Student Politics in the Third World

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Student political activism remains a key issue for Third World universities — and frequently for political systems as well. Students continue to be politically active and involved, and on occasion contribute to political unrest. There are considerable national variations and the scope and pace of student politics change over time and across national boundaries. But the issue remains one of the most important for higher education administrators, planners, and for government officials. In the 1980s, the contrast between continued political activism among students in the Third World and relative quiet in the industrialized nations of Western Europe and North America is dramatic. This essay considers some of the reasons for this contrast as well as the key factors relating to student activism in the Third World. Third World student activism is a complex phenomenon which has implications for both university and society.

Student politics is generally viewed by those in authority as a negative factor — something to be eliminated from academic life. Indeed, student politics sometimes affects higher education and on occasions sweeps beyond the campus to have disruptive implications for the political system. It is, however, not enough to condemn student politics as a negative force. It is necessary to understand the forces that impel student activism and to examine the results of this activism. Furthermore, in some respects, student political involvement can contribute to the processes of nation-building and political socialization. Without any question, student activism contributes to social change in the Third World and focuses national attention on political and social questions that might otherwise be ignored by the political system.

There are quite considerable differences in student political activism among countries, regions, and by historical periods. The most dramatic difference at present is between the industrialized nations and the Third World. But there are differences among Third World nations as well. In India, much student activism tends to focus on campus-based issues which are sometimes linked to broader political and ideological questions. Typically, however, student activism is motivated by political and social forces in society and its attention is generally focused away from the campus. Nations with a strong tradition of student activism, often stemming from student participation in independence struggles, tend to have active student movements. National policies concerning activism also have an effect on the viability and often the tactics of student movements. Political systems that permit
the relatively free functioning of social organizations and movements will tend to have more active student participation, but such activism is less often revolutionary in nature. Social and economic conditions also affect student political movements and organizations. Poor campus conditions, as in India, have stimulated activism and protest. On the other hand, an "élite" campus environment can also contribute to student political consciousness. Variations by academic field and discipline can also be noted, with students in the social sciences and humanities in most countries more involved in political activities than those in the natural sciences and professional fields.

The variables are substantial and it is not surprising that there is no widely accepted theoretical perspective concerning student activism. The purpose of this paper is not to create such a formulation, but rather it is to reflect on the experiences of Third World nations. This is particularly important since most of the theories relating to student politics refer mainly to the experience of the industrialized nations. National variations, historical differences, changing political environments, academic organizational variations and many other factors all relate to an understanding of student politics in any one nation. It is too much to expect that a readily applicable general formulation will be able to completely explain this complex phenomenon.

The literature on student activism is a curious blend of the descriptive and the theoretical. There was a massive outpouring of publication during the 1960s, when Western nations were disrupted by student activist movements. Since then, there has not been much discussion of the topic in Western academic circles. Much of the literature reflects the concerns of Western social scientists and university officials — impelled in considerable part by a desire to understand and to "deal with" activist movements which arose suddenly. The paradigms used were largely Western in orientation. The political models reflected the realities of North American and Western European situations. This literature is not necessarily directly relevant to the Third World. While academic institutions stem from similar roots, Third World realities differ significantly from those in the Western democracies. Further, the cyclical pattern so evident in the West is not necessarily the case in the Third World. In most Third World nations, there was no dramatic upsurge during the 1960s (although the international current did have some impact virtually everywhere), and no dramatic decline in the mid-1970s. There are national variations in the scope and timing of student activism in the Third World, but these are based more on national developments than on international currents. In many respects, the Western "bias" of the literature has distorted analyses of student politics in the Third World. While it is possible to utilize conceptual frameworks from the Western literature and even some of the general research trends, it is necessary to look at Third World student activism as a relatively independent phenomenon.

The Political Framework

Universities do not function in a vacuum, and they are especially related to and dependent on their societies in the Third World. Students are also attuned to societal developments, and student political activism, in most Third World countries, is