Collective Dynamics and Alienation: An Examination of Violent Student Strikes in Kenya's Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of alienation and collective dynamics in the violent student strikes that have been witnessed in Kenya's higher education over the past three decades. In the past, student strikes have been in response to inadequate teaching, learning and accommodation facilities as well as student's activism. This paper applies the political model and the collective dynamics approach to examine how policy processes at the institutional level and the emergence of collectives can precipitate violence in the university setting. Drawing examples from actual cases of riots in public universities in Kenya, this paper concludes by demonstrating how the policy process has often led to alienation. Bottlenecks in disciplinary process as well as breakdown in communication has led to riots. This has been compounded by the pre-disposition to the emergence of collectives whereby factors such as anonymity, diffusion of responsibility, group size, social identity, drugs and alcohol and frustration aggravate the situation by making the riots more violent.

Key words: Students strike, Universities, collective dynamics approach and violence

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the role of alienation and that of collectives in provoking unrest in Kenya's universities, using Moi University as a case study. It examines alienation as well as the pre-disposition to the development of collectives in precipitating unrest and extreme action in the university setting. It attempts to answer the question. How have institutional dynamics contributed in the aggravation of unrest in Kenya's higher education?

The focus of this paper is on the institutional dynamics that have informed or contributed to sustaining the unrest. It examines how the management structure and policy processes at the university play a significant role in the unrest. It also interrogates the university set-up and composition with a view to understanding how it can give rise to the possibility of the mob and group action, which can instigate and sustain unrest.

Moi University is the second public university to be established in Kenya. It was established by the government of Kenya in response to the sharp demand for higher education in 1984. Moi University currently has a student enrolment of over 39000 students. Between its inception and the year 2009 (study period), the university has witnessed a total of 24 cases of students' unrest on its main campus, constituent colleges and campuses, totalling to an average of one incident per year (Kiboiy, 2013).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper applies the deindividuation theory or concept coined by leon Festinger, Albert Pepitone and Theodore Newcombs as well as the political model developed by Victor Baldridge to analyse specific cases of unrest witnessed at Moi University. When individuals

become deindividuated, they escape normative regulations and this explains the extreme behaviour of collectives. Deindividuation is associated anonymity, diffused responsibility, group membership, group size and arousal.

People behave more aggressively when they are anonymous. Being part of a group diminishes a sense of responsibility and when the effect of a particular action is remote, there is a diminished feeling of responsibility and, hence aggressive behaviour. Large lynch mobs are more violent than small ones. Arousal increases agitated behaviour and this may result from altered temporal perspectives, sensory overload, heightened involvement and the use of drugs.

The political model seeks to explain the policy process in the university by conceptualizing it as a politically negotiated order. As such, these institutions are arenas of intense daily political action characterized by negotiations, bargaining, compromise, use of threats, concessions etc. The political model analyses policy on a five-point sequence; (i) the social context, (ii) interest articulation, (iii) legislative transformation, (iv) policy and (v) policy execution. At the social context, we see the existence of numerous groups that have varying values, attitudes and hence divergent interests. In organizations, three types of groups, depending on their positions relative to the critical policy organs have been identified; (i) Confident groups, (ii) Neutral groups and (iii) Alienated partisans. In effort to influence policy, the alienated partisans are intensely political in their approach since they deeply mistrust the system. As such they are hostile and use non-legitimate and non-formal means such as riots, boycotts and sit-ins.

METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive literature review, document analyses and interview were used to collect data. For purposes for this paper, the literature review focuses on the concept of alienation in policy process as well as the feature of collectives in extreme group actions. Document analyses focused on the primary data, which included minutes of the relevant university senate meetings, reports of senate standing and ad-hoc committees (especially those investigating specific incidences of student unrests), security intelligence reports, minutes of the students' disciplinary committee of senate, Students Governing Council (SGC) meetings, various correspondences and memos between the student leaders and the university administration. The triangulation in the data collection was completed with the conduct interviews with senior university management officials at policy level and long serving officers who had witnessed the unrests over a long period.

