Student Activism and Ideological Movement in Nigerian Higher Institutions: Its Origin and Trends

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Abstract

The trajectory of student activism and radical postures by students in Nigerian higher institutions is historically embedded in the formation and activities of the student body during the colonial era. This study however reveals that student activism has become established tradition in Nigerian higher institutions since that period. In this research, student activism in Nigerian higher institutions is situated in historical context witnessed in three phases and ideological student movement. Student activism developed in Nigeria through the formation of the West African Students Union (WASU) during the colonial era. Student activism continued to flourish when the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was established. However, the formation of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) activated student activism in Nigerian higher institutions. Influx of communist literature and penetration of communist ideology prompted ideological student movement and radicalism in Nigerian higher institutions.

Key words: activism, higher institutions, radicalism, Nigeria, student

Introduction

The evolution and historical development of student activism and ideological student movement in higher institutions in Nigeria formed the basis of discussion and analysis in this study. Meanwhile, a discussion on the topic will not be placed in its proper perspective without any particular reference to the history of the West African Students' Union (WASU), the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). The engagement by students in Nigerian higher institutions, whether on protest/demonstration had its roots in the orientation long established when student activism developed during the colonial period. Like in other African states, higher education was established in Nigeria by the colonial authorities. In the development of these institutions, the Nigerian students tried to assert their individual rights and freedom which often pitted them against authorities. In their collective efforts to exercise their rights on campus, the Nigerian students formed a student body. Informed by the development and happenings in the global world, particularly during the colonial period, the Nigerian

students aligned with the nationalists to fight colonial authorities for the nation independence.

Having established themselves on campuses in Nigeria, the various local student associations formed the national body, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) to champion the collective interests of students in the country. In view of this development, the national student body (NUNS) engaged the government on some policies that they believed had negative consequences on students and the public. The student body embarked on activisms to press home their demands from authorities and the government. Similarly, the national student body served as "opposition" to the government, particularly during the military era.

As in the foregoing, the analysis in this study is segmented into five parts. The first phase of student activism in Nigerian higher institutions is analysed in the research. This is followed by the second phase of student activism in Nigerian higher institutions. The study also analysed the third phase of student activism, followed by student ideological movement and radicalism in the Nigerian higher institutions. The study ends with the conclusion.

First phase of student activism in Nigerian higher institutions

The development and growth of student activism and idealistic radicalism were nourished in Nigeria during the colonial period in 1925 when the West African Students' Union was founded to fight colonialism and champion the independence of West African states (Ayu, 1986). However, this period has been referred to in the literature as the first phase of the development of student activism in Nigerian university. In relating this fact, Garigue in a work *the West African Students Union: a study in culture contact* says that from its inception, the Union recruited into its fold a certain type of West African student from among whom the political movements in West Africa drew some of their most active leaders (Garigue, 1952). Nevertheless, when national consciousness had reached an appreciable level in the four West African territories, splinter organisations began to emerge from the West African Federation (WASU). Lord Milverton (1948: 1003) in a letter, for example, observes that the Union was being openly accused of being 'first and foremost a political organisation for the promotion of certain political aims, and that these aims were by no means universally supported by Africans'. In that period, there appeared in London a number of organisations with a territorial basis, such as Sierra Leone Students' Union, the Gold Coast Students' Union, the Gambia Union, and the Nigeria Union. Thus, these associations channelled their resources and directed their attention to problems concerning the particular territory (Garigue, 1952).

By the same token, when the various political movements agitating for independence began to develop in West Africa, it was often ex-members of the Union who became their leaders, either through being themselves the initiators of the movements or because their help was sought on account of their education, which gave them the leverage to be leaders (Garigue, 1952: 59). In this category were personalities such as Hubert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikwe both from Nigeria as well as Kwame Nkruma and J. B. Danquah from Ghana, among others emerged as the foremost nationalists in their respective countries. In Nigeria, many of the front-line campaigners of pre-independence students' struggle were to emerge later as nationalist leaders. They fought along with others to gain independence for Nigeria. In fact, majority of these students were radicals and ideological in thought, action and perception (Onike, 2008). As part of the noble cause for independence, student rallies and public lectures were organised in different places within the country. "Thereafter, with the emergence of the University College Ibadan (later University of Ibadan) in 1948, student activism became an integral part of Nigerian university life as university campus turned to centres for nationalist agitation and political activism" (Onike, 2008: 1-2).

