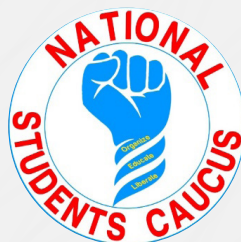


ECHOES FROM THE PAST:

HISTORICIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY KENYAN STUDENT LEADERSHIP





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Abbreviations and Acronyms

HELB	Higher Education Loans Board
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KPU	Kenya People’s Union
KUSO	Kenya University Student Organization
SONU	Student Organization of Nairobi University
SUNU	Students’ Union of Nairobi University
UAA 2016	University Amendment Act of 2016
UASU	University Academic Staff Union
USARF	University Students African Revolutionary Front



FOREWORD

The idea of writing this report began as a conversation between the leadership of the National Students’ Caucus and the Kenya Human Rights Commission in 2022. At the center of that conversation was the need to find an explanation for the lapse in vibrancy of the Kenyan student movement. It is on this basis that the Students’ Caucus research embarked on a journey that would eventually culminate into a complete diagnosis of what has been and is still ailing one of the country’s most crucial youth leadership space.

The report forms part of the endless efforts by the National Students’ Caucus to afford the Kenyan public and the world as a whole a better understanding of the Kenyan student movement, and the massive potential it still holds despite suffering decades of systemic pacification. The fluid nature of the student community poses a challenge in establishing consistency for student driven political action. However, the weaving of a binding philosophical fabric to behave the culture of student activism will go a long way in achieving the much-needed consistency and predictability in this particular leadership space. The need for an overarching institutional framework backed by a solid theoretical explanation of Kenyan student activism comes out strongly in the report. Key among the recommendations made is the need to establish a system of constant knowledge generation on Kenyan student leadership. There is need for the stakeholder in this area of leadership to consider establishing a student leadership and innovation center where student leadership experiences can be preserved and improved.

Overall, the theorization of the Kenyan student movement remains a work in progress, and this piece of research on works to add an extra layer of impetus to this noble endeavor



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The idea of historicizing the Kenyan student movement is not new. Different scholars have over the years made their fair share of contributions in trying to depict the occurrences within this particular leadership space. However, the bulk of such literature have been largely narrations and comparative analyses at their best. There is yet to be deliberate and all-encompassing synthesis of Kenyan student leadership, not as a conglomeration of historical events but as a leadership concept with consistent and as such predictable facets. However, it must be acknowledged that despite the integration of student leadership into broader academic studies worldwide, the development of a comprehensive theoretical framework for the systematic analysis of student leadership and activism has posed challenges for many scholars. It is only through a well-established theoretical framework that one can accurately interpret specific instances of student leadership throughout history.

This research there bestows upon itself the onerous task of setting ground for the construction of a proper framework, by consolidating and synthesizing all the past major attempts at the same. The historical events outlined in this research serve as channels for synthesizing and gaining a deeper understanding of Kenyan student activism. It encompasses all significant aspects of student leadership, ranging from protests to their consequences, such as exclusionary disciplinary measures and the utilization of the criminal justice system to suppress dissent. These elements will be utilized to identify patterns for potential predictions of occurrences within this sphere and to adapt its requirements to specific circumstances as needed.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The trajectory of higher education in Kenya has seen a transformative evolution from the 1960s to date. The inception of universities in Kenya dates back to the early 1950s, a period of imminent change and transition in education and politics. The Royal Technical College of East Africa, later known as the Royal College, Nairobi, stands as a testament to the endeavors of this era, supported by both the British colonial government and the Gandhi Memorial Academic Society.¹

In 1961, a significant step was taken as the Royal College, Nairobi, was integrated as a constituent college of the University of London. However, a prevailing yearning for a localized and independent higher education system prompted a legislative milestone. In 1962, the University of East Africa Act was enacted, laying the cornerstone for the Federal University of East Africa. This establishment marked a new phase in the region's academic aspect, with three constituent colleges at its core: The Royal College in Kenya, Makerere University College in Uganda, and the University College of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

The University of East Africa aimed to harmonize higher education across these nations and usher in a common administration, effectively breaking longstanding ties with the University of London. This transition granted the constituent colleges greater autonomy, enabling them to shape their academic programs and administrative affairs at a regional level. The culmination of these efforts took place on June 28, 1963, with the official inauguration of the University of East Africa. This monumental event signified not only the birth of a new academic institution but also marked a significant milestone in the history of higher education in Kenya and the broader East African region.

The University of East Africa catalyzed far-reaching changes. The constituent colleges, under its umbrella, underwent a gradual change, eventually evolving into distinct and independent universities within their respective nations. In Kenya, the Royal College, Nairobi, was reborn as the University of Nairobi, an institute of higher learning that would go on to become one of the country's leading institutions. However, this development was not without its share of challenges, as the University of Nairobi gained notoriety for a series of student strikes over the years and became a center of student activism that would spread to other institutions of higher learning.

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¹ Kamencu, M. (2013). STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THE UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE 1970 -1992 [Master Thesis, University of Nairobi].

Politics and Nationalism in Colonial and Post-colonial Kenya.

Student organizing and activism does not exist in a vacuum. Politics and Nationalism has a long-standing romantic relationship with students, and some of the earliest significant student movements were tied to it.² In Kenya, as in many other nations, students have historically been at the forefront of bringing change, voicing their concerns and aspirations. During the years 1961 to 1970, Kenyan student activism was greatly influenced by the prevailing political conditions.

In 1961, Kenya stood at an important juncture in its quest for independence from British colonial rule. The groundwork for decolonization had been laid over years of struggle, with resistance like the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s playing a major role. The struggle for independence united various segments of Kenyan society, including peasants, urban poor, and trade unions, against British colonialism. While the Mau Mau insurgency had subsided by 1961, its impact still reverberated in the subsequent political years, politically and on the intellectual public discourse.

At the end of the 1960s an occurrence worth the mention in the context of national politics occurs in January 27, 1969. The confrontations between the Kenyatta government and university students. It involved key figures like Odinga Oginga³, the leader of the opposition party Kenya Peoples Union (KPU), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a lecturer at the University College of East Africa in Nairobi.

As the leader of the opposition party Kenya Peoples Union (KPU), Odinga's views and staunch opposition to President Kenyatta administration earned him a reputation that extended to the student community⁴. Scheduled to address students at the University College of East Africa, Odinga was prevented from speaking on campus by the government, possibly due to concerns about his potential influence on the students as an opposition figure. This move by the government triggered a confrontation between the university students and the authorities, underscoring the tense relationship between the government and the emerging youth and student activism.

In response to the student's actions, the university was closed on the same day, and five students were indefinitely suspended as a consequence of their involvement in the protests. This harsh response by the government angered many, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who was outraged by the apparent apathy of most of the lecturers and professors towards the suspension of the students.



2 ALTBACH, P.G. (1989). Perspectives on Student Political Activism. *Comparative Education*, 25.
3 Oginga Odinga was the first Vice President of Kenya
4 Jommo Kenyatta was the first President of Kenya

The following decade of the 1970s saw a transformative period in Kenya's history, marked by political tension, government control, and a shifting higher education landscape. This era was characterized by global student activism, influenced by various movements such as the civil rights struggle in the United States and anti-war protests against the Vietnam War. War. Kenya's student in the universities played an important role in these dynamics, as they voiced out against global issues and against authoritarian tendencies from the government.

In July 1970, the University College Nairobi achieved full university status following the dissolution of the University of East Africa. This change was mirrored in other East African institutions, including Makerere in Uganda and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, which also gained institutional autonomy. However, according to Kamencu (2013) this newfound academic independence was juxtaposed against a government that displayed limited tolerance for dissenting views. President Kenyatta's inauguration speech on December 10, 1970, as the university's Chancellor, made his stance clear.

"Some people suggest that in a rapidly developing country like Kenya, the main task of a university is to criticize whatever is observed or projected. An academic body like this is sometimes regarded as only custodian of intellect, and it is argued that a University therefore, has both the right and duty to represent opposition to any existing regime. This idea in its most extreme form can even cross the border line

of arrogance. Mistakenly, it is then submitted that intelligence and wisdom which are very different things are only found within the University and that the public is supposed to pay University teachers for exposing and training of national leadership. However, within a young country, it is only national leadership which has truly sprung from and can really interpret the aspirations of our people."⁵

The following year Students' Union of Nairobi University (SUNU) was banned in October 1971 by the Attorney General, Charles Njonjo, under claims of posing a threat to Kenya's good governance.⁶ This move exemplified the government's determination to quell any form of organized student protest or dissent. The restriction of freedom of expression and association sent a clear message to students about the consequences of challenging authority and set the trajectory of expulsions and banning of student bodies in the following years. The evolution of universities into independent entities was counterbalanced by a government wary of dissent and eager to suppress student movements and activism.

The 1970s also marked a tumultuous period in global history, characterized by a confluence of economic hardships, political upheaval, and social unrest. One of the defining features of this era was the phenomenon of stagflation, a term coined to describe the rare occurrence of stagnant economic growth, high unemployment rates, and spiraling inflation. This phenomenon was largely triggered by the oil price



5 Kamencu, M. (2013). STUDENT ACTIVISM IN THE UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE 1970 -1992 [Master Thesis, University of Nairobi].

6 ibid

shocks that spread globally, sending shockwaves through economies already grappling with complex challenges. Concurrently, the 1970s also witnessed a surge in student activism around the world, particularly in response to the evolving socio-economic trajectory and the growing commodification of education.

Amidst the backdrop of stagflation and economic uncertainty, a significant point of contention emerged in the form of government policies surrounding higher education. In Kenya, the government's introduction of a Loan Scheme which drew the ire of students who saw it as an imposition on their right to accessible learning opportunities.⁷ Unlike the relatively affordable or free education that had prevailed in the 1960s, the Loan Scheme required students to

take loans that they would be obligated to repay after completing their education. This marked a paradigm shift towards the commodification of education, a trend that would gain momentum in the subsequent decades under the influence of neoliberal policies that exchanged education for profit and ushered Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) that is financial assistance that students receive to cover the costs of their education, which they are expected to repay after completion of studies. The policy shift was met with resistance from students, particularly at institutions like Kenyatta College, where issues of overcrowding, infrastructure inadequacies, and the broader implications of exchanging education for profit were already sparking discontent.

The death of Josiah Mwangi Kariuki- 1975.

The death of Josiah Mwangi Kariuki popularly referred to as JM Kariuki in 1975 amplified the struggle of student activism also in the 70s. On March 2, 1975, J.M. Kariuki's body was found dead in the Ngong Hills, near Nairobi. His death was widely believed to be politically motivated, with suspicions that he was murdered due to his outspoken criticism of the government and his calls for accountability. JM had been a critique of Kenyatta regime on the land question.

In the wake of JM Kariuki's suspicious death, Kenyans from all walks of life united in their condemnation of the prevailing political conditions. His demise was perceived as a stark symbol of the government's alleged oppression and lack of accountability. This sentiment rapidly snowballed into widespread protests, reflecting the

collective anger and frustration of the people. Demands for political reforms became more than just a rallying cry; they became a unifying force driving citizens to question the status quo. Just ten days after JM Kariuki's passing, the younger generation of Kenyans, predominantly represented by students, exhibited exceptional courage and resolve by taking to the streets of Nairobi in protest. The students, driven by a burning desire for justice and change, displayed their commitment by boycotting lectures and organizing demonstrations within and beyond the confines of their universities. This marked a turning point in the trajectory of activism, as the student emerged as a powerful force with the potential to challenge the government's authority head-on⁸.

