

Introduction

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Background

This network consisted of four young scholars, formerly fellows of the Social Science Research Council who conducted extensive research in the domain of youth, student activism and higher education in Africa. Faithful to this commitment, members of the group intended to advance or buttress various aspects of their study aimed at emphasising the comparative aspects of their different interests. All the members were trained in the social sciences, hence they were endowed with the necessary conceptual and methodological tools to engage in productive and intensive fieldwork that definitely yielded worthy results.

Common to their interests was the theme of youth activism or student politics in institutions of higher education. This was especially true of the post-1990 decade, which was perceived to be the era that marked Africa's 'second independence'. In the cases of Zimbabwe and South Africa, for example, the pillars of apartheid were demolished, giving way to the new democratic dispensation wherein institutions of higher learning were also de-radicalised (de-racialised). Eritrea did not only get its independence in the same decade as South Africa, but issues surrounding student politics became even more controversial. The Eritrean government, for example, imposed national service on their young citizens as a mechanism for involving young people in the nation-building project. However, students became more and more resentful of national service, which led to brutal confrontation with state authorities. In recent years, many African states have tried to assume the right to appoint senior university officials. They have adopted measures which impinge on academic freedom and this has not gone down well with university students. Furthermore, African states have attempted to stifle free speech on campuses and have ignored welfare issues affecting students. The case studies provide a good example of what is happening in many African universities. Hence, this study gives us the results of the trends, nature and operation of student activism in four African countries: Cameroon, Eritrea, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

With regard to student activism *per se*, several theoretical orientations informed the researchers' understanding of the situations in their respective countries. Their research suggest that it went a long way to challenging, modifying or validating prevailing assumptions on student activism in contemporary Africa. One of these approaches maintains that the politics of self-interest enables students to challenge the state when their interests are directly threatened and support it when it suits them. The case studies suggest that students often tend to portray themselves as demoralised individuals who are unlikely to see themselves as bearers of civil and political powers with the identity and status of full citizenship. Hence the tendency to view themselves as victims of an unjust system. It may be that students have a liberalising effect granting that the absence of parental control gives students a chance to undertake various forms of social experimentation with their personal and social identities. This raises the question whether student activism is simply an identity-pursuing project by the youth?

Scholars of youth movements have noted the similarities in expressive style, in romanticism, in idealism, in commitment to violent actions, which have occurred among groups which have varied considerably in their social and political values. Another factor which facilitates student political movement is the physical situation of the university which makes it relatively easy to mobilize students who are disposed to act politically. The campus is the ideal setting where large numbers of people in a common situation can be found.

In the cases of Cameroon, Eritrea, South Africa and Zimbabwe, the study clearly demonstrates that there are four basic issues which underlie the dramatic and often spectacular confrontation between students and the state which came to dominate university politics in the four countries. Essentially, these hinged on efforts by states to encroach on the jealously guarded freedom enjoyed by universities.

The economic decline has also put an end to the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist alliance between African states and students and other intellectual groupings in the four countries. The 'solidarity' which used to govern the relationship between students and government seems to have ended with the advent of structural adjustment programmes adopted by African governments. In some of the countries studied, the state's ostensible socialist policies have not delivered the goods. Other subjective weaknesses, like corruption, nepotism and regionalism, have become prevalent. The failure of some governments' political and economic policies have led to a rise in frustration and militancy amongst students who are increasingly beginning to feel the pinch.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the case studies of Cameroon, Eritrea, South Africa and Zimbabwe cite some clashes between students and the police over students' demand for an increase in their financial support. Typically, the governments' response in many cases has been slow, and when it came, it was rejected by students as inadequate and not in keeping with the escalating cost of living.

It is also true that one sees a sharp increase in student activism whenever events call accepted political and social values into question, particularly when policy failures seem to question the adequacy of social, economic and political arrangements and institutions. Here one can argue that student activism is the result of social discontent in African societies.

In the four case studies, it is clear that, the most general hypothesis which has been repeatedly advanced to account for youth protest suggests that it is a result of a process set in motion by rapid rates of social change and the discrepancy between the formative experience of parental generations and those of a given generation of youth.

With the above views in mind, let us briefly examine the problems or issues that this project intended to address. The following sections on Zimbabwe, South Africa, Cameroon and Eritrea attempted to provide a general framework from which comparative research questions could be posed.

Higher Education and Student Politics in Zimbabwe

As in all other countries, students in Zimbabwe have been at the forefront of the democratization debate and process since colonial rule. Since the early 1990s, they have become more organized to respond to societal demands and to demand good governance by forging alliances with other civic groups. Changes in the political and economic environment played a significant role in shaping these attitudes. In the early 1980s, students rallied behind the government in the transformation phase after the long war of liberation and most of their energy was directed towards community service. In the late 1980s, prescriptions of the economic structural adjustment programme had begun to affect them and suspicions of government's intentions towards the student body began to arise. By 1989, the one-party state advocated by the government became the pivotal point of student activism. Students saw the government as reneging on hard-won democratic ideals, which was a clear betrayal of the liberation struggle. A major victory for the students was the crushing of the intended one party-state. This victory saw an increasing shift and emphasis on their part in questioning issues of national significance. Unfortunately, the postcolonial state turned into a 'cunning state' which sought persistently to constrain issues that deal with education. The current government hailed student activism during the struggle but it is seen to have systematically denied it space after independence. This marginalization has compelled students in higher learning institutions to organize and reclaim political space they had before. The study on Zimbabwe therefore critically analyses the nature and the role of student activism in Zimbabwe since 1980.

