

## Re-jigging Political Education and Students Activism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

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### Abstract

The curriculum of higher education is often designed to foster the intellectual, moral, emotional and social characteristics of the students. This paper focuses on the study of students' activities very often referred to as extra-curricular or out-of-class activities. Student's Unionism exists primarily to cater for a wide range of students' interest and concerns. The association is found in all institutions of higher, which cuts across tribal, cultural, political and religious barriers. The paper examines among other things, the concepts of students' politics, and the origin of students' politics in Nigeria. Students politics and democratic process, social science students and politics, functions of students' activism in Nigerian tertiary institutions, problems associated with students politics as well as make recommendations on how to operate viable and sustainable students' activism in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Students, Unionism, Politics, Tertiary Institution, Nigeria.

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### I. Introduction

A lot of people, including students of our modern institutions of higher learning, have been thrown into confusion as to what constitutes politics and who should participate in it. Most often, non-political scientists/students purport to eschew political activities on the guise that the game of politics is a dirty one and that those who take part in it are corrupt either in their nature or by orientation. Far from such assumption, politics is a pervasive phenomenon in all aspects of human existence, be it religion, science, law, economics, music, Arts and culture, etc. Consciously or unconsciously, everybody participates in politics. Rode, Anderson et al (1983) observes that all people are politicians, but some public officials are more political than others. In the modern society, the belief is that politics is the exclusive domain of political scientists, which negates the Aristotelian postulation that "Men by nature are all political animal". In the Nigerian situation, owing to the level of educational advancement and consciousness, students of institutions of higher learning have developed and exercised more political interest within and outside the school curricula.

According to Pearson (1978), a student is someone who is studying under a teacher. In this context students of Tertiary Institutions include all those who are enrolled into various programmes in the universities, Polytechnics, Monotechnics, and Colleges of Education. One peculiar nature of a student is that he or she must be studying under the guidance of a teacher or an instructor.

For Dag, Sozer and Sel (2015), political education is a process whereby citizens internalize the set values of the political system. It is the process whereby people learn several matters such as how to socialize within political culture, how to think and act on politics and government, how to adapt to the political process, how to shape political system and how to make decisions (Pandey and Kumar, 1977).

In this context, political education is a process whereby children and youths internalize the value set of the political system, evaluate political concepts and phenomena through political education at mental, relational and perceptual scale, and form a state of awareness and consciousness to transfer what they learned into practice. To this end, Political education wishes to succeed in is to support the children in realization of their political existence and political subjectivity; to develop their political awareness; to ensure that they are raised as individuals with political awareness required for a freer and more democratic future; to assist their organization around participatory lines allowing them to become effective citizens and to contribute to their shaping the political culture (Dag, Sozer and Sel, 2015). Political education therefore is all formal and non-formal teaching and learning processes with the aim to develop civic competences.

Politics like any other concept in Social Science lacks precise definition, especially as there are many authors with divergent views on the nature and scope of the subject matter. However, attempt shall be made to define politics.

Lasswell (1936) sees politics as who gets what, when and how. In the same vein, Easton (1969) conceptualized politics as authoritative allocation of values (scarce resources). Implicitly, politics involves all activities directly or indirectly associated with the acquisition of state power, use of state power and consolidation of state power Nnoli (1978). Meanwhile, all human societies are faced with the problems of scarce resources, unemployment, security, social vices and conflicts of interests. Students of Tertiary Institutions are faced with the problems such as high tuition, hostel accommodation, lack of good water, poor transportation system, extortion of any sort, etc. Students' union bodies are usually formed to project and protect the overall interest of the entire students by ensuring that there is a balance and cordial relationship between the school authorities and the students. In all, every plan geared toward getting, the aforementioned problems solved fall within the ambit of political decision-making process.

Student unionism itself is the central strength of students' movement and a stable organization that exists to cater for a wide range of students' interest and student's body. In other words, the whole essence of social existence is politics. It is a natural and inevitable disposition among men, because when people try to define their positions on any issue in the society and as they compete for available resources or as they try to influence others to accept their own views, they are invariably found to be involved in politics.