7 ibid

8 Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, popularly referred to as JM Kariuki was a firebrand opposition member of parliament in the 70's

The activism exhibited by these students did not merely manifest as symbolic gestures; it transformed into a direct confrontation with the government. The street demonstrations turned into running battles, where protestors faced off against security forces, embodying the deeply entrenched divide between the state and its people. These clashes, while violent and challenging, showed the unyielding determination of the Kenyan people to hold the government accountable and fight for a more just and equitable future.

Among the prominent figures who emerged from these demonstrations was James Oren-go, a student leader who played a pivotal role in organizing and leading the protests. Today, James Oren-go stands as the Governor of Siaya, a testament to the enduring impact of the activism that was kindled in those crises' times. His journey from a student leader on the front-lines of the protests to a position of political authority on a wider context demonstrates the transformative potential that student movements can wield as many other student leaders are in political positions today.

By the end of President Jomo Kenyatta's reign in 1978, the trajectory of democratic spaces and student activism had been significantly suppressed. His government exerted control over universities, suppressing independent voices and activism among students. Student gatherings were heavily monitored, and dissenting voices were met with disciplinary actions. Furthermore, students who attempted to raise their voices against government policies often

faced intimidation, arrest, and expulsion. This suppression continued with the ushering in of President Daniel Arap Moi's regime, which spanned the next 24 years.

In October 1979, students protested the barring of Kenyan politician, Oginga Odinga, and all other Kenya People's Union (KPU) members from running in the upcoming December 1979 parliamentary elections. They also demanded that Ngugi wa Thiong'o be reinstated as professor of literature at the university. Ngugi had been detained two years earlier by the Kenyatta government and although he was released in December 1978 (alongside other detainees) he was not allowed to take back his job at the University of Nairobi. He was detained again by the Moi government for organizing a community theatre in his native Kamirithu village in Limuru.⁹

The period from 1980 to 2000 witnessed a significant surge in student activism in Kenya, driven by a confluence of factors including the Moi dictatorship, curtailed academic freedom, and the introduction of neoliberal policies through the structural adjustment program. This era marked a crucial turning point for higher education in Kenya, as students took to the streets, campuses, and platforms to voice their concerns while challenging the authoritarian regime, and resist the encroachment of neoliberalism on the education system.

In this era, Kenya under the rule of President Daniel Arap Moi, whose regime was known for its authoritarian tendencies and suppression of

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9 <https://republic.com.ng/december-21-january-22/student-activism-kenya/>

dissent¹⁰. Sought to stifle both academic freedom and student activism, creating an environment where critical thinking and expression were often met with repression. Campuses became hotbeds of resistance as students sought to defy these limitations and assert their rights.

Simultaneously, the introduction of the structural adjustment program had profound implications for higher education in Kenya. As the country embraced neoliberal economic policies, institutions of higher learning faced a shift towards privatization, reduced funding, and increased emphasis on market-oriented education. This shift brought about by neoliberalism clashed with the traditional ideals of education as a public good, leading to widespread discontent among students who saw their educational opportunities compromised and led to the emergence of radical student movement championing ideological politics. Their activism contributed to the agitation for multi-party politics and the eventual end of Moi's one-party rule in 1991, by demanding greater political participation and pressuring for the repeal of section 2A of the constitution.

In 1980 the University of Nairobi students took to the streets on February 26th to protest against a range of pressing issues. These included power failures, water shortages, poor food quality, and the absence of a student union, which had been banned earlier. The protest was not limited to the confines of the university campus; it spilled over into the broader society, illustrating the gravity of the students' concerns. They highlighted the administration's negligence towards their well-being and the di-

rect consequences of the absence of a student union. The protest served as a rallying point for students to reclaim their rights to a conducive academic environment and a platform for voicing their concerns, but when the strike turned violent the university was closed down. The students received support from the University Staff Union that issued a statement in solidarity with the students showing the support students were getting from progressive academics like Willy Mutunga, Anyang Nyong'o, and Mugaru Nganga at the time.

In his book "*Constitution Making from the Middle: Civil Society and Transition Politics in Kenya 1992-1997*," Mutunga points out the remarkable contributions of the staff union during this period. On June 28, 1980, UASU organized a demonstration with great impact throughout the streets of Nairobi, attracting attention not only within Kenya but also on the international stage. The aims of this demonstration were threefold: to condemn the murder of Professor Walter Rodney of Guyana, to denounce the system of apartheid in South Africa, and to protest the presence of United States military facilities in the Kenyan port of Mombasa.

Professor Walter Rodney was a renowned revolutionary Guyanese scholar and activist who made contributions to the study of African history and the fight against colonialism. His assassination in June 1980 sent shockwaves throughout the international community. UASU, as a radical academic staff union, recognized the significance of Rodney's work and the importance of standing up against his murder.

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10 Daniel Arap Moi was the second president of Kenya

However, the same year that UASU organized this demonstration, President Daniel Arap Moi banned the union. The banning of UASU can be seen as a response to the perceived threat the union posed to the existing power structure.

This link between progressive scholars and students greatly amplified student activism and made the government uncomfortable. The scholars were also left leaning and some could be linked to the underground December twelve movement, later Mwakenya¹¹.

Initially, Mwakenya was not a clandestine organization. Its members advocated for the opening up of democratic space in Kenya through public lectures and issuing of leaflets including Mpatanishi and Mzalendo. These lectures and leaflets served the purpose of explaining what they (Mwakenya members) felt was wrong in the country's political sphere. However, after the government began cracking down on its members, the organization went underground. Later, Mwandawiro together with two other students, Tirop Arap Kitur and Karimi Nduthu, were expelled in connection to the movement. Others, arrested on Mwakenya-related activities were individuals like Gacheche wa Miano, Gupta Nganga Thiongo, James Opiata, Mwandawiro Mghanga, Wanderi Muthingani, George Oduor Ongwen, David Njuguna Mutonye, and David Murathe. Additionally, members of the academic faculty, including Ngotho Kariuki, Kariuki Gathitu, Katama Mkangi, Gibson Kamau Kuria, were prosecuted.¹²

The Students Organisation of Nairobi University (SONU), was registered on February of 1982. The office of the President consented to its registration. This was a milestone in Student politics as Students were bereft of a registered Union. Elections were held on April 14th of the same year that saw Titus Adungosi, a third-year architecture student, elected the first Chairman of SONU. At the beginning of May 1982, a headline in the weekly review captured the prevailing unrest and agitation in Kenyan universities. The striking headline, "Season for Student Arrest," painted a vivid picture of the turbulent times in Kenya's higher education institutions. During this period, several universities, including Egerton College, Kenyatta University College, Nairobi University, and Kenya Technical Teachers College, witnessed a wave of strikes and protests that not only disrupted academic activities but also escalated to involve law enforcement authorities.

The core demands driving the students' protests were centered around their future prospects and the conditions of their education. Chief among these demands were calls for immediate employment opportunities for graduates and an increase in teaching remittances, which were critical for the sustenance of the student population. These demands reflected the pressing concerns of the students and their dissatisfaction with the state of higher education in Kenya at the time.

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11 Mwakenye was an underground movement formed by progressive forces in Kenya to push back the dictatorship of KANU government in the 90s

12 Amutabi, M. N. (2002). Crisis and Student Protest in Universities in Kenya: Examining the Role of Students in National Leadership and the Democratization Process. *African Studies Review*, 45(2), 157. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1514792>

The strikes and protests that spread across these universities were not limited to peaceful demonstrations. The involvement of the police and the subsequent arrests of students highlighted the intensity of the situation. The clashes with law enforcement authorities only added to the tension, and at times, resulted in violence.

On August 1st, 1982, the political climate in Kenya hit a boiling point as junior Kenya Air Force servicemen orchestrated a coup d'état aimed at toppling the Moi regime. The repercussions of this audacious move spread across various segments of Kenyan society, with the academic realm being no exception.

As the news broke on that historic day, (Kamencu 2013), notes students across Kenyatta University College were greeted with the electrifying news of the coup. To the delight of many, the prospect of Moi's regime being ousted from power elicited a wave of jubilation among the student body. A palpable sense of excitement permeated the campus as students, animated by their disdain for the incumbent government, took to the streets in celebration.

Meanwhile, a similar scene was happening at the University of Nairobi, where students joined forces with Kenya Air Force soldiers to express their support for the coup. Among the jubilant students was Titus Adungosi, the Chairman of the Student Organization of Nairobi University (SONU). Adungosi's presence in the midst of the celebration was used by the Moi Government later to administer collective punishment

on the students as they put to an end the Coup attempt and made several arrests on students. Ultimately, the University was closed indefinitely – it was later to be opened fourteen months later.¹³

The University reopened on October 3rd 1983 with a ban on the student union. Because university students took to the streets en masse to celebrate the (premature) news of the fall of the Daniel Arap Moi regime, their reputation as enemies of the state was cemented¹⁴. When the student body was reinstated the same year, it took a less confrontational approach with the government as in the wake of the coup the regime arrested its critics and subjected them to torture.

A more galvanized radical student union would come back in 1987, led by Wafula Buke. Kamencu(2013), further notes that during their inauguration, the student leaders criticized the Moi government's excesses, denounced detentions and torture, and decried the lack of academic freedom. They protested against district-based student associations and sought to unite students nationally. Resentment against government control, especially the presence of Special Branch agents posing as students, escalated.

In response to President Moi's announcement of increased student allowances, SONU Chairman Wafula Buke refused to credit the president, attributing the change to economic conditions. The following day, seven SONU leaders were arrested by Special Branch agents, the

13 ibid

14 Melchiorre, L. (2019). Creating a "monster": the National Youth Service pre-university training programme, student activism and the Kenyan state, 1978–90. *Africa*, 89(S1), S65–S89. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0001972018000918>

students included Wafula Buke, Kaberere Njenga, Margaret Ben, Oyuo Ngala Amuomo, Miguna Miguna, Munameza Muleji and Munoru Nderi. The arrests triggered student protests and a two-day clash with the police¹⁵. The escalations would lead to the deregistration of SONU the same year; several students would be jailed including Wafula Buke for five years on fabricated charges.

Hence, from November 1987 to April 1992, the University of Nairobi lacked a centrally elected Students' Union to advocate for students. The government feared that establishing such an entity during a period of increased repression in Kenya would unveil the dictatorial excesses of the Moi regime. Further, the government collaborated with the University administration to suppress perceived dissent among students, leading to hostility towards attempts to revive the Students' Union and the expulsion of proactive students. Various techniques, including increased surveillance, arbitrary expulsions, and ethnic-based associations with government patronage, thwarted the formation of a centralized multiethnic student body.

After the five years of student activism quietness, its resurgence will happen in the 1990s with the formation of SONU 1992. The 1990s marked a significant era of change in Kenya as the wave of democratization swept through the nation. This wave manifested in various shapes and forms, with international pressure playing a crucial role in catalyzing change. The government led by President Moi had been under mounting criticism since the 1980s, with Ken-

yan churches, pressure groups and the student movement becoming increasingly vocal in their discontent. In July 1990, the country witnessed a series of riots, reflecting the widespread dissatisfaction seen in the 80s. Influential church leaders such as Alexander Muge, Bishop Henry Okullu, and Rev. Timothy Njoya were some of the prominent voices calling for the creation of an inclusive political environment that allowed active participation of Kenyan citizens in governance.