RESULTS

This paper established in its findings that both alienations, perceived and/or real, as well as the predisposition to the emergence of collectives have been critical in the sustenance of unrest in Kenya's higher education. Alienation of students in the mainstream decision making is as a result of several factors such as the lack of effective students' representation, busy university calendar, autocratic leadership styles and inadequate communication. With regard to collectives, the paper concludes that the university in its current setting is highly susceptible to the emergence of extreme collectives due to situational factors such as anonymity, diminished responsibility, group membership and size as well as the prevalence of drugs and alcohol. Additionally, this paper concludes that frustration is another factor,

over and above what has been identified by the proponents of "Deindividuation" theorists that precipitates the state of deindividuation or the "state of altered awareness" that results in irrational, emotional and impulsive behaviour of collectives.

Alienation and Unrest

Alienations from the mainstream decision making organs of the University plays a critical role in informing students 'unrest. Alienation may be real or perceived and is a consequence of several factors that are prevalent in the administrative set up as well as the operating of the University. Alienation of the student body that are represented by their elected leaders is often the consequence of the bureaucratic set up of the University, the policy process, communication, and poor leadership and management styles.

Lack of Representation

In quite a number of instances there are no provisions for student representation in critical policy organs of the University. Consequently, important decisions are often made without the input of students who often express frustration through risks and demonstrations. At the Maseno University College, students staged a series of demonstration over matters related to teaching practice; upon investigation the Ad-hoc committee which had been constituted to investigate the matter concluded that:

The committees' investigation would seem to show that apart from representation on Academic Board, students' representation on other University Committees e.g. Teaching Practice Management, Faculty Boards, Departmental meetings etc. is extremely poor (Maseno University College, 1992). While this confirms as clear lack of representation of students in some key decision-making organs, data also indicate that although there is elaborate arrangement for student representatives in Departmental and Faculty Boards, Senate and its standing committees, student leaders are often hardly aware of this. As such, they do not make efforts to have representation in such meetings but instead perceive it as a deliberate effort by the university management to exclude them in decision making. For example, asked about their knowledge of this existence of Departmental and Faculty Boards and whether they attended as leaders, a former student leader responded. Yes, it is only that for the four years I was in Moi University, I never heard of a faculty (Board) meeting I never heard of that, may be they used to be there or probably it was happening but they were reserves of maybe the lecturers because the students were used to participate. From 1st year, I was also a class representative, BBM class and I never got to attend any of these, probably I was never invited or I didn't know they were happening (Interview, Nairobi, June 2012.

Busy calendar

Owing to the collegial model of Managing University matters, critical decisions and policy are often the result of numerous committees. The University is hardly the ideal bureaucracy and hence the emphasis on decision through committee. Consequently, the university is more or less bogged down by numerous committees that result in meetings of specific committees being far apart. For example, analysis of members of the students' welfare members reveal that this committee hardly sits once a year and in some instances a year or two passes without holding a meeting. Yet this is a critical organ in so far as student matters are concerned. Bearing in mind that student leaders' term in office is one year, the result is a technical alienation of them since they may serve a whole term without such a meeting being convened.

Data also revealed that although student leaders attend critical decision-making committees, they still feel that their views are not captured or are overlooked since the composition of the said committees is such that students are few as compared to staff (Interview, Nairobi, June, 2012).

Authoritarian Leadership styles and Bottlenecks in Decision Making

Especially in the 90s when Universities were struggling for improved academic freedom, there is strong indication from the primary and secondary data conforming authoritarian leadership tendencies as well as bottlenecks in decision making attributed to a highly centralized system that Kenya Universities had been moulded into by the successive |political organs |MT4| after independence (Inyinyangi, A mutabi). A mutabi (2002) for example observes that:

It emerges, therefore, that a certain level of authoritarianism is prevalent in the management styles at the university and that the violent strikes are a student response to try to create a better democratic space. The relevant literature also suggests this to be the case. Amutabi (2002), for example, asserts:

> Reports invariably suggest ...that Kenyan universities are occasionally disrupted by a small group of aggressive and anti-establishment students...yet the democratic nature of the students' grievances, and structures under which they operate, are often ignored. It is rarely reported that university students in Kenya are responding to authoritarian leadership, institutional decay, and management crises at the university (p. 159).

Strong suggestions in various reports to decentralize decision-making are an indication of the bottleneck of decisions in such a system as a factor informing the interests. The Vice-Chancellor's Committee Report (cited in Standa, 2000:61), for instance, asserts that

> While there were many causes of disturbances and riots in the universities, the ways in which these were handled when they occurred varied with the university management style. A management style which is flexible, transparent and easily accessible appears to have fewer disturbances than a highly structured, bureaucratic management style.