It is against this backdrop, the cardinal objective of this study is to;

1. Examine the role of Tertiary Institutions in the political education of students in Nigeria.
2. Ascertain the influence of students on the political process in Nigeria.
3. Identify associated problems of students' activism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions.

### **Historicizing Students' Politics in Nigeria**

Student politics predates Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. Jacks (1975:73) traced the origin of students' politics to the ancient Italian 'universities where students organized themselves into clubs and societies. In England, student unionism started as school clubs, philosophical and debating societies. In Nigeria, the history dates back to 1940 when Rev. Ransome Kuti organized students into a single body known as Nigerian Student Union (NSU) with its strong base at Abeokuta Grammar school, King's College, Yaba. At the emergence of University College, Ibadan (now University of Ibadan) in 1948; most of the students who transferred to the College instantly organized themselves into a Union. Ajuluchukwu (1981:5), maintained that the students of the university college and others from Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology with campuses at Ibadan, Enugu and Zaria were inaugurated as National Union of Nigerian Student (NUNS) in 1956. Today, the Student Union is a well established body in all institutions of higher learning including secondary schools. The national body has new nomenclature- National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). Outside the apex body (NANS), there are other sub-unions existing as hotel societies, musical clubs, philosophical and debating societies, photographic clubs, state and local/community-under-graduate associations, etc. These students' bodies are usually organized to exercise certain authority as far as matters affecting them are concerned.

### **Students Politics and Democratic Process**

In today's world, democracy is no longer seen as a system that cannot work in certain countries as the wind of democracy continues to blow across all the continents. Abdallah (1992:56) captured the mood of the people when he remarked that:

*Increasing attention is being given to the subject of democracy in Africa and in the world generally. This is a welcome development, and most people in Africa and elsewhere are rejoicing over it.*

In this dimension, Howards (1991:1) opined that "the world has changed dramatically as a result of the upheavals in Eastern Europe in 1989. This process will have far reaching implications for many countries in other areas including the African continent." Haussler (1994) observed that in many countries, the people have shown the preference for democratic rule. They have thus come to the realization that for economic developments, for life more abundant so often promised by government and for the upliftment of man in general, a democratic climate must first be ensured. Democracy has therefore come to be seen not merely as an abstract concept but rather as a means of ensuring the consent of the governed. The democratic credentials of student politics were encapsulated thus;

*The inherently democratic nature of student politics puts them in good stead as advocates of free society. After all even during military rule the democratic process within student unions continue unhindered. Thus, they remain and shall always be a formidable bulwark against anti-democratic forces (Haussler, 1994)*

Writing along the same line, Bangura and Beckman (1989:35) reiterated that no matter the perspectives from which students involvement in the democratic and political terrain are viewed, African students may well have a stronger case than most actors on the political scene to claim to represent broad popular interests. In

examining the political and democratic role of students, Nkwede(2003:6) sees the activities of student unions as basically political and democratic when he stated thus;

*One day we are too materialistic, too much concerned with bread and butter issues. We are accused of being selfish to the point where we want to make progress at the expense of other elements in our society. But when we speak out on the broad, big questions, like foreign policy, human rights, democratic control of capitalism, then our critics turn around and ask what is students doing, trying to interfere in the affairs of the state.*

The democratic aspirations of students are in themselves a survival instinct as the survival and proper functioning of student unions hinge on the development of democratic culture and vice-versa, a sort of chicken and egg relationship. It is therefore in the long term interest of student unions to work for the development of democratic culture in the country.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Contingency Approach developed by Joan Woodward (1958). A contingency theory is an organizational theory that claims that there is no best way to make decisions in institutions. Instead, the optimal course of action is contingent (dependent) upon the internal and external situation. A contingent leader effectively applies his style of leadership to the right situation. This is to say that decisions are to be made by leaders.

Historically, contingency theory has sought to formulate broad generalizations about the formal structures that are typically associated with or best fit the use of different technologies. The perspective originated with the work of Joan Woodward (1958) who argued that technologies directly determine differences in such organizational attributes as span of control, centralization of authority, and the formalization of rules and procedures. Some important contingencies for institutions are listed thus;

- Technology
- Suppliers and distributors
- Consumer interest group
- Consumers and competitors
- Government
- Unions.