The turning point arrived in 1991 when President Moi amended section 2A of the constitution ushering multi-party politics. The next year Moi sought re-election in the multi-party elections. The Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by him, secured a strong majority, consolidating its political dominance. However, the election results did not quell the growing demand for political change and increased citizen involvement.

Five years later President Moi secured another term in elections that were widely criticized for their lack of transparency and fairness. Former vice-president Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, son of the late Oginga Odinga, emerged as prominent opponents to Moi. However, the electoral process faced scrutiny, with allegations of irregularities and widespread criticism, casting a shadow over the legitimacy of the outcome. He would later retire from politics in 2002 after intense pressure and his candidate Uhuru Kenyatta lost the 2002 election to Mwai Kibaki.

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15 ibid

CHAPTER 2: THE TRANSITION FROM KANU AND SETTING OF THE PACE FOR THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ‘COMRADES POWER’



(A section of the then presidential candidate Mwai Kibaki's supporters during a campaign rally in 2002)

The character of the student movement during the Kibaki era can be traced back to 1998, five years before Mwai Kibaki assumed the presidency¹⁶. The reinstatement of SONU as SONU '98 marked the beginning of the deliberate institutionalization of the Kenyan student movement. Historically, the movement consistently evolved and adjusted its aims and methods within the political environment, adapting to the changing structure of political opportunities (McCarthy and Zaid 1977, 153). The lifting of the ban on SONU in 1998 occurred during a time of intense political fervor in the country,

with the political opposition and civil society vigorously advocating for a change of regime. Having played a significant role in expanding the democratic space in the country during this decade, the reinstatement of the largest student union inevitably attracted both political opportunists and progressive forces from across the nation. Thus, the stage was set for over a decade of the Kenyan student movement serving as a platform for national political contestation. The Kibaki era established the framework for institutionalization and subsequent de-radicalization of the Kenyan student movement.

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16 Mwai Kibaki was the third president of Kenya

The first wave of deradicalization of the Kenyan student movement was witnessed during the 2002 presidential campaigns. These campaigns presented an opportunity to rectify the governance shortcomings that Kenya had endured since gaining independence. The prevailing call at the time was to oust the KANU government from power. Given the student movement's enduring experience of the regime's oppression over nearly three decades, students naturally aligned themselves with the opposition. They hoped that by supporting the NARC party's bid for victory, the incoming government would be inclined to grant concessions to the student community. Central to this was addressing the widespread issue of mass suspensions and expulsions that students had endured since the 1970s. Throughout the Nyayo era, comrades had been expelled or suspended in large numbers during various periods¹⁷.

Shortly after assuming office, the newly established NARC government issued a blanket amnesty to all students who had been suspended or expelled from universities across the country¹⁸. This marked a promising start for the students and the new administration, a notable departure from the practices under the KANU government. This shift in approach was also evident within the broader civil society, with some activists from the Nyayo era aligning themselves with the new government. It would be

premature to suggest that these former liberation fighters had betrayed their cause by joining the new state. Instead, it seemed to be a hopeful assumption of a change in governance posture, anticipating that the new regime would be more receptive and create greater space for democratic engagement.

While the Kibaki government exhibited improvements in many respects compared to its predecessor, there were still significant shortcomings. The 2005 constitution referendum and the 2007 post-election violence tarnished the regime's reputation. Nonetheless, the new leadership provided a period of relative stability and institutionalized engagement. This increased level of institutionalization resulted in a student movement that faced fewer national issues to confront in comparison.

The introduction of the University Act of 2012 was a major event in the journey of institutionalization of the Kenyan student movement. The Act saw the successful reinforcement of the fact that the university student councils were in deed an extension of the university administrations, and that the law expected them to operate within the prevailing structures of the host university administrations. It also marked the beginning of the universities' overbearing presence on the affairs of the student councils.



17 Nyayo era is popularly used to refer to the period when the second president, Daniel Moi, was in power

18 Expelled Students get Amnesty in Kenya. Wachira Kigotho, 2003. Retrieved from Expelled Students Get Amnesty in Kenya (chronicle.com) on 20th May 2024

CHAPTER 3: KENYAN STUDENT MOVEMENT IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The phase following 2016 ushered in distinct peculiarities for the Kenyan student movement, marked by noteworthy developments that have brought about unprecedented changes. These alterations within the student leadership seem, to a considerable extent, to mirror shifts in the country's broader social structure across various levels. It is important to recognize that the student community doesn't exist in isolation; rather, it acts as an extension of the larger society, absorbing many of its characteristics.

Hence, it is accurate to assert that the contemporary student movement's character reflects the socialization of today's generation. However, the analogy that attributes the traits of modern-day student leadership solely to the broader society, much like previous generations, has its limitations also.

The fact that students in higher learning institutions often fall within a consistent age bracket (in their early 20s) introduces a psychological dimension to the debate on the university student community's character. This stage of growth comes with unique passions and temperaments. Consequently, it is not uncommon for young adults in this developmental stage to express discontent. Such common fault lines across different generations of student leaders and activists are to be expected.

However, the challenge lies in the consistency of character across these diverse generations, presenting moments of vibrancy and intellectualism alongside periods of quietude and opportunism. It becomes imperative, therefore, to delve into the historical factors contributing to this variegated existence of the Kenyan student movement. This exploration aims to deepen our understanding of the current state of contemporary student leadership.

The historical background of the Kenyan student leadership space reveals a consistent pattern of suppression, making it arguably the most stifled youth leadership domain. Both local university administrations and the state apparatus have consistently employed various measures to quell the vocal nature of university student leadership, resorting to tactics such as systemic exclusion and criminalization. These methods are designed to curb the natural inclination of young people to voice their concerns during times of discontent. As a result, the anticipated common fault lines within the student leadership have often been obscured.

By addressing the confusion surrounding the lack of consistency in the character of Kenyan student leadership, it becomes evident why the contemporary Kenyan student leadership, much like its predecessors, possesses a distinctive character. Numerous factors have contributed to this uniqueness.

A significant shift in the history of Kenyan student leadership occurred with the introduction of section 18 of the University Amendment Act of 2016. For the first time, the student community found itself isolated from the political

processes of their unions and associations. This legislative change marked a departure from previous norms and had profound implications for the dynamics of student engagement in the political sphere

I. **The University Amendment Act of 2016 and Its Impact on Contemporary Student Leadership.**

The University Amendment Act of 2016, specifically Section 18(D), implemented the delegates voting system to replace the traditionally recognized popular voting system. The consequential impact of this significant change in the realm of student leadership has been both gradual and widespread. Over the course of six years since its inception, the nation has observed a steady rise in political disengagement within the university student community. This particular section states verbatim:

The students at each Electoral College constituted under subsection (1 C) shall elect three representatives - from amongst persons who are not candidates under subsection (1A); and of whom not more than two-thirds shall be of the same gender. (1E) the representatives of each Electoral College shall elect the members of the student council within thirty days of the election under subsection (1 D). (1F) A member of the student council shall hold office for a term of one year and may be eligible for re-election for one final term.



(National Students' Caucus members during the Saba Saba Convention on Electoral Integrity at Ufungamano Halls in 2022). Saba Saba is remembered as the day in Kenya when nation-wide protests happened on the 7th July 1990 to demand for free elections

In recognition of the sentiments expressed in the relevant sections of the University Amendment Act of 2016, the student community understands that the National Assembly's overarching goal was to rectify the persistent issue of prolonged student leadership in higher learning institutions. Nevertheless, it remains reasonable to explore alternative approaches to achieve the same objective without isolating students from the affairs of their unions. As an alternative, we propose the reinstatement of the popular voting system, coupled with STRICT TERM LIMITS, as the most viable solution to address the undesirable culture of prolonged student leadership.

Despite the apparent good intentions of the Electoral College system, it creates a significant gap that some regressive individuals within higher learning institutions exploit to silence the voice of student leadership. Incidents of alleged bribery and intimidation of delegates render them unable to authentically advocate for the interests of ordinary students.

Once the electoral process is entirely relinquished to university administration, students inevitably become estranged from their own organizations.

II. Composition of the Various Students' Organizations

Additionally, we propose a reconsideration of Section 18(b) I(A) of the Amendment Act, specifically addressing the composition of various student organizations. Based on the conducted interviews, the student community expresses satisfaction with the positions of Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Treasurer, and Secretary General. However, the restriction of special interest positions in each university to three appears to be insensitive to the distinct economic and demographic contexts of individual higher learning institutions. It would be more sensible to allow the number of such special interest positions to be determined through the deliberation of individual student organizations.

Furthermore, the legislature should clearly articulate the necessity of establishing proper grassroots leadership by ensuring the inclusion of slots for hall representatives (traditionally referred to as the congress). Each campus should have its representative who connects the students of that particular campus to the overall students' council. Additionally, every faculty should have a representative solely responsible for addressing academic issues. Throughout these considerations, it is crucial to emphasize that each student organization possesses its unique setting, including budgetary allocation, and that the composition of the student body should be a subject of internal discussions.

III. Change of the Voting System and the Debate on Gender Balance

We also recommend the removal of Section 18(b) I(B) to I(E) and its substitution with the singular voting system. The challenge posed by the two-thirds requirement can be addressed by first acknowledging the varying levels of responsibility and political influence associated with different elective positions in the student council. The issue of gender inclusivity is a political matter that warrants political solutions rather than legal ones. Nevertheless, it could be beneficial to designate specific political positions for a particular gender. For exam-

ple, SONU (Student Organization of Nairobi University) traditionally reserved the roles of Finance, Gender Affairs, Academic Affairs, and Health and Environment Secretaries for women, ensuring they automatically constituted forty percent of the executive student council. Similar to the Chairperson and the Secretary General, the Finance Secretary held signatory authority for the union's funds. Moreover, women remained eligible to compete for any other position of their choosing.

Emphasizing the importance of student bodies having a national representation exposes students to the risk of coerced or guided democracy. It would be more rational to confer leadership positions to students based on merit rather than on their geographic origin.

IV. The Electoral Process

There is a pressing need to reconsider the wording of Section 18(b) 1(H) of the Amendment Act, as it seems to contain a significant gray area that various university administrations exploit, compromising the quality of students' representation. The legislation must explicitly state the imperative for students to assume full control of the electoral process. It is absurd to have student elections solely managed by university staff who dictate the venue, candidates, and ultimately, the victors. Instances like Meg's case highlight situations where administrations prevent students from running for office without providing any explanation. Meg Muchoki who was a student leader at Daystar University was barred from contesting without any explanation. It would be more sensible if the student electoral commission comprised a majority of student representatives. After all, it is their organization.

V. Accountability

It is essential for student councils to establish robust parliaments capable of holding leadership accountable. Much like any government, the success of a student council relies on the presence of an effective parliamentary system. The specific composition of the parliament should be deliberated by the individual student leadership, taking into account factors such as available resources and the size of the student population to be served.

VI. Historical Identity

In consideration of the sacrifices made by past student leaders, it is appropriate to maintain the historical names of various student organizations. Altering names serves only to erase the rich historical heritage of these organizations. As William Shakespeare queried in his play, "Romeo and Juliet," "What's in a Name?" While Juliet contended that a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet, we are of the opinion that the legacy of a student union would not be as robust if its historical identity is tampered with. Names encapsulate stories and freeze moments in time.