Following an inquiry into the cause of unprecedented student riots at Kenyatta University in 2009, the Parliamentary Committee on Education, Research and Technology (Republic of Kenya 2009) recommended for a free flow of communication through open fore with stake holders as well as allowing some level of autonomy of the student leadership.

Poor Communication

There are several ways in which lack of, or poor communication may precipitate unrest, for example in barring decision making organs of the University from getting information about critical issues that require prompt action for solution. However, with regard to alienation, this leaves student leaders in the dark in as far as their representation in various committees is concerned. For example, asked about participation in Departmental and Faculty Board meetings a former student leader responded.

*From 1st year, I was also a class representative, BBM class and I never got to attend any of those, so probably I was never invited or I didn't know they were happening. Yeah so there is this issue of disclosure of information because you know students are also busy people, so there should be a calendar may be at the beginning of a semester that we are going to have this kind of a meeting .... (*Interview, Nairobi, June, 2012*).*

In this kind of scenario, many important decisions, touching on the academic and welfare matters of students are made without their input. Often this leads to resistance by the affected students, even where such decisions are for their good.

Collective Dynamics and Unrest

Anonymity

Anonymous members of crowds or mobs are more likely to engage in activities that they would, otherwise, not engage in, such as violence and aggression. Data obtained for this study indicates that several of the riot that took place at Moi University were compounded by circumstance that increased the anonymity of the students. For example, in the second of the 1999 twin riots on the Main Campus, the students were under cover of darkness as the riot occurred at night. This riot was the most destructive in the history of the University in terms of the value of property destroyed. Similarly, the incidents at Maseno University College of 1997, the Western University College riots of 2006 and the failed Chepkoilel Campus election of 2007 were all aggravated by the anonymity created by the cover of darkness.

Diffused Responsibility

Whenever members of a group experience a diminishing responsibility of their actions, their engagement in aggressive action is increased. This situation can only arise in a group as a result of the anonymity offered in the group context. Because it is difficult for the university to isolate individuals who are responsible for particular actions during riots, the sense of responsibility is diffused amongst all the students and, consequently, has encouraged similar repetitive actions by the students. On the many occasions that the University has been closed after students engaged in riots, the university has reopened and has charged a uniform amount of money to all the students to compensate for the property destroyed or lost. The twin riots of 1999 are a good illustration of this. While property valued at over Kshs 14,000,000 was reportedly stolen, the university was only able to charge seven students for the theft of various items, the value of which only amounted to a few thousand shillings. The university was unable to isolate individuals who were responsible for the theft and destruction and, consequently, levied a uniform charge on all the students.

Group Membership and Size

It is only in groups that "the sense of anonymity and diffusion of responsibility that generated deindividuation" (Forsyth, 2010) is possible. Riots, involving students of the entire campus, have been more destructive than those involving only sections of it. The demonstrations in support of the national teachers' strike in 1997 involved mainly students in the BEd programme of the Main Campus and had less of an impact in terms of the disruption of academic programmes or the destruction of property than the strikes of 1991 on all the campuses; the 1999 strike on the Moi Main Campus and Chepkoilel Campus; and the 2003 strike which affected the Main Campus and the Eldoret West Campus. The March 2009 strike at the Kenyatta University is another illustration of how the involvement of a

large group leads to very widespread destruction. During this strike, a large portion of the student population in a strike that lead to the destruction of property valued at Kshs 126,000,000/= (Republic of Kenya, 2009).

Social Identity

Often students engage in riots or demonstrations as a way of defending their social interests and social identity. It is often an "us" against "them "scenario – be it against the administration, the police or another group. The fact that they see themselves as belonging to a social group motivated them to come out in its defense and, if need be, fight for it. Students, for example, refer to themselves as "comrades" which is a clear indication that they see themselves as belonging to a social group. Although almost all the strikes are a demonstration of this unity and a defence of their identity, a few relevant cases strongly illustrate this. The June 1991 fight between Main Campus students and local businessmen at the neighbouring Cheboiywo Market and the protest against increased transport charges on the Main Campus in 2009 are good examples. The main Campus riots of 1999 also demonstrates as fight in defense of social identity while the JAB vs PSSP clash in 2003 was a fight in defense of the two groups' social identities and status.

