

Student Unions In Kenyan Universities: Representatives Or Political And Ethnic Puppets?

By

Kenneth O. Nyangena

Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Department of Social Sciences

Laikipia University

Email: kemyangena@yahoo.com

Aiset Aisha

Lecturer, Department of History,

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Islamic University in Uganda and a PhD student at
Laikipia University.

Email: aisetae2020@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth examination of the dual role of student unions in Kenyan universities, focusing on whether these unions function as authentic representatives of the student body or as tools manipulated by political and ethnic interests. By critically analyzing the historical evolution of student activism, the intersection of national politics with campus life, and the influence of ethnic dynamics within academic institutions, this study seeks to uncover the complex and often contentious nature of student leadership in Kenya. The research delves into the ways in which student unions, initially formed to advocate for students' rights and welfare, have increasingly become embroiled in the broader political and ethnic struggles that define Kenyan society. By examining both the positive and negative impacts of political and ethnic manipulation on student unions, the study highlights the challenges these unions face in maintaining their independence and fulfilling their core mission of representing the interests of all students. The findings reveal a nuanced interplay between genuine student representation and the external pressures of political and ethnic affiliations, which often compromise the unity and effectiveness of student leadership.

Keywords: student unions, ethnic politics, student activism, higher education, governance,

Introduction

Globally, student unions act as advocates for the students, represent student interests and concerns to administration and other stakeholders. They play a crucial role in ensuring that students have a voice in shaping policies and decisions that affect their academic and social experiences. University student unions in Sub-Saharan Africa have undergone a significant transformation, evolving from elitist factions that engaged in protests against social and political injustices, colonial rule, and the misrule of Africa's post-independence leaders into political tools for authoritarian regimes. This shift is exemplified by the politicization of student governance at Makerere University in Uganda, as analyzed in the study by Andrea Kronstad Felde, a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Bergen in Norway. Felde's research focuses on

how the mainstream political parties in Uganda, particularly the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) and the opposition National Unity Platform (NUP), have influenced the student union at Makerere University (Felde, 2024). Felde's study, titled *Opening the Black Box of Student Government in Authoritarian Contexts: Institutional Work and Intra-organizational Conflicts in the Students' Guild at Makerere University, Uganda*, was published in *Higher Education* on April 29, 2024. It sheds light on how student unions, once champions of radical advocacy, have been increasingly entangled with the political dynamics of Uganda's autocratic environment. Felde (2024) argues that the institutionalization of political party influence has significantly impacted the governance of the Students' Guild, with frequent internal divisions undermining the academic interests of the student body.

At Makerere, the oldest university in Eastern and Central Africa, Felde found that the Students' Guild had become closely tied to political parties, reflecting broader patterns of political polarization within the country. This politicized environment is marked by ethnic affiliations, fragmentation, and contestation among political parties aiming to control the student leadership, which has resulted in detrimental consequences for student governance (Felde, 2024). As Felde notes, the growing political factionalism has extinguished the once-vibrant flames of student radicalism that were prevalent during the struggle for independence and against authoritarianism.

Felde's study highlights that, despite the internal strife caused by the interference of rival political factions, most students did not seek to eliminate party politics from the Students' Guild. Instead, they were primarily concerned with the ways in which party rivalry disrupted decision-making within the Guild. As one respondent noted, it was difficult for students to imagine a Students' Guild that was free from political party influence, given the entrenched nature of party politics within the university (Felde, 2024). Even students aligned with the NRM expressed concern over the influence of the opposition NUP, but they did not critically assess how party politics might be harming the governance of the Students' Guild (Felde, 2024).

Felde's research also reveals that when students spoke of disrupting party politics within the Students' Guild, they were primarily referring to reducing the influence of opposing political parties, rather than eliminating party affiliation altogether. This division was particularly evident during the elections for the Students' Guild leadership, where political rivalries were manifested in the formation of candidate teams along party lines. Thus, while the internal conflicts within

the Guild were a source of concern, they did not lead to calls for an apolitical student governance system (Felde, 2024).

The higher education sector in Kenya has seen significant growth and diversification. According to the Commission for University Education (2014), the country boasts about 13 Public and private universities. This robust network reflects the government's commitment to expanding access to higher education. Beyond universities, Kenya's higher education landscape encompasses various specialized institutions. These include teacher training colleges, institutes of science and technology, medical training colleges, and trade and agricultural institutions. These institutions offer a mix of three-year diploma programs and two-year certificate courses, catering to diverse vocational and professional training needs. The expansion of higher education in Kenya is also evident in student enrollment numbers. From a modest 571 students at independence in 1963, enrollment surged to 239,362 by the 2012-2013 academic years (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This remarkable growth highlights the increasing demand for higher education and the country's efforts to meet it. However, this growth comes with challenges such as ensuring quality education, addressing infrastructure deficits, and meeting the needs of a rapidly growing youth population. Policymakers and stakeholders must work collaboratively to address these issues and sustain the progress made in the sector.