VII. The Need to Do Away with the 'Teams' Style of Voting

While the University Amendment Act does not explicitly advocate for the team model as the method of forming student bodies, certain university administrations have adopted this peculiar interpretation. When students are compelled to vote for a team rather than individuals, they often find themselves endorsing individuals within the team whom they would prefer not to vote for. It is common to encounter situations where all competing teams have at least one candidate who enjoys widespread popularity among students. For example, students may grapple with the dilemma of choosing Team A for its Chairman, Team B for its Secretary General, or Team C for its Treasurer.

The crux of the matter lies in the fact that each aspirant possesses a unique sense of popularity and should, therefore, be allowed to leverage it individually. Indeed, the individual aspirant voting system holds student leaders personally accountable to the people, unlike teams where blame can be placed on the entire team for an individual's failure as a leader. Moving forward, the law should be amended to explicitly state that every student aspirant will run as an individual and be elected on the basis of one student, one vote.

VIII. Impact of the Delegates Voting System on Kenyan Student Activism

The changes witnessed in the Kenyan university student leadership space since the introduction of the delegates voting system, as per Section 18 of the University Amendment Act of 2016, are hard to ignore. On the surface, this new system has distanced the student community from its core leadership processes, transferring such powers to university administrations. The consequence has been a noticeable decline in vibrancy within the student movement space, with student council elections losing their former dynamism as only a limited number of students participate. Furthermore, some universities, including the University of Nairobi, have adopted an online voting system, which has been criticized for its susceptibility to manipulation, providing the university administration with an additional layer of control.

Beyond physical isolation, there is a palpable disinterest among the present-day student community towards public life in a broader sense. The depoliticization of student leadership spaces has had a ripple effect on the wider public discourse. Politics and activism seem

unfamiliar concepts to contemporary Kenyan university students, and there is a struggle to connect local struggles to broader governance issues and the need to join social justice groups in addressing them.

While it is true that post-2010 Kenyan student leadership faced challenges, the removal of the popular voting system in 2016 appears to have exacerbated the situation. The drafters of the legislation cited the need to end student election-related violence as a justification for the change in the voting system. However, one might question the wisdom of discarding the entire system instead of exploring alternative methods to address election-related chaos. Despite the introduction of the law, there have still been cases of election-related chaos, such as those witnessed at Kenyatta University in 2017, Machakos University in 2017, and Technical University of Mombasa in 2022, highlighting a misdiagnosis in the University Amendment Act of 2016 regarding the issues afflicting contemporary Kenyan student leadership.

Predictably, post-2016 student election-related violence has led to suspensions and the use of the criminal justice system to punish students labeled as masterminds of such chaos. For instance, in 2017, Kenyatta University students faced expulsion from the institution following a disputed student council election, and some were later arrested and remanded at Kiambu Prisons. Notably, this was the first time the delegate's voting system was introduced into university spaces. In the subsequent year, Machakos University experienced student unrest after a botched election, resulting in sus-

pensions and arrests of suspected ringleaders. One of the affected students, Gideon Omare, exemplifies the punitive nature of Kenyan university administrations against vocal student leadership. Gideon faced suspension, arrest, and a criminal justice process that, ultimately, saw him declared innocent. Despite court orders to readmit Gideon, the university administration defied them, leaving Gideon yet to return to school four years after the judgment. Further investigation, possibly through interviews, is needed to explore the fates of other comrades suspended alongside Gideon.

CHAPTER 4: AN ALTERNATIVE PATH FOR THE KENYAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

While maintaining optimism about the possibility of a better tomorrow is commendable, it is important to take proactive steps that ensures that the future indeed offers better experiences compared to the present. In light of this reasoning, the Kenyan student movement should not allow its morale to be dampened by the setback caused by the delegates' voting system and its accompanying challenges. Instead, it should view this situation as an opportunity for the movement to reinvent itself, bouncing back in an even better shape. The isolation of students from the leadership of their unions provides a chance for the student community to deeply reflect on the remaining and necessary changes in its leadership culture.

I. A Problem Deeper than It Looks

The removal of the popular voting system significantly impeded the progress of the contemporary Kenyan student movement. However, it is essential to note that the post-2010 Kenyan student movement had its unique contradictions, and it was only a matter of time before these challenges became evident. The gradual isolation of the larger student community from their leadership, influenced by external political interferences, has been a key factor in the modern-day student leadership equation. Many students in this era admit to feeling disconnected from their leadership.

In these circumstances, the tragedy of the contemporary student movement extends beyond the right to directly elect representatives. A thorough examination of the situation is necessary to find a comprehensive solution that addresses the various facets of leadership that have been gradually eroded over the years. Perhaps the post-2010 Kenyan student movement can be likened to a dysfunctional car that continued to be driven simply because it

could move. It was only in 2016 following the introduction of the University Amendment Act when it couldn't move at all, that the occupants realized the severity of the problem. Even then, the passengers have continued to toy with the wreckage, like children playing around with a stalled vehicle in the backyard. Reviving this vehicle requires a thorough understanding of all the factors that led to its breakdown.

Our analysis indicates that the primary issue facing the current student movement is a lack of ideological clarity. It is challenging for individuals to stand their ground if they are unsure about what they are standing for. The inability to connect internal university challenges with broader social movements makes it difficult for students to align themselves with larger societal issues. While we caution against aligning the student movement with political parties, the historical relationship between the student movement and the political class in Kenya has been fraught with challenges, with students often ending up on the losing side.

Our stance is that the Kenyan student movement must solidify itself ideologically and institutionally before seeking alliances with the broader political class. The movement needs to organize itself before attempting to collaborate with others to avoid becoming mere errand-runners for individuals lacking the necessary national consciousness.

To address the missing links in the modern-day student movement, the first step is a historical analysis of what has worked and what has failed in this space. It is also crucial to explore strategies that have shown potential but have not been thoroughly examined across different generations of student leaders. Proper diagnosis remains essential in understanding the challenges and determining the most effective remedies. Surprisingly, despite the significant role student leadership plays in shaping the political landscape, it has not been mainstreamed into the Kenyan university curriculum, highlighting a possible deliberate attempt to diminish student activism in public spaces.

The state of student leadership requires scholars to appreciate its complexities fully. While it may be tempting to attribute the lack of scholarly literature and mainstreaming of the subject in the curriculum to intellectual lethargy, there is a persuasive argument that it is a deliberate move to erase student activism from universities and public discourses. The discomfort of a poorly performing third-world state with a knowledgeable and questioning youth may explain the intentional suppression of vibrant student activism in favor of a more compliant and manageable movement.

Historically, the Kenyan student movement reached its zenith in terms of having a solid political character during the periods of the 70s, 80s, and the 90s. These specific eras marked the peak of activity within the student movement. Some argue that the dynamic nature of the Kenyan student movement during these periods was largely influenced by the prevailing political climate. The authoritative KANU regime had placed significant pressure on various sectors, including the university student community. On the other hand, some contend that the distinctive characteristics of these three generations of young people were inherent, suggesting a contestation between biological and sociological factors.

Considerable changes have occurred within university spaces on multiple levels over the last five decades. Furthermore, post the first three periods, subsequent generations of students faced a transformed leadership landscape. In the intervening years, the state had learned to manage and suppress the student movement effectively. By then, the state had established tactics to predictably quell dissent among university students, dealing with a population that, in most cases, had little awareness of the experiences of their predecessors. Unlike the state and university administrations, with their permanent institutional frameworks, students lacked a collective memory of past dealings with activism. Each generation essentially started from scratch, resulting in a situation of consistent perpetrators and ever-changing victims.

II. Intensified Suppression

Recalling a personal experience of one student Maxwell Magawi during his time as a student activist in 2016, the university administration had suspended and expelled over a hundred students following a disputed student election for the leadership of the Student Organization of Nairobi University (SONU). Those who escaped disciplinary action were left demoralized. Expelled, he sought the quickest way to be readmitted without engaging in lengthy court processes. Opting for protests, he encountered resistance from fellow comrades who were reluctant to join, fearing similar consequences. Eventually, six other students, including the late Samuel Ragira, Arnold Obadha, Frank Samora, David Osano, Timothy Sikenyi, and Michael Bongah, joined out of solidarity. The seven-person group staged intermittent demonstrations on the University of Nairobi's main campus for a week, culminating in their arrest at the university chief security's office.

During this period, they observed a shift in support from the general student community towards their cause. The head of university security informed them that they could collect letters of reinstatement the following week. Naively, they walked into the hands of police officers from the Central Police Station. As they made their way from the university compound to the police station, the lead arresting officer commented, 'tumeona wengi kama nyinyi,' loosely translating to 'we have seen so many like you.' Evidently, the police had historically played a central role in pacifying student activism.

The consistent poor performance of the Kenyan student movement in its struggles against

the authorities can be aptly characterized as a seemingly hopeless clash between individuals and institutions. There is a glaring absence of a comprehensive institutional framework to shield student leaders from the formidable power of authorities, which inherently possess strong institutions capable of containing any individual opposition. The concept of an overarching institutional framework for the Kenyan student movement hinges on the establishment of a national organization that unites the student community from various regions, providing them with a shared identity. Additionally, the organization must devise tailored programs that address the unique and common leadership needs of students across all tertiary learning institutions in Kenya. At the core of these initiatives should be the construction of a protection mechanism aimed at resisting the victimization of student activism. The tragedy of Kenyan student activism, as observed, is predominantly a plea for protection. Consequently, the protection agenda should take precedence in discussions surrounding the institutional framework for Kenyan student leadership.

Examining available records reveals an attempt to create an institutional framework for Kenyan student leadership in 1997 when vibrant student leaders from major universities formed the Kenya University Students' Organization (KUSO) as an umbrella body to collectively address student grievances. However, the eventual dissolution of this arrangement necessitates an examination to discern the lessons in constructing an all-encompassing and generationally resilient institutional framework for the Kenyan student movement.

III. KUSO-97

To gain insight into the dynamics of KUSO-97, we had a discussion with Suba Churchill, former chairman of the Egerton University Students' Association and the then KUSO Chairman. Churchill recounts the spirited resistance staged by the President Moi regime against the student movement, marked by suspensions, expulsions, and the tragic deaths and detentions of student activists. Among these, the murder of Solomon Muruli, a student leader from the University of Nairobi, Kikuyu Campus, stands out vividly. Addressing the reasons behind KUSO's inability to realize its envisioned impact, Suba Churchill explains that the state prevented its formal registration, leaving it as an informal arrangement with contested legitimacy, especially in the eyes of potential partners and funders. Additionally, KUSO lacked legal identity and faced significant capacity gaps, both in terms of human resources and finances.

Therefore, a sustainable institutional framework for the Kenyan student movement must attract competent manpower. The administrative team within the organization should

consist of individuals with specialized training, preferably in areas of finance, governance, and general administration. These individuals should be full-time employees, demonstrating competence in effectively meeting the institutional demands of the organization. The limitation of KUSO-97, which was managed by a group of young university students lacking specialized organizational management training, highlights the need for a more professional approach. The student leadership in such an institutional arrangement should primarily engage in grassroots work within the student community, working closely with the secretariat to achieve a more institutionalized interaction. Leveraging the competence of the secretariat ensures a coordinated approach to harvesting students' sentiments and articulating their grievances, departing from the traditional trend where student activism is scattered without clear clarity on underlying issues, rendering it vulnerable to narrative and strategic distortion.