Throughout Zimbabwe's twenty-year democracy, students have functioned as an episodic opposition force, demonstrating against the government's policies which the public in general consider as a violation of their freedom and dignity at

times in solidarity with whichever group has grievances against the government such as the workers or teachers but mostly for the improvement of their own conditions as students and their employment prospects. The various student movements or organisations at the tertiary institutions and the national students union have been avenues for political socialization since the mid-1980s. Many of the current political leaders were all active in the union and some students who aspire for political office still learn the tricks of the trade in the union. Of late, their slogan has become “change the world”. That students are viewed as fighting for political space raises questions on whether the students’ calls for change are merely instrumental.

In January 2002, the Students’ Union General Council resolved to support the opposition party, the MDC, in its fight for democracy; not only because they desire freedom, but also because the president of the opposition had shown consistent support for the students since 1988 when he was a trade union leader. In 1989, he was arrested for issuing a public statement in support of student demonstrations. The pro-democracy role the students have played raises some questions which this project seeks to answer. To begin with, who are the students in these institutions and what are their aspirations both as individuals and in collectivity? How do students deal with tensions within the student body? How much space is there for female students to participate in student activities? How has the government responded to student activism over time and space? How does their activism compare with that of the students in the four countries? These are the questions the research attempts to address.

Transformation and Student Politics in South Africa

Higher education institutions provide youth with vital space in which to engage in transformative activism and to develop democratic citizenship. In South Africa’s turbulent history, students, like in Zimbabwe, have played a critical role in social and political change – all too often attracting brutal and violent state repression. During the 1970s and 1980s, their sustained activism contributed significantly to turning the historical tide against apartheid. However, since the first democratic elections in 1994, which signalled the end of the political struggle against apartheid, conditions surrounding and within South Africa’s higher education institutions have changed markedly. With this, the role and contribution of students in educational change have also changed. This study clearly documents these changes and identifies the constraints and opportunities surrounding student activism and citizenship in the current context of South African higher education.

As part of a comprehensive framework for transformation, the South African government’s 1997 White Paper on Higher Education strongly promotes cooperative governance in higher education institutions. Against this backdrop, one of the key issues analysed in the South African case study concerns the effective-

ness of student participation in the various governing structures at universities and technikons in South Africa.

One of the consequences of the 1997 White Paper, then, was the introduction of a form of representative democracy at higher education institutions. Accordingly, the research examines the two issues that emerged as centrally important in examining effective student participation: 1) Who represents students, that is, what is the profile of those students being elected as representatives, with regard to race, gender, age, undergraduate or postgraduate levels and fields of study? This is likely to have a bearing on the nature and efficacy of student participation. 2) What different patterns of formal representation and informal activities (such as lobbying, consultation and other practices) occurred within and around the various new governance structures at different institutions? How did students negotiate the constraints and opportunities within this to influence policy related processes? These patterns had a direct bearing on the effectiveness of student participation.

To examine these developments and their impact on student activism and democratic citizenship, the study attempted to describe and analyse key trends in student governance and SRC activities, since 1997, at three universities in the Western Cape region of South Africa.

These key trends include:

- patterns shaping student participation in structures of governance within universities and technikons,
- factors affecting the effectiveness of student participation in governance structures in universities and technikons, and
- the extent to which students influence decision-making processes in institutions.

Democratisation and Student Politics in Cameroon

Until 1993, higher education in Cameroon was principally restricted to Cameroon's single bilingual university – the University of Yaounde, albeit with university centres in Buea, Douala, Dschang and Ngaoundere. However, as a result of overcrowding and other factors, all the university centres were upgraded to full university status, and the University of Yaounde split into two separate institutions, thus bringing to six the number of state institutions of higher learning. As a result of the reform, the University of Buea became the only English-speaking university in the country where most of this study was conducted. The factors leading to this process are analysed in the case study of Cameroon.

The research in Cameroon focused on student politics or activism at the University of Buea. The objective, being to determine the character of student activism in this institution with a view to comparing it to student politics at the University of Yaounde just before the university reforms.

The research reveals that soon after the creation of the University of Buea, student politics galvanised around issues such as the university's demand for more financial commitment from students and the desire to run their affairs without interference from the university administration. In 1995, conflict between the student body and the university administration degenerated into violence on an unprecedented scale, leading to the burning of the registrar's car, the arbitrary and wanton arrests of students and the militarization of the campus for over a week. Student politics was also banned and the university became more or less, a replica of the one-party state, bereft of divergence, alternative or dissenting views. Since 1995, then, student politics at the University of Buea has been tailored to suit the whims and caprices of the administration that is largely state-appointed. What is similar or different about student activism in Buea when compared to cases in South Africa, Zimbabwe or Eritrea? Such are the issues that constitute a critical study of student activism at the University of Buea.