Methodology

This study is largely descriptive in design (cf. Creswell, 1998; Babbie, 2001; Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). The desk top review concentrated on literature related to student governance and activism with special reference to Kenya. The documentary sources used included published books, journal articles, magazines, as well as unpublished materials such as dissertations, and conference and seminar proceedings.

Overview of student unions in Kenyan universities

After independence, most African countries tasked the civil service and universities as agencies of transformation and modernization. In particular, Universities would be an instrument to give strength, content, and direction to national life. By the late 1970s, Universities such the University of Nairobi and its constituent Kenyatta University College became key hubs of national dissent within Kenya. Many of the debates that students initiated on campus would later be rearticulated on the national political stage as former students went on to prominent public

positions, set up their own political parties or joined governing or opposition parties. Many of those who graduated in the 1970s and 1980s have been active in Kenyan politics ever since thus playing an active role in Kenya's struggle for democratization. During this period, the sitting president was the chancellor of all public universities. The president being the chancellor was responsible for appointing the vice chancellor of the university. This led to democratic space and ideas at the university being stifled by administrators who were seen to serve the interests of the ruling class. President Moi took over leadership from President Kenyatta in 1978 and one of his first actions was to release all of Kenyatta's detainees which students responded to with joyous demonstrations on the streets of Nairobi.

However, the hope of a return to nationalist ideas after death of President Kenyatta, basic freedoms of discussion and democratic participation was short-lived. Instead, lectures and seminars that were deemed to be controversial were cancelled a move that diminished institution's autonomy. Expulsions of University continued, politicians giving lectures in public Universities were harassed and arrested while students and lecturers seen as against government such as Professor Ngugi wa thiongo were detained without trial. Worse, the Nairobi University Students Organization (NOSU), the predecessor of the Student Organisation of the Nairobi University (SONU), was dissolved in 1979. In 1982, there was student unrest at various universities forcing college administrators to suspend suspended studies and ordered students to go home. Days after, the Ministry of Education made it a requirement that no student would be readmitted unless he or she gave out information implicating the perpetrators. This was the introduction of blackmail in public Universities that grossly undermined academic freedom in Universities.

President Moi would later in the 1980s publicly reprimand student activism and intensified his intolerance on student activism. Despite the government crackdowns, student activists continued to force government policy change. For example, the government introduced new rules on student loans application in which parents or guardians were required to deposit land title deeds before their children would be granted loans to enroll in the university. However, the student union SONU organized a boycott of the new loan forms in 1982 arguing that majority of students came from humble backgrounds and therefore without property and collateral in the name of title deeds would not access university education. During this period, there was a coup de ta that was

linked to student activism. This led a major crackdown on the University of Nairobi and the dissolution of the university of Nairobi in October 1982. Unknown number of students were arrested, mistreated and forced to sign false confessions implicating their fellow students.

In the years 1980s to 2024, Kenya's higher education sector underwent significant transformation and expansion. According to the Commission for University Education (CUE), the nation's higher education system comprises 52 universities, including 22 public chartered universities, 17 private chartered universities, and 13 institutions holding letters of interim authority (CUE 2014). In addition to universities, Kenya's educational framework incorporates teacher training colleges, institutes of science and technology, medical training colleges, and trade and agricultural institutions. These establishments offer diverse programs, including three-year diploma courses and two-year certificate programs, thereby addressing various vocational and professional training needs. The trajectory of student enrollment in Kenya's universities further highlights the sector's expansion. Enrollment figures rose dramatically from a mere 571 students at independence in 1963 to 239,362 during the 2012-2013 academic year (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2015).

While the exponential growth of university student numbers signifies increased demand for higher education and underscores the nation's dedication to advancing academic accessibility, students have remained active in national politics, fighting for constitutional reforms. The emerging criticism by the church, the Law Society of Kenya, dissidents of the state party, and civil society agents as well as students made it possible to liberalize political structures in the country. In particular, student activism has continued to play a critical role in political change and the analysis of student activism illustrates the connection that exists between political development, social status, the education system.