CHAPTER 5: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR KENYAN STUDENT ACTIVISM

The existing literature on Kenyan student activism primarily comprises narratives of events that have transpired within the realm of student leadership. At best, these accounts are no more than comparative analyses. The few analytical studies that have been undertaken generally connect student activism events with broader national issues and explore how prevailing circumstances have influenced these connections. Despite consistent patterns of behavior and attitudes observed within the student leadership space, there has been a lack of intentional efforts to construct a coherent theoretical explanation of student activism, especially in the Kenyan context. This chapter aims to address the question: What parameters should be employed to formulate a potential theoretical framework for Kenyan student activism? In this endeavor, we draw from the works of Altbach, who poses four key questions in theorizing student activism: 1) *Under what national conditions does student activism emerge and succeed?* 2) *In what higher education systems and institutions is student activism likely to emerge?* 3) *What are the typical characteristics of student activists?* 4) *What are the typical characteristics of student movements?* Additionally, we will explore the effects of student activism, offering insights with a specific focus on the Kenyan context.

I. Under What National Conditions Does Student Activism Emerge?

A crucial distinction among student movements lies in the comparison between students' activism in industrialized countries and that in third-world countries (Altbach, 1992:1442). The legitimacy of political systems in third-world countries is often weak due to the manner in which they are typically installed. This is in contrast to their industrialized counterparts, which boast more robust governance structures and lack glaring legitimacy deficits. Third-world governments, characterized by their largely questionable legitimacy, are more susceptible to threats posed by any form of dissent. This vulnerability is increased by a weak mass media and a restricted civic space, keeping the state disconnected from public opinion. In such

circumstances, the student movement often serves as a crucial alternative voice. Conversely, student activism appears to be less relevant and necessary in open and pluralistic systems of government.

The aforementioned analysis accurately sets the stage for the objective conditions under which student activism emerges in third-world countries. However, the varied history of Kenyan student activism, predominantly occurring under regimes with shaky legitimacy, suggests that the legitimacy of a regime alone does not determine the character of student activism. Subjective realities also play a significant role in shaping the direction of student activism at any

given moment¹⁹. A convergence of subjective and objective conditions within the student movement is essential for the emergence of student activism.

Altbach argues that the legitimacy of the student activists themselves is a crucial factor. In industrialized countries, students are not perceived as legitimate political actors, unlike in non-democratic societies. Where student activism is traditionally acknowledged as a legitimate part of the political system, it is likely to have an impact on that society (Altbach, 1991). Legitimacy, therefore, emerges as a vital variable, representing a contest between the legitimacy of the prevailing political system and the student movement. This distinction elucidates the stark difference between student activism in developed countries and third-world countries.

Nevertheless, the systemic depoliticization of the Kenyan student movement has progres-

II. In What Higher Education Systems and Institutions Is Student Activism Likely to Emerge?

The character of academic life serves as both a hindrance and an enabler for student activism. On one hand, it affords students the free time to foster close relationships, share ideas, and plan for action. On the other hand, the structured nature of academic programs, with scheduled exam periods, poses challenges to organizing activities.

Understanding student activism requires consideration of various national education sys-

temically alienated it from the general public. This leadership space no longer enjoys the moral purity with which it was initially viewed. The infiltration of the Kenyan student movement by external political actors has become apparent, causing the public to view it with diminishing trust. Presently, political infiltration of the Kenyan student movement is conspicuous, with student leaders aligning themselves with national political figures and students associating with political parties based on tribal affiliations. This infiltration has left a deep wound, symbolizing a deviation from the once untainted reputation of the student movement.

In summary, the legitimacy question has evolved alongside the changing character of Kenyan student leadership. It can be argued that the state has successfully dragged the once virtuous student movement into chaos, and together they navigate these turbulent waters to the disappointment and disgust of the general public.

tems, the type of university, and the discipline of study. Currently, there is a lack of conclusive studies on the impact of the type of university on the nature of student activism. Academic institutions with more regulated programs are likely to experience a decline in student activism, as opposed to those where students have more control over the pace of their studies. In the Kenyan context, public universities have historically experienced less regulation in ac-



19 Robinson, C. and Taylor, C. (2007a) 'Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives', *Improving Schools*, 10(1), pp. 5–17. doi:10.1177/1365480207073702.

ademic programs, partly due to the limited capacities of these institutions to sustain rigorous schedules. However, recent attempts at exerting more control over student academic life have been observed in institutions like the University of Nairobi and Moi University.

The fluid nature of the university student community poses a challenge to sustaining student movements. Students are often anxious about results, knowing that their time in the academic environment is limited²⁰. The structural arrangements of national education systems significantly impact the duration of student generations and, consequently, the time student leaders can dedicate to political work. Less regulated student academic environments tend to encourage longer generations of student leadership, fostering a more developed and sustained tradition of student activism.

The size and heterogeneity of a national education system also influences the possibility of a national student movement. In large and diverse education systems, constructing a cohesive national student movement becomes

challenging due to differences in institutional cultures and geographical proximity. In Kenya, the dispersed locations of universities, coupled with infrastructural challenges, have hindered the formation of a solid national student movement in past decades. However, technological advancements, particularly in communication through social media, have provided avenues for students from different institutions to coordinate and share updates. Despite these advancements, a genuine national student movement has not emerged, raising questions about potential differences in institutional realities, political lethargy, or capacity issues within the student community.

Furthermore, certain faculties and disciplines tend to produce more student activists than others. Students in social sciences, humanities, and to some extent, mathematics, are more likely to engage in activism compared to those in vocational training and professional courses. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the varied nature of student activism across different academic disciplines.

III. What are the Typical Characteristics of Student Activists?

This question delves into the broader sociological generalization of the identity of activists. According to Altbach (1990), student activists traditionally come from well-off backgrounds. However, the Kenyan context has consistently demonstrated that the majority of student activists come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a clear need for in-depth research to explore the factors that may have influenced Altbach's position, with a suggestion that scholars could initiate comparisons between student activists from both the global north and global south.



20 Robinson, C. and Taylor, C. (2007a) 'Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives', *Improving Schools*, 10(1), pp. 5–17. doi:10.1177/1365480207073702.

Typically, student activists exhibit a complex set of attitudes and beliefs, marked by a heightened sense of morality compared to their more apathetic peers. Ideals such as democratic reforms, nationalism, and equality propel this group of students into activism. However, there are instances when student activists are driven by immediate material interests, and their level of commitment may wane once such interests are fulfilled.

One cumulative effect of student activism is the inclusion of students in formal decision-making structures within various institutions. While this might initially be perceived as a positive development, it challenges the very essence of

student activism with its inherent rebellious posture. The establishment of formal student representations could potentially diminish the perceived need for student activism. Nevertheless, historical experiences with formal student councils reveal complexities. Over time, these structures have proven to be instruments of control by both university and state authorities over the student community. Formal student representation often restricts the scope of student activism, sometimes to the detriment of the broader student community, especially when intentionally designed to afford authorities greater control over student leadership affairs.

IV. What are the Typical Characteristics of Student Movements?

Analyzing and understanding student movements presents challenges due to their transitory nature, as noted by Altbach. The student community undergoes rapid changes, and their interests and organizations are often temporary, with fluctuating leadership. The emphasis of movements shifts between campus and societal concerns at regular intervals, and the movement itself may disappear for extended periods. The complex interaction between the educational system, broader political and economic situations, and the socio-psychological nature of the student community makes it difficult to thoroughly comprehend the role of students in politics and education.

The transient nature of student leadership significantly influences the characteristics of student movements, making them short-lived and sporadic. This high level of fluidity makes it challenging to predict when the movement will rise or fall. Student activism can be either reformist or revolutionary, with Altbach categorizing post-Cold War student movements into “etudialist” and “society-driven” – the former focusing solely on college and higher education issues, while the latter addresses broader societal issues at political, social, and cultural levels. Additionally, movements can be norm-based, focused on specific issues or goals, or value-based, driven by wider ideological concerns.

Political party affiliation is another factor shaping the characteristics of student movements. Movements aligned with political parties often exhibit a stronger ideological inclination and engage in broader political issues. However, party politics may introduce complexities that dilute the authentic interests of the student body. In Kenya, historical engagements between the student movement and the political class involved affiliations with both state-run political parties and opposition parties. The student movement collaborated with the opposition in the 90s, leveraging its inherent oppositional nature to align with opposition parties against the

V. Effects of Student Activism

The impact of student activism hinges on its character and is contingent on various factors, particularly the response of broader social forces within and outside university spaces, as well as the reaction of the establishment. On a national scale, the effectiveness of student activism is influenced by its alignment with wider pro-democracy efforts and movements. For instance, the role of the student movement in Kenya during the 90s fight for multi-party democracy made sense as it complemented the endeavors of other pro-democracy advocates in different spheres.

The media's response to student protests also plays a role in shaping the lasting impact of activism. Positive or negative media coverage influences the public's perception of student protests, impacting the level of support they garner. Instances where the media aligns with student grievances can amplify their message, while negative coverage may diminish public support.

Governments and university establishments

regime.

Norm-based student movements often have an "etudialist" nature, while value-based movements focus on broader societal issues. The Kenyan student movement has historically exhibited a blend of these characteristics, with recent developments indicating a more normative and "etudialist" posture. Over the decades, Kenyan student politics has shifted from a prominent presence on the national political arena to a focus on immediate grievances, primarily within the lecture halls and hostels.

traditionally respond to student activism in various ways: they may choose to ignore it, engage in negotiations with activists, or resort to repressive tactics of varying degrees. While repression may quell immediate unrest, it often sets the stage for intensified resistance in the future. Consequently, the nature of the response to student activism shapes its trajectory over time. In the Kenyan context, a pattern of cycles emerges within the student movement space, where suppression of one generation leads to the emergence of a subsequent generation that is more militant and determined.

In essence, the effects of student activism are far-reaching and dynamic, involving complex interactions between the activists, the broader society, the media, and the responses of both government and university authorities. The outcomes of student activism not only impact the immediate concerns being addressed but also contribute to the evolution of the student movement and its influence on broader socio-political issues.

VI. The Marxist Discourse at the University of Dare salaam and the University of Nairobi

The Arusha declaration saw a period of intensified intellectual debates at the University of Dare salaam. The growing discourses at the university spaces became a direct confrontation to the conventional approach of academic compartmentalization of disciplines and the elitist character of the Tanzanian education system. The militant students were greatly influenced by the thoughts of philosophers like Hegel, a situation that pushed them to claim for 'the truth as a whole' and consequently waged what was termed as an 'ideological struggle' against the traditional disciplines and learning methodologies²¹. It was as a result of the collaboration between a group of militant East African students and a few faculty figures such as Walter Rodney that the University Students' African Revolutionary Front (USARF) was born. The outfit was led by a young militant leader, Yoweri Museveni (current Present president of Uganda).

