithetical to their future and that of their country (Lipset, 1957; Califano, 1970; Jonas, 2000).

The same tradition flowed in to Nigeria when, in 1956, students’ unionism began on the campus of the University College, Ibadan, with late Ambassador Obe as first President of the National Union of Nigerian Students: an umbrella body that consisted of the entire universities and colleges in Nigeria. Ideology played significant role in the students union of that time and after the “students during this period devoured books and literature-the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and that of Trotsky as they also read Frantz Fanon, Amical Cabral, and several third world authors” (Arogundade, 2002:36, in Eesuola 2012), they were absolutely well positioned to contribute positively to the politics and administration of their university and nation at large. It is in record that Nigerian students played very important roles in Nigeria's fight against colonialism and return of political power from military to civilians, just like their counterparts in Europe and America did on an array of political issues.

As Eesuola (2012) asserts, students union in Nigeria, like others around the world, has contributed to political development of Nigeria. Starting from pre independence period around 1955 when in the University College, Ibadan, the union with its counterparts in Yaba Higher College, Lagos, other tertiary institutions in West Africa, and in collaboration with early nationalists such as Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, all came up together to fight colonialism. The post independence era also witnessed series of students union political struggles against neo colonialism and imperialism, notably through what Babatope (1970) calls the Battle of Postcard of 1961 and Anti Anglo Nigeria Defence Pact of 1960. These students’ union activities were staged to promote political development in the country, or to save Nigeria from neo colonial and imperialist political romance with Western countries.

This period was that when students union in Nigeria began to question certain socio political developments and the expected gains of independence in their polity, and by 1970 the National Association of Nigerian Students had been formed to address such national issues as Nigeria's alignment during the cold war, military in governance as well as welfare of Nigerians (Eesuola 2012). Another prominent struggle of the Nigerian students union that time was the Ali Must Go demonstration that was staged nationwide to check the excesses of the military in cutting down the funding of education.

During military era, Nigerian students played a big role in pressurizing the military out of power and retuning the country to democracy. Students unions organized conferences, seminars, rallies, demonstration and protest walks to reject military rule and call for democracy. Most economic policies of the military were rejected, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) for example, and this was done in conjunction with civil society organizations such as Alliance for Democracy (AD), Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) and the Campaign for Defence of Human Rights (CDHR).

Conclusion and Summary

Students' union is needed in the university because it is a significant part of university administration as well as veritable tool for political development of a country. It has been emphasized that the university is a different form of educational institution uniquely created for the overall development of a country and its students should be so uniquely organized in form of union so that universities can perform their social roles completely. Students union remains the highest embodiment of structures that are capable of molding university students into future elite for the development of the country, irrespective of the formal degrees that the students obtain from the university. Any university administration that must help its country achieve its overall socio political goals needs necessarily allow organization of students in forms of union. The peculiarity of the university, the uniqueness of students as well s structures and activities of students union in the universities collectively form a powerful tool of developing young university adults into political actors and leaders of thoughts. This reciprocal interaction goes a long way in ensuring smooth socio political development of a country. Several political actors in local and international politics today can trace their political socialization to students union in their college days (Clifano 1960, Babatope 1999, Eesuola 2012).

Students union in Nigeria had anti imperialist, anti military and pro democracy orientations, and it demonstrated this in active forms. These activities, coupled with the training their members have in the internal structures of their unions, have no doubt positioned the union as key political actor, and elites that are systematically trained and ideologically prepared to take over the political leadership

of their country. For instance, the students union of the University of Lagos was made up of an executive headed by a president, and a parliament headed by the speaker, who is the chairman of the congress fortified with many oversight functions on the executive. The parliament through the speaker consists all presidents and secretary generals of faculties and departmental students associations, as well as chairpersons and secretaries of students' halls of residence. This body made and discussed all policies and practices affecting students on campus, and liaised with the executive through different committees and lobbyists. With this kind of structure decision making was very popular, and this is where the students union derives the powers it had to question authorities, criticize policies and engage even the state.

The whole idea lies in Bandura's social learning tradition, especially the principle of reciprocal determinism. In addition to the social leaning principles which posit that individuals social learning commences from trial and errors, and passes through reinforcements before finally graduating to emulation, reciprocal determinism posits that social learning is a causal relationship between the individual and the society where the individuals teach the society the very things that he or she learns from it (Bandura 1977). The case of students union is a good example of reciprocal determinism where university students learn politics and political activities from the university system and then become mature adults who return to the larger society to teach politics to others and participate in its larger framework. If the students union structure does not exist in the university, the cycle of reciprocal determinism is likely to exclude almost all students whose disciplines are not political science, international relations or, say sociology, and such students have very little or no political skills and values to teach to the society when they get to larger socio-political frameworks.

While we must note, however, that students unions sometimes engage in activities that can be antithetical to the reasons of their existence and that can equally hamper smooth running of the university as well as peace and tranquility in a country, as exemplified in many violent fall outs of riots and rallies where several people have died and a host of others injured, it must still be emphasized that having students union has advantages that outweigh disadvantages. Matter-of-factly, the 2005 University of Lagos riot that led to the proscription of the ULSU, should, if anything, be blamed on absence of a strong union, not presence of a union. Where there is a union that is strong and worth what it is, a demonstration or protest organized for any reason is quite unlikely to be hijacked by people who will turn violent and loot homes and offices. In addition, if there are no students unions in universities, young adults will miss the opportunity of political leadership training that they cannot achieve through formal training in their degrees. It is the students union that makes such opportunity available. Without it many graduates will either lack adequate political experience or the strong character needed to lead their people when they get to the

larger political space. This spells doom for a nation and puts its political development in jeopardy.

Recommendations

The grand recommendation is that the Ministries of Education of countries, as well as other university regulatory authorities like the Nigeria's National University Commission should direct all universities, private or public, to have students union, since, as has been earlier established in this paper, students union plays a significant role in the political development of country as well as smooth running of university administration.

For specific suggestions, all universities in Nigeria should have strong students unions and train them for the purpose of partnering with them in achieving effective administration. Such unions should be funded by the university. The unions should be given international exposure so they will adopt and adapt best practices around the globe.

University administration should engage old students' unionists as *ex officio* of students unions while Students Activities Officers should be the main link between the students and the administration.

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