The highly-contested 2007 presidential election between Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga created significant political polarization in Kenyan universities, characterized by tribal mobilizations. According to Omole, these mobilizations shifted away from ideological roots, mirroring the national political landscape. As political allies of the candidates clashed on the streets, students replicated these divisions in university halls. Mwandawiro notes that tribalism was absent in universities during his time, with only one unifying body, the Student Organization of Nairobi University (SONU), fostering solidarity among students regardless of ethnicity.

The enactment of the Universities Amendment Act (2016) further reshaped the landscape of student leadership. For the first time, a female student, Anne Mvurya, was elected chairperson of the University of Nairobi Student Association (UNSA), marking a historic moment in university governance. The Act mandated an electoral college system for student elections, requiring representatives from various colleges to elect executive leaders. While some applaud the reforms for reducing campaign violence and increasing inclusivity, critics argue that the system stifles robust student representation. For instance, Bruno Otiato contends that UNSA lacks meaningful engagement with the student body, contrasting it with the alleged corruption of SONU, which focused on looting funds allocated for student activities.

Challenges in the current system include accusations of administrative interference, as seen in cases where strong candidates were disqualified under questionable circumstances. At Egerton University, for example, Kiplagat Ng'eno reported being threatened by university security after declaring his candidacy. Mwandawiro critiques the present system for failing to nurture effective leaders, instead producing individuals who prioritize appeasing university administrations over advocating for students. While Kenya's higher education sector has made significant strides in accessibility and inclusivity, challenges in governance and leadership remain. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to balance administrative control with the empowerment of authentic student representation, ensuring universities continue to produce leaders capable of driving societal progress.

Ethnicity student unions and politics in Kenya

Kenya, a multi-ethnic society with over forty recognized ethnic groups, has been characterized by its rich cultural diversity. However, this diversity, while a source of strength, has also been a source of tension and division throughout the country's history. The role of ethnicity in various spheres of Kenyan society, including politics, education, and governance, cannot be overstated. In the context of student unions, ethnicity has played a significant, yet controversial, role in shaping the dynamics of student activism, leadership, and representation in Kenyan universities.

Student unions in Kenya have historically been powerful platforms for voicing concerns, advocating for student rights, and influencing national political agendas. These unions, however, have not been immune to the pervasive influence of ethnic politics that has shaped the broader Kenyan political landscape. This essay seeks to examine the intersection of ethnicity and student

unions in Kenya, exploring how ethnic affiliations and loyalties shape the functioning of student organizations, the challenges they face, and the impact they have on student activism and leadership in Kenyan universities.

Student movements and associations in higher education exert a significant influence, affecting not just students but also academic institutions and the broader society. Students' unions play a crucial role in higher education by serving as essential mechanisms for student impact and representation within. They are pivotal in fostering student success and enhancing the overall university experience. They provide a platform for students to acquire leadership skills, develop a sense of belonging, gain industry connections, access campus provisions, share learning experiences, and also to feel the campus life at its best.

However, the process of choosing university student leaders all over the world is a democratic one that opens a door into student union politics, a realm often met with intense campaigns, with high stakes and emotions being dedicated to these campaigns that can sometimes escalate into tribal attacks. Drawing from global cases, it is evident that student politics can turn divisive, violent and destructive. Recent incidents have highlighted the dark side of these elections, with clashes, stabbings, and even deaths occurring amidst fierce campaigns. Some have led to disruption of activities within institutions. Very recently, one Public University Senate was forced to close the University over similar escalating incidences. The big question is, is it really worth it?

In light of these challenges, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of promoting peaceful and inclusive student politics. Students must prioritize dialogue, respect diverse perspectives, and uphold democratic values in their engagement with their counterparts in these activities. Further, besides the individual legal responsibility for perpetrators, it is crucial to realize that student elections should work as a uniting factor to students rather than an ingredient for division, injuries and even death of fellow comrades.

Ethnicity in Kenya is thus deeply rooted in the colonial and post-colonial periods. During the colonial era, the British administration employed a policy of divide-and-rule that exacerbated ethnic divisions. Different ethnic groups were allocated specific roles and privileges, creating an unequal distribution of resources and power (Ogolla, 2022:11). Post-independence, successive Kenyan governments continued to employ ethnic patronage systems that ensured the loyalty of

ethnic communities to the ruling party by distributing political and economic benefits along ethnic lines (Wanjiru, 2021:57).

This practice of ethnic favoritism has had lasting effects on the political and social fabric of the country. Political parties, especially during elections, have relied heavily on ethnic allegiances, and this dynamic has been mirrored in student unions, where leadership has often been determined by ethnic affiliation rather than merit or ideological alignment. The politicization of ethnicity in Kenyan society is therefore a crucial backdrop to understanding the role of ethnic politics in student unions.