Post-war Instability and Student Politics in Eritrea

Higher education institutions provide youth with important space to make far-fetched claims on citizenship issues in the national political system. The state and society also place great expectations on students, especially higher education students, when it comes to nation-building and national transformation projects. Students have played a significant role in the history of national liberation in Eritrea. For example, student mobilization and demonstrations were instrumental in the 1960s in the revival of nationalist sentiments, and they have endowed the Eritrean people with the human resources for its political mobilization and the armed struggle. During this period, students of all social backgrounds voluntarily joined the struggle, contributing to the success of the struggle. After Eritrea gained independence in 1993, youths were at the centre of the nation's long-term projects. The Eritrean government felt the need to involve youths in nation-building and reconstruction projects. As part of such projects, the national service and summer work programmes for students were adopted and implemented in 1994. The national service was made compulsory for every Eritrean aged eighteen and above with 18 months earmarked for both military training and civic duty. The summer work programme for high school students was also launched. This annual programme targeted students involved in agricultural and educational development projects. Both were declared mandatory for all young citizens of Eritrea. Students have been and still are, actively involved in these national projects. Moreover, students rallied behind the government in the two-year border war with Ethiopia as far as going to the war fronts as soldiers. After the war had stopped in 2000 and peace agreements signed subsequently, the dynamics changed.

Students in Eritrea's only university, the university of Asmara, had gotten politically active in 2001. National programmes that had hitherto gone practically

unchallenged in theory and practice came under criticism from the student body. However, in mid-June the student body openly objected to the usual summer work programme's mode of implementation and rationale. In so doing, they referred to international human rights conventions, citizenship rights and socio-economic problems. The university also served as a public platform for discussions on several issues. The issue was also discussed in the private newspapers that existed at the time. Concurrently, this period also witnessed a split in the government and the public media. Questions were raised and the stakes were high that there would be strong resistance among students following the government's imprisonment of the student president and forced movement of students into desert camps for the summer service. That decision was highly politicised and condemned as a blatant violation of human rights violations. No active students' movement existed thereafter. However, one significant effect of such activism was changing the nationalist pre-figurative political culture described by some people as a 'culture of silence'. A year after these incidents, we witnessed a silent political activism, not as a result of nationalist repertoires, but probably because of the repressive measures taken by the government to suppress student activism.

This case study, then, is a starting point for addressing the broad issues of citizenship, nationalism and life prospects and democratization among youth in higher education institutions. The short-lived student movement touched on such core issues as legitimacy, discourses and practices of citizenship and national identity in Eritrea. The study is a purposive sample survey conducted during the summer of 2003, two years after the collapse of the short-lived student movement of 2001. It investigates how student activism and perceptions of life prospects have responded to political processes between 1998 and 2003. The study explores student perceptions of their life plans, career choices and level activism. It unveils interesting patterns in students' perception that vary according to gender, generational and experiential differences of students. The study also looks into how students negotiate nationalist political repertoires in thinking about their current and future individual and social lives.

Research Objectives

The research project has the following specific objectives:

- To focus fieldwork on issues relating to higher education and student activism in selected universities in South Africa, Cameroon, Zimbabwe and Eritrea;
- To generate field data that can contribute and inform policy on higher education in Africa with regard to student activism;
- To compare the nature of student activism in various African countries and their significance in our understanding of higher education in Africa.

- To compare data on the social backgrounds and level of activism of students in selected countries, with a view to undertaking limited generalisation on the correlation between social backgrounds, university experiences and activism.

Research Questions

Some of the key questions that researchers were interested in are as follows:

- What precisely is student activism in the selected countries, in terms of mechanisms, strategies, etc.?
- Is student activism in Africa a passing phase, a permanent process or simply circumstantial?
- What patterns of political socialisation do student activists experience and how do these experiences shape or determine their levels of activism?
- How has student activism changed in relation to transformations within higher education structures or in relation to broader political changes (e.g. from one-party state to multiparty state, apartheid to democracy, liberal or social democracy to authoritarian rule, etc.)?
- What is specific or common to universities as spaces where students engage in political activism whose consequences extend beyond the university?

Relevance or Significance of the Study

Existing literature on higher education and student activism in Africa suffers from an acute shortage of comparatively informed approaches. As a result, this study reveals that research on student activism in Africa is grossly under-theorised and inadequate, hence the huge gap in the understanding of the processes, events, strategies, issues or debates that inform or characterise student activism across the continent. This study is, first and foremost, the modest contribution of some young scholars to the debate in a bid to understand student activism as a relevant component of higher education in Africa.

This volume will undoubtedly be of tremendous assistance to university. It is a rich collection of experiences which university administrators should consider in order to create a conducive learning environment on their various campuses. It may not be easy for universities, though, to meet the economic demands of their students. However, administration-students mutual understanding could be improved by genuine dialogue between the two pillars. As long as students are left out of the consultation process on some of the critical issues which affect the university, there will always be persistent tension on the campus. No amount of force will ever destroy this show of strength by students, since they feel they are part and parcel of a community which cherishes democratic values.