USARF not only published the radical magazine 'Cheche' but also conducted ideological classes on Sundays. The magazine had deep critiques of the enduring capitalist system, proceeding to interrogate the policies and practices in Tanzania and eventually asking whether the country was really on a socialist path. The magazine had a Marxist-Leninist standpoint. USARF was always keen to critically comment on any major event, both in Tanzania and in Africa. It hosted

public lectures for leaders of liberation movements and Marxists. The church of Tanzania was not amused that USARF would choose to conduct its ideological classes on Sundays. In its teachings, the organization encouraged its comrades to cultivate a scientific world outlook to for a better understanding of the world. The radical students appreciated the need for a revolutionary to have a reliable methodology for analyzing concrete situations in his or her mission to change the world. It would be interesting to note that out of the 1600 students that were at the University of Dare Salaam then, the members of USARF were not more than 50. It is their depth of research and clarity of articulation of their positions that afforded them a larger than life presence both within and outside the university. An outside observer would have been easily convinced that the university had gone completely Marxist²².

The larger than life character of the otherwise lean Marxist group at the University of Dare Salaam can be understood within the context of any other typical movement. Ordinarily, a movement has a well-grounded core and fellow revelers on the fringes who are characterized by demagoguery and dogmatism. The USARF was not any different, and the latter were crucial in shielding the organization against ill-intentioned critics. Nyerere was among these critics.

21 Shivji, I.G., Yahya-Othman, S. and Kamata, N. (2020a) *Development as a rebellion: A biography of Julius Nyerere*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd.

22 Shivji, I.G., Yahya-Othman, S. and Kamata, N. (2020a) *Development as a rebellion: A biography of Julius Nyerere*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd.

The 'Cheche' magazine and the radical activities of the organization irked the Roman Catholic Church. The then Campus Chaplain at the University wrote a special article to the bishops on the Marxist philosophy that was fast seeping through the university fabric, and how it was quickly moving students away from God. It is highly likely that the same concerns were raised with Nyerere who made use of his regular teach-ins and interactive sessions at the institutions to rebuke the left-Marxist students. The growing ideological tension between Nyerere on one hand and USARF on the other hand eventually saw the latter proscribed. The progressive students however continued to advance their radical ideas through the TANU Youth League. It however began to wane owing to the state's intensified attacks with Mwalimu Nyerere using his usual style pungent sarcasm to paint the Marxists as dangerous to the national project²³.

Seeming, the Marxist discourse was not entirely a UDSM affair. The University of Nairobi in the 80's had its own piece of this spate of radical discourse. After the closure of the university following the aborted coup of 1982, the Kenyan government was faced with shortage of staff at the university. One of the reasons for the shortage was that some of the lecturers like, Willy Mutunga of the faculty of law, had been detained. Before their detention, a number of government officials had complained that the lecturers were indoctrinating the students with Marxism, and emphasized on the need for the government to stop such a trend. While some

lecturers were arrested, others left the country abruptly.

One of the lecturers at the University of Nairobi who left abruptly was Dr. Kimani Gecau. While his fears were not properly known, him serving in the department of literature served as sufficient justification. This particular department was under constant attacks from the state on the courses it offered to the students. The then Minister for Education, Mr. Kamotho announced that literature were preaching violence and needed to be withdrawn from school. The revolutionary texts of lecturers of the likes of Ngugi wa Thiongo, Professor Micere Mugo and Mr. Maina wa Kinyatti from Kenyatta college dominated the literature syllabus.

Apart from the department of literature, the department of government primarily for its provision of political science as a discipline. Most politicians at that time thought of this particular discipline to be subversive. Most lecturers resigned from the department citing frustrations through constant charges levelled against the department. One notable case was that of Dr. H. Spegle an American called it quits while on leave in his home country.

Overall, the above ideologically intense historical moments for students at the University of Daresalaam and Nairobi not only paint a period in history when student activism was largely driven by ideologies but also how such ideological motivations created opportunities for linkages between the students and the rest of the academia. The lecturers, as demonstrat-

23 Shivji, I.G., Yahya-Othman, S. and Kamata, N. (2020a) *Development as a rebellion: A biography of Julius Nyerere*. Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers Ltd.

ed helped to shape the thinking students in a particular manner. It therefore follows that the early instances of collaboration between the students and the rest of the academia was ideological. At the center of this collaboration was the appreciation was that the two groups were victims of a common systemic arrangement and thus were obliged to fight from a common front.

It is however important to note that not every member of the student community was and has been driven by ideals. As early as the 80s, the political establishment had already began infiltrating the student movement. For instance, on the eve of re-opening the University of Nairobi after the 1982 aborted coup, a group of university students from Ukambani assured the government that when they return to school they will be serious about their studies and that they will not engage in any politicking. They had gathered at Kenyatta Stadium in Machakos where they were advised by the local politicians to oppose any attempts by other students to get them on a collision course with the government. Earlier on, Bungoma university students had taken the same route of loyalty pledge. The group of students met in Bungoma town and were addressed by the then Minister for Tourism and Wildlife, Mr. Elijah Mwangale. The students committed to behave themselves.

In the more recent times, the pacification and sabotage of the Kenyan student movement has largely taken a carrot-stick path. While 'deviant' and vocal students are severely punished through massive suspensions and use of the criminal justice system, their cooperative coun-

terparts are often rewarded with positions within the various student councils and various forms of career exposure. Majority of the students have found safety and reward in silence after watching their vocal colleagues get treated to all manner of suppression. The infiltration of the country's political class into student leadership activities further complicates the whole situation, with a section of student leaders openly associating themselves with the major political factions in the country. In the long run, the student movement space is not only robbed of objectivity but also the much needed public legitimacy as an alternative voice on governance. This is not to discredit the need for needful collaboration between the student movement and the broader political networks. Such collaborations must however be motivated by tact and the urgency to address collective governance concerns in the country. Otherwise, political partnerships based on individual political expediency is evidently built on quick sand and as such sooner or later crumble.

The waning ideological commitment of the Kenyan student movement has gradually robbed it of its legitimacy both within the student community and in the eyes of the outside public. The systemic isolation of the student community from the political processes of their unions have not only bred apathy within the student movement but also made the mainstream student councils lose their grip of the community. As a result, there has been a proliferation of non-elected student activists who seem to garner more legitimacy and support than their mainstream counterparts.

CHAPTER 6: WOMEN AND STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Traditionally, literature on student activism has been developed without due consideration of the unique contributions and circumstances of female student leaders. The gender dimension in the analysis of Kenyan student activism has been notably absent, and the tendency to view female leaders through the same lens as their male counterparts hinders a nuanced understanding of their distinctive challenges and contributions. This section aims to shed light on the historical leadership challenges faced by female student leaders within the Kenyan student movement, reflecting broader socio-cultural challenges faced by women in various spheres. Despite gradual progress in women gaining access to key leadership positions, the pervasive gender disparities persist.

Kenya, on paper, has implemented various frameworks aimed at addressing inequalities, providing platforms for women to engage on issues affecting their lives. In the context of student leadership, the University Act of 2012 (as amended in 2016) serves as the primary reference document on university management, including student leadership. Section 41(3) of the Act mandates every university to have a Students' Council elected by the Students Association, with no more than one-third of the Council being of the same gender where applicable²⁴. Despite this legislative provision for gender inclusivity in student-led organizations, the adequate involvement of women in student representative councils remains a persistent challenge. While some universities have implemented arrangements to meet the two-thirds gender requirement, such as insisting on student candidates contesting as teams, this approach limits the freedom of choice among student voters.

Research indicates that organizations incorporating women benefit from greater diversity in talents and ideas. However, recent observations suggest that females in significant leadership positions within student councils still face deeply rooted structural challenges that impede their success.

I. A Historical Analysis of Kenyan Women in Student Leadership: The Case of Philomena Chelagat Mutai

In the historical examination of women's involvement in Kenyan student activism, one standout figure is Philomena Chelagat Mutai. Born in Lessos, Nandi County, Chelagat holds a significant place in the narrative as one of the first Kalenjin women to attend university. Her story is central to understanding women's student activism in Kenya, given her transition to national leadership and her consequent consistent public presence for almost three decades. It is crucial to appreciate the unique cultural context in which Chelagat operated, navigating a political terrain that frowned upon women in politics and was marked by high repression.

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24 University Act of 2012, as amended in 2016

Coming from a political family, Chelagat was the last-born daughter of Kimutai arap Kogo, a prominent farmer, and Paulina Kogo. Her family background included her father's membership in the Nandi Local Native Council and her maternal uncle, William Morogo Saina, serving as a Member of Parliament for Eldoret North, a position she later succeeded. Chelagat's activism began even before university while at Highlands Girls High School, challenging the school administration on the eve of her final examinations, leading to her suspension. Undeterred, she excelled in her exams while under suspension and gained admission to the University of Nairobi in 1970.

At the university, Chelagat became deeply involved in politics, showcasing her oratory skills in student gatherings. Within two years, she became the first female editor of the student magazine, *The Anvil*, using her journalism background to publish critical articles that sparked riots in 1973, leading to her expulsion. Despite this setback, she later received a scholarship to Harvard University, which was unfortunately blocked by then Vice President Daniel Moi, leading to her return to teaching in Nandi County.

II. Challenges Facing Contemporary Women Student Activists

In analyzing the challenges specific to contemporary women student activists, interviews with five former women student leaders revealed a common theme of misogyny. Operating within a predominantly male-dominated environment, these women faced sexist attacks, limitations, and gender-based violence during their leadership roles.

Chelagat's persistence paid off when, after appealing to the Minister for Education, she was allowed to return to the University of Nairobi and graduated in 1974. During her second stint at the university, she contested and won the Eldoret-North by-election in 1974, becoming the youngest and first Kalenjin woman MP. In parliament, she fearlessly spoke against corruption and governance issues, earning her a reputation as a bold and outspoken legislator.

Chelagat faced sexist attacks and was intentionally excluded from the infamous 'Seven Bearded Sisters' list, a term coined by Attorney General Charles Njonjo. In 1976, she was arrested for public disturbance related to a land issue in her constituency, serving two years in prison and released by President Daniel Moi in 1978. However, her political career faced a decisive blow in 1983 when she fled to Tanzania due to imminent arrest plans. She returned to Kenya in the late 80s, avoiding politics and leading a quiet and challenging life until her death on July 7, 2013, on the day of Saba Saba²⁵. Philomena Chelagat Mutai's legacy remains a testament to the courage and resilience of women in Kenyan student leadership and national politics.

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25 The Girl who fought 'men wars' against Kenyatta regime. Daily Nation 7th July 2013. Retrieved from [The girl who fought 'men wars' at varsity, against Kenyatta rule | Nation](#) on 20th May 2024

One interviewee shared an incident during her campaign for the Secretary General position of the Student Organization of Nairobi University, where her hostel room was targeted with used sanitary pads. Despite eventually winning the election, the experience left her emotionally scarred. While serving in the student council, she encountered gender-based limitations from predominantly male council members. Her subsequent attempt to vie for the chairmanship position faced direct physical attacks, leading her to lose hope to vie.

Another interviewee, who served as a student leader in the early 2010s, faced sexism during her campaigns, describing them as riddled with violence. Despite winning, she encountered challenges advocating for women-specific issues in a student council predominantly composed of male members.

The third interviewee, from a Kenyan private university, faced significant obstacles when contesting for the council's presidency in 2023. Despite her disqualification on seemingly flimsy grounds, she decided to take the matter to court, highlighting the gender biases she encountered.