Student political activism and idealistic radicalism which often result in crisis between authorities/government and students had its nature and processes in the struggle against colonial rule in Nigeria, just as in most African countries (West Africa, 1989; Olugbade, 1991). This is because the university system in Nigeria began during the period of the nationalist anti-colonial struggle which included mostly students. With that pedigree, the Nigerian students did not only develop the tradition of activism, but also radicalism and progressive political culture which have been sustained over the years (Arise, 1986). In a comment on this subject, Olaniyi (2012: 220) noted that the trend of student movement in Nigeria had evolved right from the nationalist struggle up to the independence period when Nigerian students formed the nucleus of agitation for social justice, self-determination, opposition to military dictatorship and neo-colonialism.

Second phase of student activism in Nigerian higher institutions

The formation of a national student body, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), with the aim of sustaining the legacy of students' unionism which hitherto had been established during the nationalist struggle marked the milestone and a turning point in the history of student activism in Nigeria (Ya'u, 2005). In this connection, findings from the encyclopaedia on student and youth movement revealed that the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) was established in 1956 as a result of a nationwide university organisation inhabited by the Students' Union of the University College Ibadan which included student councils of the Colleges at Ife, Zaria and Nsukka (Wikipedia, 2016).

Meanwhile, the NUNS era had been referred to by scholars as the second phase of the development of student struggle and activism in Nigeria, from independence period till when the military government proscribed the Union in 1978.

It is apt to remark here that since the inception of NUNS, student movement in Nigeria has been dictated by the role of the individual Students' Union leaders in mobilising students for radical and revolutionary, social and political changes in the country (Sani, 1979). This, he argues further that their activities indicated a rejection of the values upheld by the political leaders. They are believed to fight for the good of the common man, and for the democratisation of the social system. They oppose social injustice, criticise "wrong" political decision and make legitimate demands (Sani, 1979: 47-48). Furthermore, since NUNS's existence, student activism in Nigeria is said to aim at the liberation of the society from all retrogressive ideas and reactionary social forces. For example, during the military rule in Nigeria (1966-1979; 1983-1999), students in higher institutions became a strong political force in the country, especially when all organised opposition groups to military dictatorship had either been banned or silenced.

Third phase of student activism in Nigerian higher institutions

The third phase of the development of student activism in Nigeria began with the inauguration of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) in 1981, when the ban on the activities of the Students' Union (NUNS) was lifted by the civilian government of President Sheu Shagari. Since that time, student movements in Nigeria up to the 1990's had established links with pro-democracy groups and labour unions in the search for and articulation of the truth in the context of democracy and democratic governance in the country. From the lens of student activism, students had often demonstrated against military dictatorship and military rule in Nigeria. As one of the "marginalised" groups in the society like workers, peasants, Nigerian students joined in the struggle for democratic leadership and equitable distribution of resources (against corruption and corrupt practices). For instance, by the 1970's, the spate of student activism in Nigeria was on the increase largely due to economic meltdown, corrupt practices by government officials and commercialisation of higher education by the government. Also, the issues of academic freedom, university autonomy, and the freedom of expression had become major concerns in student protests.

Furthermore in the 1980's, the umbilical cord in relations between the Students' Unions and the Trade Unions advanced the pace of activism in higher institutions, as the student body (NANS), for instance, fraternised with organisations such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Women in Nigeria (WIN), and the Movement for a

Progressive Nigeria (MPN). Mustapha (2005: 99) opines that the bond between ASUU and the Students' Union was on the basis of ideological inclination which existed between the two, as key ASUU members were former student leaders. Reportedly, however, the two bodies usually were known to have led campaign for social justice and qualitative education in history.

In that instance, Ahmadu Bello University Students' Union Government and the Academic Staff Union of the University (ASUU) on two different occasions in the 1980's campaigned against the government move to commercialise university education in Nigeria. The two bodies reportedly joined hands together in 1986 and demanded for the removal of the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor Ango Abdullahi, over his leadership style in the administration of the university. Again, the two organisations also collaborated and campaigned against the Federal government bad economic policies, including her austerity measures, the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the IMF conditionalties in the mid-1980s'. Moreover, Mustapha (2005) observes that owing to a similar ideological posture, the Students' Union also collaborated with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and other bodies agitating for a progressive cause.