In the 1999 Main Campus incident, the riot was triggered off by an attempt to apprehend a student who was found cooking in the hostels by one of the security officers. Cooking had been outlawed by the university. In retaliation, the students not only attacked the security officer but went ahead to attack all the University officers in sight. They also destroyed a make-shift office of the university security on the campus. Clearly the students were targeting the security officers as well as the janitors who to them were part of a group that threatened their welfare.

During the demonstration in protest against the murder of the late Dr Odhiambo Mbai, which was generally peaceful, riots erupted when police officers barricaded the road that the students were using to reach the university's buses that they needed to board in order to travel back to campus. To the students, the police were an outside group that was being aggressive by blocking their way, they did not see them as a law-enforcement body. For them, as a social group, the police officers were another group that was provoking them while they were demonstrating peacefully.

Drugs and Alcohol

One of the agents, or causes of deindividuation, is the ingestion of alcohol and drugs which induces a feeling of excitement and reduces the sense of self-control. Various studies and reports confirm the high prevalence use of drugs, especially bhang (cannabis sativa) and illicit alcoholic drinks, such as the locally brewed "chang'aa" at all the public universities in Kenya, including Moi University (Mwinzi, 2003; Standa, 2000). As in all other campaigns and in the election of student leaders to fill the SGC positions, those that took place in 2006 at the Western University College of Science and Technology were characterized by the heavy consumption of alcohol by the student voters who are often bribed by the candidates with the alcohol in order to win their votes. The Senate Reports which were released following the twin riots on the Main Campus in 1999 and the JAB vs PSSP clash on the Main Campus and Eldoret West Campus also confirm the high prevalence of drugs and alcohol. In the former case, the devastating destruction of property was the consequence of both the anonymity occasioned by the cover of darkness and the effects brought about by the heavy consumption of drugs and alcohol. During the build-up of the tension, one of the

student leaders is recorded to have urged the university authorities to allow the consumption of alcohol and the smoking of bhang.

Frustration and Disillusion with University Education

As seen elsewhere in this study, during the 1990s university students became frustrated and highly disillusioned with higher education as a consequence of several factors. These factors include the introduction of PSSP the degradation of welfare standards; rigid university programmes and admission criteria; and the diminished chances of employment after graduation. All these factors combined to create a university student who was so disillusioned with higher education that the numerous protests that rocked the university gave these students the perfect opportunity to release their pent-up anger and frustration against the system by their destructive behaviour. It is the argument of this study that the frustration and disillusion of the university students compounds the effects of deindividuation and, therefore, it is maintained that this is one of the factors that occasions the deindividuated state.

By the late 1990s, the average university student was grossly disillusioned with university education because of several factors. First and foremost, students felt that the introduction of the PSSP programme advantaged students with poorer grades in high school as they could access admission into competitive courses, such as medicine, engineering, law and architecture, among others, because their parents could afford to pay, while better students in the government programmes were denied these courses on account of the limited places. This dealt a massive blow to the entire meaning of academic excellence – the core value of university education. For the students it amounted to a betrayal and the devaluation of university education and its cardinal foundation and values. It was no longer anything to be proud of or feel good about.

Secondly, the poorly performing economy whose job creation rate had diminished substantially did not in any way offer any consolation to the graduates and the university students saw their colleagues who were joining the labour market being forced to spend many years in the job market without employment. In 1997, for example, the government froze the further employment of teachers. Prior to this, graduates of the Education programmes in public universities usually received letters of employment while at the university as they finalized their studies. With the freeze, this privilege was withdrawn, leaving the BEd students and graduates uncertain about their employment prospects which, prior to this, had always been guaranteed.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how both alienation and the easy emergence of collectives, precipitate unrest in the current setting of the universities in Kenya. Alienation is the consequence of effective students' representation, busy university calendar, autocratic leadership styles and bottlenecks in decision making as well as poor communication. On the other hand, the emergence of collectives is as a result of anonymity, diffused responsibility, influence of the group size, group identity, effects of drugs and alcohol and disillusion and frustration with university education

RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study, the following recommendations are drawn;

i. The Universities should form conflict and resolution committees so as to deal with unrest issues in an amicable manner.
ii. The Universities should also come up with severe punishment for those found quilty of initiating or contributing to students' unrest.
iii. Peace education programmes should be introduced into universitiesl curriculum for students and staff to understand the exquisiteness of resolving their differences through peaceful means rather than violent ways
iv. University Students leaders should be trained on principles of good governance and leadership concepts

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