The Role of Student Unions in Kenya

Student unions in Kenya are formal organizations that represent students' interests within the university setting. These unions typically engage in advocacy around issues such as academic freedom, campus welfare, financial support, and political rights. They serve as a collective voice for students, enabling them to mobilize around shared issues and push for reforms both within the university and beyond. Historically, student unions in Kenya have also played a pivotal role in national political struggles, with students often leading campaigns for democratic reforms, justice, and social change (Omondi, 2020:33).

However, while student unions have the potential to unite students across ethnic and social lines for common causes, they have often become arenas for ethnic competition and division. This is particularly evident during student elections, where candidates and their supporters often align themselves along ethnic lines, a trend that is reflective of the broader national political culture. Ethnicity becomes a determining factor not only in the election of student leaders but also in the allocation of resources and positions of power within the union (Ogolla, 2022:15).

The role of ethnicity in the selection of student leaders is one of the most visible ways in which ethnic dynamics shape student unions. In many Kenyan universities, student union elections have become a reflection of the country's ethnic divisions. Political campaigning during elections often takes on an ethnic hue, with candidates drawing support from specific ethnic groups based on common ancestral ties or regional affiliation. This practice undermines the development of a cohesive student body and perpetuates ethnic fragmentation (Mburu, 2019:45).

The election of student union leaders through ethnic lines results in the marginalization of students from minority ethnic groups who may not have the necessary support to win elections. In some cases, ethnic alliances are forged not out of shared political ideologies or goals but simply as a means of ensuring that a particular ethnic group retains power within the student union. This has a significant impact on the representation of students in leadership roles and can lead to disillusionment among those who feel excluded from the process (Omondi, 2020:36).

Furthermore, the ethnicization of student leadership often creates a culture of patronage within student unions. Leaders may prioritize the interests of their ethnic communities over those of the wider student body, leading to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. This practice hinders the development of an inclusive and effective student union that can address the concerns of all students, regardless of their ethnic background (Wanjiru, 2021:63).

The Impact of Ethnicity on Student Activism

Ethnicity also affects student activism and the ability of student unions to engage in national political struggles. In some cases, student movements that have the potential to challenge the status quo or advocate for progressive reforms become fragmented along ethnic lines. Ethnic allegiances can lead to a lack of unity within student unions, reducing their capacity to effectively mobilize and push for meaningful change (Ogolla, 2022:19).

This fragmentation is particularly evident in the context of protests and strikes, where ethnic solidarity can sometimes override common concerns. For example, during national protests or university-wide strikes, students from different ethnic groups may prioritize their ethnic interests over collective student goals, leading to disjointed and ineffective activism. The divisive nature of ethnicity in these contexts further weakens the potential of student unions to achieve their objectives and contribute to national political movements (Mburu, 2019:49).

On the other hand, there are instances where student unions have used their ethnic diversity to foster solidarity across groups. In some cases, students have managed to overcome ethnic divisions and united for common causes such as demanding better educational facilities, fighting for gender equality, or advocating for political reforms. However, such instances are often the exception rather than the rule, and the dominant trend remains one of ethnic fragmentation (Wanjiru, 2021:66).

The dominance of ethnic politics in student unions presents a number of challenges. First, it undermines the principles of democracy and meritocracy that should guide student leadership and representation. When ethnic affiliation becomes the primary determinant of leadership, the best candidates may not be elected, and the interests of all students are not adequately represented (Omondi, 2020:40).

Second, ethnic politics fosters a culture of exclusion, where students from marginalized ethnic groups are sidelined in the decision-making processes of student unions. This exclusionary culture can lead to feelings of alienation, distrust, and division within the student body, undermining the unity that is essential for effective student activism (Ogolla, 2022:21). Third, the entrenchment of ethnic politics in student unions reinforces the broader national culture of ethnic-based politics, which has been a major source of division and conflict in Kenya. When student unions mirror the ethnic divisions of the wider society, they contribute to the perpetuation of a political culture that prioritizes ethnic loyalty over national unity and common citizenship (Wanjiru, 2021:70).

Conclusion

Ethnicity continues to play a central role in shaping the dynamics of student unions in Kenya. While student unions have the potential to be powerful platforms for advocacy and political change, their effectiveness is often hampered by the influence of ethnic politics. The ethnicization of student leadership and activism creates divisions within student unions, undermines democratic processes, and prevents the development of a unified student body that can effectively address the concerns of all students.