Communist ideology and student movement in Nigerian higher institutions

Findings in the literature has shown that the liberation struggle in Africa with the support of some communist countries (in particular Cuba, under Fidel Castro) and the struggle against the apartheid system in South Africa contributed immensely to the development and growth of leftist student movements in some universities in Africa. Moreover, Omari & Mihyo (1991: 41) in a study related that the growth of revolutionary governments with the influence of communist ideology in Africa in the 1970's facilitated the emergence of revolutionary student movements on university campuses. Equally, these scholars argued further by saying that student activism on campus during the period had the character of leftist tendency, which they believed prompted their action and opposition to authorities and government. In the same vein, Balsvik (1998) expressed the view that vigorous student activism became pronounced on university campuses in Africa in the 1970's owing to the communist ideology transmitted into Africa by African students in Western universities and Western academics in African universities.

In the Nigerian situation, Achebe (2012) said that communist presence became visible during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), when the Soviet Union (Russia) had succeeded in gaining diplomatic breakthrough for her support to the Nigerian nation against the Biafra. Olugbade (1981: 15) in an unpublished B.Sc. thesis (1981) University of Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University) observes that "Marx and Engel ideology in *The Communist Manifesto*

had had a great influence on students' actions as well as protests and on the leadership of the Students' Union in Nigeria in the 1970's". On the other hand, Lukman (2005) traced the evolution of student activism and radicalism in Nigeria to the brand of student politics in the higher institutions in the 1970's, seen to be inclined towards leftist ideology, with the two dominant ideological tendencies of the "Labour Militants" and the "Leninists".

Given this background, the Nigerian student movement became radicalised, and organised student confrontation with the state took a clear ideological form; pitting left-wing student movement against the establishment all through (Lukman, 2005). In addition, there were other leftist student movements found on university campuses like Patriotic Youth Movement of Nigeria (PYMN); Movement for a Progressive Nigeria (MPN); Youth Solidarity on Southern Africa (YUSSA). It is important to note as well, that the ideological student movements on campuses were the driving force behind most student agitations during this period. Lukman further observed that "the students movement impacted positively on the Students' Union and helped it forged a progressive sense of direction because they could fall back on well-established national structures that were only known to the core leadership of the campus based movements" (Lukman, 2005: 62). At that time, Nigerian students constituted the only viable opposition to military dictatorship, as other opposition groups had either been banned or silenced in the process. As future leaders, with exceptional interest, university students often raised issues through protest/demonstration and Students' Union press releases or publications.

In addition to this fact, the anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism stance that preceded the struggle for independence in Africa aided the influx of communist literatures in African universities, most especially the *Communist Manifestoes* by Karl Max and Fredrick Engels. By extension, the writings by Frantz Fanon T*he Wretched of the Earth* (1965), Walther Rodney *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972) and Patrik Wilmot *The Right to Rebel* (1986) and the leftist postures by some African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Leopold Senghor of Guinea (Negritude) and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had had a great influence on the student movements in Nigeria as in some African countries. Similarly, in the 1970's, the revolutionary songs by legendary Reggae Star, Bob Marley, *Uprising, Zion Train, Kaya! Kaya!, Zimbabwe,* among others and the protest music of the Afro Beat King, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, (particularly against government) i.e., *Zombie o Zombie! Zombie o Zombie, and Beast of No Nation etc.,* greatly influenced Nigerian students. It infused in them the spirit of radical political activism against corrupt governments (civilian or military), oppression, dictatorship and military rule.

Conclusion

The development of a robust and vibrant student activism in Nigerian higher institutions was dated back to the colonial period when students in Nigerian higher institutions joined the struggle against continued colonial rule that led to the demand for Nigeria's independence. Since that time, students in higher institutions in Nigeria have engaged themselves in many activisms over national and international issues. Student activism in Nigerian higher institutions became pronounced during the military rule when students remained in the struggle for democracy and also in opposition to obnoxious policies of the government.

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