The major assumptions underlying contingency is that institutions are open systems that need careful management to satisfy and balance internal needs and to adapt to environmental circumstances. Again, there is no best way of organizing. The appropriate form depends on the kind of task or environment one is dealing with. Also, management must be concerned, above all else, with achieving alignment and good fits. Furthermore, different types of species of organizations are needed in different types of environments.

The relevance of Contingency Theory in the current study is because it can be concluded that there is no best way or approach of doing things; different situation calls for different approach to handle, manage, and solve the arising issues concerned.

Institutions are open system which embraces anomalies or challenges every now and then, which requires adaptable and situational solution in order to overcome or solve the problem or issue concerned. Other situational or contingency factors are changes in beneficiaries demand for goods and services, change in government policy or law, change in environment or climate change, and so on.

To this extent, contingency approach has relationship with best fit approach as different problems deserve to be solved with the best resources. This is really the case of rejigging political education and students' activism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions where human development takes the centre stage.

## **II. Methods**

The paper adopted qualitative research method in an effort to rejigging political education and students' activism in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. Qualitative research method as explained by Hancock, Ockleford and Windridge (2009) is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomenon aimed at helping us to understand the world in which we live and while things are the way they are. This method is suitable for this study because it enables readers to understand the current Nigerian political education and students' activism through a holistic perspective.

However, the study which derives its argument from existing secondary sources of data including textbooks, journals, articles, magazines newspapers, government publications, and periodicals was content, theoretically discourse, and narratively dissected and analyzed.

### **III. Results/Discussion**

#### **The Manifest Functions of Students Activism**

It is erroneous to assume that students attend school just to engage themselves in academic works only. Students' activity involves extra-curricular or out-of-class activities such as sports, drama, religious activities, clubs and politics. Such learning experiences are less formal and in most cases fixed outside teaching periods. No marks are awarded for participation, except that outstanding performance attracts award of certificate of merit to individual participant.

Student politics as represented by various students' union bodies found in most Nigerian universities, polytechnics, Monotechnics, Colleges of Education and Secondary Schools are stable bodies, which cater for a wide range of students' interests. Hence, students' organizations seek to protect, promote, and improve on the general ethos, values and life expectancy of students. Such bodies are usually non-tribal in membership and without political or religious inclinations. Some functions of students' union activities in Nigerian educational institutions cannot be holistically as being complimentary to the day-to-day administration of the educational institutions. However, students' unionism generally performs important functions in the modern operation of Nigerian Tertiary Institutions. Such functions are as explained below:

- Students' union act as unifying factor for students with divergent ethnic and social backgrounds. In this regard, students' union activities promote national integration and peace needed for the overall development of the country (Ilogu, 1981:9).
- Students' politics provide a training ground for future leadership. Students learn to apply and experiment on democratic principles, which prepare them for wider community administration. A good number of politicians in Nigeria today started their political activism through school politics. The Pan African nationalism was believed to have developed during the higher school days of the pioneer nationalists.
- It provides official representation in all matters affecting students' interest impressively; students in campuses unite efforts to press home their demands such as hostel accommodation, transport, medical, recreational facilities and other welfare needs.
- Student unionism improves the understanding and good relationship among members of the union. In other words, their activities offer them the opportunities for group dynamics/interactions. As students organize themselves in groups, they learn to exchange ideas and develop high sense of responsibility and the needs for belongingness, security and companionship are satisfied.
- Through students' politics, latent capacities in the youths are discovered, especially as they are given opportunities to plan and carryout projects on their own.
- Students' politics helps to inculcate in the students the good qualities of good citizenship and instill in them the virtues of good leadership and followership.
- Well-planned students' activities foster social responsibilities. Form the proceeds realized during the rag-days or from menial jobs, students sometimes use such to assist the destitute and the homeless.
- Enriching social life on campus by organizing parties, discounted trips on excursions, fun trips to beaches, zoos and museums, selling discounted tickets to concerts, shows, plays and cultural events and rag days (David, 2013).
- Contributing to community and society at large by coordinating volunteer activities such as blood donation, promoting environmental awareness campaigns, presenting gift items to charity homes and the needy, clearing of drainages, career choice training to primary and secondary schools in host communities (Zuokemefa and Sese, 2015).