The fourth interviewee took a different approach, strategically partnering with university security and administration to address violence and harassment during her campaigns for the vice chairperson position. While this earned her some enemies, it also instilled fear among those who traditionally harassed female aspirants.

In summary, misogyny and sexism emerges as a unique challenge for female student leaders, distinct from the general leadership challenges faced by their male counterparts. Recognizing

these unique challenges is crucial in developing mentorship models tailored to the specific needs of female student activists.

Mitigating the Challenges Facing Female Student Leadership

To address the unique challenge of misogyny faced by female student leaders, several strategies can be considered to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for women in student leadership:

Legislative Measures:

Reinforce and strengthen existing legislative provisions, such as the University Act of 2012, which mandates gender representation in student councils.

Advocate for stricter enforcement and accountability mechanisms to ensure compliance with gender representation requirements.

Educational Programs:

Develop and implement educational programs at the university level aimed at changing societal narratives around women in elective politics.

Promote awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and biases, emphasizing the value of diverse leadership styles and perspectives.

Mentorship and Support Networks:

Establish mentorship programs that pair female student leaders with experienced mentors who can provide guidance, share experiences, and offer support.

Foster strong support networks among female student leaders, encouraging collaboration, information-sharing, and mutual assistance.

Leadership Training:

Provide leadership training programs specifically tailored to address the challenges faced by female student leaders.

Include modules on resilience, conflict resolution, and navigating gender biases within leadership training curricula.

Institutional Policies:

Review and revise institutional policies to create a more inclusive and gender-sensitive environment.

Implement zero-tolerance policies for gender-based discrimination and harassment, ensuring that perpetrators face appropriate consequences.

Advocacy and Awareness:

Encourage student-led advocacy groups to raise awareness about the importance of gender diversity in leadership.

Organize forums, discussions, and events that shed light on the experiences of female student leaders and promote gender inclusivity.

Engage Male Allies:

Encourage male students to actively participate in initiatives promoting gender equality in student leadership.

Create allyship programs to engage male students in supporting and advocating for their female counterparts.

Regular Assessments:

Conduct regular assessments of the gender inclusivity climate within student councils and university leadership.

Use feedback from female student leaders to identify areas for improvement and implement targeted interventions.

By implementing a combination of these strategies, universities can work towards mitigating the challenges faced by female student leaders, fostering a more inclusive and equitable student leadership environment.



(A member of the Students' Caucus Women's League posing for a photo at a past convention)

CHAPTER 7: AN OVERARCHING INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE CONTEMPORARY KENYAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

I. What is an institutional framework? What are its components? Policies and behaviors as key components of an institutional framework.

An institutional framework can be defined as a set of rules and norms that shape socio-economic activity and behavior, both formally and informally. Laws, regulations, procedures, and customs all contribute to establishing an institutional framework. This framework functions as a set of rules within which an organization operates, significantly influencing the purpose and performance of the organization. It serves as a determinant for effective governance, particularly in enhancing human resource stewardship, a vital component of any mass organization.

Effective policies and legislative regimes have the potential to give rise to strong institutions that can effectively guide human emotions and behaviors. However, the term “institutional framework” remains abstract when left unexamined. Practical understanding arises when its major components are interrogated, as emphasized by Berger and Luckmann (1967), who argue that institutions are ‘dead’ if only represented verbally or physically, lacking subjective reality unless manifested in actual human conduct.

There are three major pillars used to construct an institutional framework: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive systems. In the

context of the Kenyan student movement, historical observation reveals a close association between the institution of student leadership and university structures. The Kenyan student leadership has historically conformed to the institutional character of respective universities. University administrations traditionally view student leadership as part of their administrative processes, necessitating alignment with administrative frameworks. This dynamic may explain the tensed relationship between student leadership and university administrations, with university authorities perceiving young leaders as lacking the capacity to run their affairs independently.

This tension is exacerbated by inefficiencies in university management, often concealed by manipulating or coercing the student community to conform. These dynamic underscores the imposing nature of Kenyan university administrations on the student community and their continuous efforts to break free from such control. An analysis suggests that the concept of an independent institutional framework for Kenyan student leadership has been problematic, compounded by capacity gaps within the student community due to a lack of generational coherence and competent human resources.

II. Why would an independent institutional framework be important for the contemporary Kenyan student leadership?

By now, there should be a consensus that the checkered journey of Kenya's student leadership has been characterized by a challenging blend of chaos, silence, and unwarranted external control. More precisely, there has never been an independent institutional framework governing this specific youth leadership domain. This lack of institutional independence has deprived the movement of the opportunity to have a more significant impact on the national discourse across numerous generations.

First and foremost, an institutional framework within the student movement would facilitate the effective utilization of resources within the space, both in material and human terms. When there is ambiguity regarding how resources should be allocated, assessing their impact within the organization becomes challenging. The absence of proper impact assessment translates to an inability to identify and address resource gaps in the future. This discussion extends to the absence of accountability mechanisms necessary for the effective management of resources.

So, what are the material and human resources that should ideally be incorporated into a proper institutional framework for Kenyan student leadership? Financial considerations are crucial, as other material aspects are closely related to the finances within the student movement. Presently, there is no comprehensive legal framework governing the collection and expen-

diture of student organizations' finances in the country. The University Act of 2012 (amended in 2016) remains conspicuously silent on this matter.

Traditionally, many university administrations in the country have adopted the Canadian method of unions' statutory deductions, where such dues are directly deducted from members' salaries, in this case, students' tuition fees. However, there is no adequate accountability mechanism to monitor the expenditure of such funds. The financial accounts of the students' councils are rarely audited in line with standard accounting practices. Under these circumstances, the student leadership lacks the freedom to develop independent programs that address the practical leadership needs of the student community. Without the ability to mobilize finances from diverse sources, the student movement finds itself subject to the authority's control.

This situation is further shown by the transactional nature of contemporary student leaders, who, driven by a lack of financial support, engage in compromising activities with the political class. The chronic shortage of funds for student unions has become so ingrained that discussing the possibility of advocating for more equitable use of union dues within the student community seems unattainable. Nevertheless, this issue, seemingly beyond their reach, can be addressed through judicial interventions and advocacy for accountability.

Secondly, an institutional framework is essential for human resource stewardship within the student movement. It delineates responsibilities and timelines, addressing the longstanding issue of competency across generations. The lack of proper appreciation for the potential impact of student activism on governance quality in the country has contributed to the competency challenge. Student activism, being a complex

III. How then do we construct a sustainable institutional framework for the contemporary Kenyan student leadership?

This rationale may be precisely what the Kenyan student leadership needs to navigate the challenges over time. Constructing a robust institutional framework for the contemporary movement necessitates a blend of competencies.

The initial step in establishing the institutional framework involves acknowledging the historical institutional gaps within this space. University administrations have historically played a significant role in hindering the institutionalization of Kenyan student leadership by insisting on shaping student organizations according to their own preferences. This has deprived student movements of the necessary institutional autonomy. Therefore, the first action is to completely disentangle student leadership activities from mainstream university administrations. Student organizations should operate as entirely independent entities, free from administrative interference in financial matters, planning activities, accessing offices, and hosting guests. While it may be argued that both university administrations and student bodies share the common constituency of students, a middle ground can be achieved without diminishing the relevance

and substantial idea, requires engagement from both theoretical and practical perspectives, demanding unique levels of competency. The academic community needs to be actively involved in nurturing Kenyan student leadership, recognizing the importance of safeguarding and harnessing this significant aspect of national discourse.

of vibrant student leadership.

Secondly, it is crucial to establish a connection between the present and the past to preserve institutional memory within the movement. Connecting with past generations of student activists helps freeze moments in the space, creating a strong link with historical experiences. This connection aids in establishing common philosophical threads that form the basis for an institutional culture capable of enduring across different generations of student activists.

The third step in creating an independent institutional framework involves resourcing, as finances and human capital are vital components. Lack of relevant resources can derail an organization, and financial resources significantly impact an organization's ability to acquire other resources. The recent financial resources available to the student movement, exemplified by the University of Nairobi's reported annual union dues, are substantial. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that these funds are used exclusively for student leadership activities, with proper audit mechanisms in place to verify the appropriate utilization of collected dues.

Lastly, cementing institutional independence within the Kenyan student movement requires establishing a culture of ideological training within the student community. Leadership should be guided by a theory, and universities, as places for idea testing, should encourage

students to explore leadership ideologies beyond the mainstream curriculum. The goal is to enable the student community to develop an ideology that resonates with their lived circumstances and the broader community, fostering a pro-people agenda.

IV. Social Media and changing perspective of Student Activism.

In the ever-evolving nature of student activism, social media has emerged as a powerful and transformative tool utilized by students. The dynamics of activism among students have undergone a paradigm shift, with online platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram now enabling students to organize and coordinate events, protests, and campaigns. This was evident particularly during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic and public lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the increased reliance on social media within student activism. Online platforms provided a virtual space for students to voice their concerns, share grievances, and organize on issues. The advent of hashtags or hashtag activism, became a defining feature of these virtual protests, acting as rallying points for collective action. Kenya universities, in particular, witnessed a resurgence of student activism, with key issues revolving around access, funding, and the preference for in-person classes over online alternatives.

With a decline of print media; Pamphlets, magazines and posters are not as popular as they were in 1980s and 1990s, Contemporary student activism and social movements have adopted social media platforms as a cornerstone

of their activism. Social media platforms offer students a direct channel to express their opinions, disseminate information, and engage with a wider audience beyond the student community. The ease of sharing, commenting, and mobilizing on these platforms has redefined the nature and scale of student activism. The digital sphere has become a vibrant arena for activism.

While hashtags and online activism have become synonymous with student protests, it is crucial to recognize that participation extends beyond the digital realm. In-person activism continues to hold significance, with physical presence often seen as a more impactful expression of dissent. However, the synergy between social media and in-person activism is undeniable, with both channels complementing each other in the pursuit of common agendas. However, it has been warned that activism is not limited to online expressions; it requires tangible actions. Social media can sometimes devolve into a performative space where merely posting or tweeting may replace concrete efforts for change, the feeling here is that heavy presence and following in social media may not necessarily translate to the desired concrete change.

In the past decade, social media has become an instrumental tool for activism, facilitating the rapid spread of information and providing a platform for voices that might otherwise go unheard. Two significant global examples that show the impact of social media in shaping social and political narratives are the Arab Spring and the murder of George Floyd.

The Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy protests that erupted in the early 2010s, stands out as a key moment on the impact of social media activism. Originating in Tunisia, these demonstrations quickly spread across the Arab world, fueled by the aspirations of a young generation seeking political change. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook played a crucial role in documenting and disseminating information about the protests, allowing activists to connect, organize, and share their message with a global audience. The impact of the Arab Spring extended beyond the streets of Tunis and Cairo, influencing other social justice movements in the region and worldwide.

v. The National Students' Caucus as a Pacesetter for the Kenyan Student Leadership Institutionalization Agenda

The National Students Caucus emerged as a result of profound reflection and introspection by a post-2018 generation of student activists, predominantly from the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. It symbolizes the frustrations inherent in modern student leadership struggles and seeks to rectify past mistakes. The idea of a national leadership arrangement is

Another instance that exemplifies the power of social media in activism is the tragic murder of African American man George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The incident was captured on video by 17-year-old Darnella Frazier, who used her smartphone to document the arrest and the subsequent fatal actions of police officer Derek Chauvin. Frazier courageously shared the video online, and its viral spread ignited a global wave of outrage and protests against systemic racism and police brutality.