In order to overcome the challenges posed by ethnic politics, there is a need for a concerted effort to promote inclusivity, meritocracy, and unity within student unions. Students must be encouraged to engage with each other across ethnic lines and focus on common issues and goals that transcend ethnic boundaries. University administrations and student bodies alike must work together to create a culture of unity and cooperation that reflects the diversity of the student population and fosters a sense of collective responsibility.

Ultimately, the role of ethnicity in student unions in Kenya highlights the broader challenges of nation-building and political unity in a multi-ethnic society. If student unions can overcome the divisive forces of ethnicity and work towards building inclusive, meritocratic, and

effective organizations, they could serve as powerful agents of social and political change, both within the university system and in the broader Kenyan society.

References

Bakke, E. *Roots and Soil of Student Activism*. The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Comparative and International Education Society, 1966.

Barnett, R. *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Buckingham: SRHE/Open University Press, 1997.

Barasa, S. "Disabusing Student Politics on Campus." *Coffee Connection*, Mar. 2002, p. 19.

Babbie, E. (2001). The Practice of Social Research. New York: Wadsworth. Bakke, E. (1966).

Babbie, E. *The Practice of Social Research*. Wadsworth, 2001.

Bergan, S. "Student Participation in Higher Education Governance." Council of Europe, Dec. 2014, www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/Governance/SB_student_participation_FR.pdf.

Bergan, S. *The University as Res Publica: Higher Education Governance, Student Participation and the University as Site of Citizenship*. Council of Europe, 2004.

Bilken, R., & Bogdan, K. *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. 4th ed., Allyn & Bacon, 2003.

Boland, J. A. "Student Participation in Shared Governance: A Means of Advancing Democratic Values?" *Tertiary Education Management*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2005, pp. 199-217.

Bosire, J., Chemnjor, C., & Ngware, M. "Students' Leadership in Selected Public Universities in Kenya: Disfranchised Pressure Groups or an Integral Component in University Management?" *African Research Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2008, pp. 195-221.

Brickman, W., & Lehrer, S., editors. *Conflict and Change on the Campus: The Response of Student Hyper Action*. School and Society, 1980.

Bryman, A. *Social Research Methods*. 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2008.

Carrington, W., DeBuse, J., & HeeJin, L. "The Theory of Governance and Accountability." 2008, www.cprid.com/pdf/Course%20Material_political%20science/4-Governance_%26_Accountability-Theory.pdf.

Clark, B. R. *The Higher Education System: Academic Organisation in Cross-National Perspective*. University of California Press, 1983.

Commission for University Education. "CUE News." *Newsletter*, Sept.-Dec. 2014, www.cue.or.ke/images/phocadownload/CUE_Newsletter_Sept-Dec_2014.pdf.

Creswell, J. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Traditions*. Sage Publications, 1998.

Creswell, W. J. *Qualitative Inquiry Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd ed., Sage Publications, 2007.

De Boer, H., & File, J. *Higher Education Governance Reforms Across Europe*. Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente, 2003.

De Boer, H., & Stensaker, B. "An Internal Representative System: The Democratic Vision." In P. Maassen & J. P. Olsen, *University Dynamics and European Integration*, pp. 99-117. Springer, 2007.

Egerton University. *Egerton University Calendar, 1999/2000*. Education Media Center, 1999.

Felde, A. K. "Opening the Black Box of Student Government in Authoritarian Contexts: Institutional Work and Intra-organizational Conflicts in the Students' Guild at Makerere University, Uganda." *Higher Education*, 29 Apr. 2024.

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. *Kenya National Census Report: 2015*. Government Printer, 2015.

Mburu, M. *Ethnic Dynamics and Student Leadership in Kenya*. African Studies Press, 2019.

Mburu, W. *Ethnic Politics and Student Union Elections in Kenya*. University of Nairobi Press, 2019.

Ogolla, F. A. "Ethnic Dynamics and Student Leadership in Kenyan Universities." *African Journal of Political Science*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2022, pp. 11-21.

Ogolla, P. "Ethnic Politics and Student Unionism: The Case of Kenyan Universities." *Journal of African Politics*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2022, pp. 11-19.

Omondi, J. "The Role of Student Unions in National Political Struggles in Kenya." *Nairobi University Press*, 2020.

Omondi, L. *Student Unions and Political Mobilization in Kenyan Universities*. University Press, 2020.

Wanjiru, G. "Ethnicity and Inclusion in Student Governance: A Kenyan Perspective." *African Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2021, pp. 57-70.

Wanjiru, M. *Ethnic Politics and University Student Unions in Kenya*. Oxford University Press, 2021