#### **The Impacts of Students Activities on Nigerian Tertiary Institutions**

Generally, students' activities are often-times referred to as extra curricula or out-of-class activities. These out-of-class activities are learning experiences, which are student-centered. Students select the activities which they want to participate in and assume the responsibilities of planning and carrying out the activities such sports, drama, music, culture, literary and debate societies, religion, press/publication, politics, fraternities and sororities. These activities are usually informal and most cases slotted outside teaching periods. Marks are not awarded except award of certificates of honour and merits. The activities center mostly on development of skills and social relationship. Although students organized the activities themselves, they are to seek advice and support from school authority, precisely the office of the Dean, students' Affairs. To ensure conformity with the institutional guidelines, student Union bodies wishing to be formally recognized are usually required to register with the students' Affair Department with the provision of the stipulated requirements. Such applications for registration are screened before certificate of recognition are issued to intending associations. Student unionism train students in parliamentary democracy and cabinet government with a view to keeping vigilance against any violation of fundamental human rights freedom of speech and movements, since they themselves elect people into various offices to handle the affairs of the union.

### **Associated Problems of Student Politics in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions**

Despite the roles played by student union bodies some problems are identified to be associated with their conduct such as:

- **Students' Demonstration and Unrest:** Students have often organized themselves into demonstrative groups, which sometimes result to killings and unwanted destruction of public properties. Students' restiveness cause serious setbacks in academic programmes and most times result to closure of schools.
- **Formation of Secret Cult:** Some students' activities had resulted to the formation of secret and occultic societies, ritual murder, harassing and maiming of fellow students and staff.
- **Lack of Adequate Supervision:** In the contemporary society, there is lack of proper supervision of students' especially from the Dean of students' affairs who coordinate students' programmes.
- **Lack of Role Description:** In many institutions, students' roles are not usually specified so as to enable them know what role they are expected to play and at what time to play the role. This results in haphazard activities, which do not motivate many students to participate actively.
- **Lack of Direction and Guidance:** There exists evidence of lack of direction guidance in the affair of students after classes. In his own standpoint on students extra-curricular matters, Vincent I. (1976:97) observed that Nigerian Tertiary Institutions do not show serious attempt at coordinating students' life after the scheduled classroom hours. There is the general feeling among staff that what happens to the students outside the classroom is none of their responsibilities.

### **IV. Conclusion/Recommendations**

Politics is one of the fields of human endeavour which have continued to be alternative to all who have stake in the governing process of the society. Very often, people shy away from politics in subtle claim that politics is an exclusive reserve for politicians. Aristotle's philosophy that all men by nature are political animal debunks the above claim. Last decades have shown that more than ever.

In our history, the problem of leadership, in the third word states has been that of lack of adequate preparation for leadership roles in our Tertiary Institutions. In this regard, students with potential qualities for various societal leaderships should be encouraged to develop interest in politics while still in school. As aptly noted by Zanella (1979:263) that if our schools do not serve as a developmental ground for leadership qualities, the future will be serviced by less qualified and poorly prepared individuals who may not cope well with the societal problems. When this is achieved, it will help to promote healthy academic culture for sustainable educational development in Nigeria. In the light of the above, the following recommendations may sound useful for a better and healthy student politics in Nigeria.

Firstly, students with special personality and leadership qualities should be used advisers to students' social groups as practiced in Brooklyn College, New York. Secondly, student teacher advisory council should be formed for all activities and programme relating to students. In this case, students' leadership should be made to be aware of their role description. Thirdly, school management should show serious concern for students' extra-curricular activities and not indifferent to such out-of-class arrangement.

Fourthly, on campuses, students should be allowed to exercise their fundamental human rights and at the same time granted autonomy to elect people who are qualified to lead them.

Fifthly, students with low average performance should not be allowed to contest student union positions, especially as such students may suffer academic set-backs. Sixthly, students' union leadership should be required to prepare annual report on their activities and their programmes properly evaluated to ascertain areas of effectiveness and identify where to make further improvements. In line with the above, all students' societies, whose objectives run counter to the democratic and social principles of the institution, should be proscribed without delay. Finally, basic infrastructural needs should be provided on our institutional campuses for students so as to make them comfortable and keep their minds off from restive thoughts.

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