The significance of social media in contemporary student activism cannot be overstated. However, it is essential to ensure that these efforts lead to real-world impact. A successful movement requires a strategic approach that combines online visibility with on-the-ground activities. This may involve organizing forums, protests, engaging with local communities, collaborating with traditional media, and establishing partnerships with like-minded organizations outside the universities

not new, and historical observations reveal the challenges such arrangements faced in gaining traction within the Kenyan university students' community. The genesis of the National Students Caucus dates back to early 2019 when a small group of radical student activists assessed their five years in student activism, recognizing an overall loss in their endeavors.



(The National Students' Caucus is flanked by the leadership of The Institute of Social Accountability and Elimu Bora Working Group in celebrating the organization's five years of existence)

The Caucus adopts a comprehensive view of student leadership, considering it both theoretical and practical, applicable in both the streets and study rooms. It advocates for the integration of student leadership into academic programs, terming it the 'pedagogization' of student leadership. Notably, existing literature on Kenyan student activism lacks a proper theoretical framework, providing an opportunity for scholarly debate in the humanities and social sciences. The belief is that engaging in practical aspects should be preceded by a settled theoretical foundation. Therefore, the National Students Caucus emphasizes the constant refinement of student leadership, drawing on past experiences to enrich the present.

Since its legal registration as a non-profit organization in 2021, the National Students' Caucus has recognized that student activism cannot

The introspection revealed that Kenyan student activism had historically been characterized by confrontations between individuals and institutions, with the former lacking the necessary support for sustained struggles against the latter. This observation contributed to the lack of strategic continuity within the leadership space. Examining institutional gaps within the student movement highlighted past national student outfits as amorphous groups negotiating personal interests on national platforms, often excluding the ordinary student. In some cases, these outfits remained confined to names and logos on social media platforms like Facebook. To address these shortcomings, the National Students Caucus aimed to avoid the mistakes of its predecessors.

exist in isolation. Its sustainability hinges on forging long-term alliances with political and human rights groups beyond university spaces. The goal is to find convergence between student leadership programs and those from other sectors, allowing the Caucus to consolidate alliances and enhance its capacity through shared experiences. Historically, alliances between the university student community and other social movements have proven powerful tools in influencing policies and even toppling regimes.

Over the years, the Caucus has organized student-centered activities aimed at consolidating the student movement in the country. The organization has been deliberate in shaping these programs consistently, hoping to establish a distinct institutional posture within the student community gradually.

On July 7th, 2021, the National Students' Caucus collaborated closely with the Kenya Tuitakayo Movement, Communist Party of Kenya, and the United Green Movement to organize a march commemorating the historic 'Saba Saba' day. The participants, mainly university students and members of civil society organizations, highlighted issues such as corruption and police brutality during the march. Miriam, a student leader at Kiriri Women's University and a pioneer leader of the National Students' Caucus, addressed systemic challenges in higher learning institutions, calling for radical policy interventions. A petition was presented to parliament for further policy engagement. The protests were met with police dispersal, teargas, and arrests, with Miriam and several students detained at the Central Police Station. The National Coalition for Human Rights Defenders promptly secured the release of the arrested protesters on the same day. Notably, this event marked the organization's first significant engagement with the student masses since its inception.

Preceding the 'Saba Saba' protest was the 'Nane Nane' town hall meeting at the Bridge Hotel in Mombasa City. This event served as a follow-up to the 'Saba Saba' march, addressing concerns raised during the protests. Issues such as corruption, youth unemployment, depoliticization of the university student community, unfair loan terms, extra-judicial killings, and gender inequality formed the thematic framework. The town hall meeting comprised church visits, addressing congregations on governance is-

ues, and a plenary session at the Bridge Hotel, where attendees shared views on governance matters. Resolutions from the meeting were compiled into a document read out during a press briefing at the conclusion of the event.

Towards the end of the year 2021, the National Students' Caucus faced resource constraints and struggled through the last quarter. However, the year 2022 brought a unique moment for the organization, coinciding with a national election year. In late 2021, the Caucus leadership had decided to develop a five-year strategic plan to guide its activities until early 2026. The launch of this plan marked the first activity of the Caucus in 2022, held at the 'Kenya Tuitakayo' movement offices in Ngara market, Nairobi. Despite limited resources, the organization managed to host around thirty students from various universities in the city, both in person and through an online platform.

Following the launch, the National Students' Caucus faced numerous institutional challenges in the early part of the year until around April when it regained momentum. The organization then focused on planning the annual 'Saba Saba' event, themed on electoral integrity given its relevance during an election year. Unlike the previous year when the Caucus had partnered with other organizations, it decided to take a solo approach, involving only its internal leadership and university networks. This decision aimed to showcase the organization's capability to independently organize and engage with its constituency.

The ‘Saba Saba’ convention took place at the historic Ufungamano Halls, with financial support from the Kenya Human Rights Commission and the Defenders Coalition. The event contributed to the organization’s broader strategic goal of institutionalizing Kenya’s student leadership through deliberate and structured engagement with the university student community. The institutionalization agenda involves finding a balance between competency

and legitimacy, creating a triad structure. The secretariat, evolving to its optimum capacity, interacts with a General Assembly that brings in students, and a board of advisors guides strategic directions. This triad structure forms the backbone of the institutional framework that the Students’ Caucus continues to develop as it deepens its involvement in the leadership affairs of the Kenyan student community.



(The Executive Director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission, Mr. Davies Malombe, addresses the Caucus membership during the 2022 Saba Saba Convention for Electoral Integrity)

In 2022, the National Students’ Caucus concluded its major events with its nomination as one of the upcoming human rights organizations of the year at the annual Human Rights Defenders’ Awards hosted by the Defenders Coalition. Despite stiff competition, the Caucus emerged in a category marked by powerful civil society organizations. The awards ceremony, held at the residence of the Netherlands’ Ambassador to Kenya, instilled a sense of confidence and belief in the Caucus leadership. It was a realization that despite the challenges faced by the Kenyan student movement, there were individuals who believed in its potential for resurgence.



(A section of the National Students' Caucus leadership updating the team from the Commonwealth Elections Observer group on the involvement of youths in the 2022 electoral processes)

Structurally, the organization has undergone significant consolidation, achieving a better level of operational consistency. However, resource constraints continued to pose challenges, driving the organization forward primarily through its vision and the team's passion.

In 2023, the Caucus commenced the year by hosting an annual members' convention featuring the former Chief Justice of Kenya, Dr. Willy Mutunga. During the convention, the or-

ganization outlined its operational plan for the year, providing an opportunity for members to reflect on its journey and future growth plans. With a lean but efficient secretariat team, the Caucus demonstrated a high level of institutional clarity. Dr. Mutunga, drawing from his experiences as a lecturer at the University of Nairobi in the 80s, provided a historical perspective on Kenyan student activism, aligning with the Caucus's efforts to resolve contemporary contradictions.

The operational framework for 2023 condensed into two campaigns: 'VIJANA NA UONGOZI BORA' and 'DADA POWER.' The latter campaign was spearheaded by the Caucus's Women's League, focusing on women leadership programs. The organization, along with partners, continued to propel these campaigns directly and indirectly. In May 2023, the Caucus collaborated with the Kenyan Human Rights Commission, Kenya Young Parliamentarians Association, Youth Agenda, and Siasa Place to host a regional student leaders' convention at the Nairobi 'After 40' Hotel. The convention brought together student representatives from nearly ten universities to discuss major leadership issues affecting the modern university student community. The University Amendment Act of 2016 emerged as a key concern, particularly the issue of the delegates' votes system as a replacement for the popular vote. The Caucus, supported by other organizations, expressed optimism in dealing with the situation. Ongoing engagements with relevant stakeholders are in progress²⁶.

In 2023, the National Students' Caucus took a notable step in its mission to consolidate part-

nerships by becoming a member of the Elimu Bora Working Group. This group, convened by the Kenya Human Rights Commission with the support of Uraia Trust, focuses on sustainable education reforms in Kenya. Through its participation in the working group, the Caucus gained better clarity on the state of higher education in Kenya and explored potential policy interventions to address existing challenges. The platform also provided an opportunity for the Caucus to audibly share its vision for the Kenyan university student community.

Engaging with the Elimu Bora Working Group significantly enhanced the visibility of the National Students' Caucus, both within the student community and the broader Kenyan human rights defenders' fraternity. The Caucus played a crucial role in the development of a shadow report on minimum standards and principles suitable for education in Kenya. The tireless work of the technical team, along with numerous media and stakeholder engagements throughout the process, contributed to reinforcing the legitimacy of the National Students' Caucus as the institutional vanguard of modern-day Kenyan student leadership²⁷.



26 There is an urgent need to consolidate the forces around the campaign for the repeal of Section 18 of the University Amendment. It is the compartmentalization of such efforts that has made it difficult for the student community to make any meaningful inroad over the years

27 This report was developed at a time when there was so much conversation going on around CBC (Competency Based Curriculum) as a new model of learning in the country. Apart from questioning the level of government's preparedness in rolling out the new curriculum, the Students' Caucus has special concerns on its impact on critical thinking among Kenyan learners, a crucial determinant of the future of Kenyan student activism

ANNEXE 1: NOTABLE STUDENT LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED THE HISTORY OF KENYAN STUDENT ACTIVISM

The highway of the Kenyan student movement is one that is littered with so many wrecked lives. Of dreams that were dreamt but some of the dreamers fell asleep for good. The casualties of this ceaseless war against state autocracy are numerous. Too numerous to be exhaustively counted. At the very tail end of this research we pose to remember some of the comrades who have contributed towards and on several occasions paid heavily for the ideals they believed in. In as much as a good number of these comrades were interviewed during the research process, it may be needful to come up with a separate material narrating the unique leadership experiences of all these individuals. Beneath souls could be stories that offer both the scholars in this area and the public at large a more accurate impression of what Kenyan student activism has been, and what it potentially stands to be going into the future

1. Titus Adungosi
2. Paddy Onyango
3. Josiah Omotto
4. Oduor Ongwen
5. Wafula Buke
6. Miguna Miguna
7. James Bob Aggrey Orengo
8. Kabando wa Kabando
9. Suba Churchill
10. Solomon Muruli
11. Muthoni Kamau
12. A.P.C Awuor Ponge
13. Chelagat Mutai
14. Booker Ngesa Omole
15. Wanza Kioko
16. Roselyne Akombe
17. Suyianka Lempaa
18. Kepta Ombati
19. Boaz Waruku
20. Kamau Ngugi
21. Paul Mwaura
22. Kawive Wambua
23. Christopher Owiro
24. Fredrick Okung
25. Bennedict Wachira
26. Maxwell Magawi
27. James Walter Massawa
28. Billy Graham Mukenye
29. Ronny Otieno
30. Byron Mirodho
31. Michael Ombewa
32. Benard Omondi
33. Brian Lishenga
34. Moses Oburu
35. Onyango Oloo
36. Samuel Ragira
37. Otidi Amuke
38. Jim Akach
39. Mark Oroko
40. Walter Swanya
41. T.J Kajwang
42. Gerald Otieno Kajwang
43. Raphael Ragot
44. Calford Odhiambo
45. Dornic Orwa

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