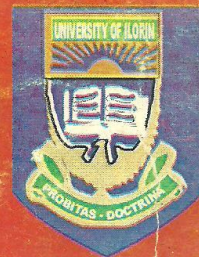
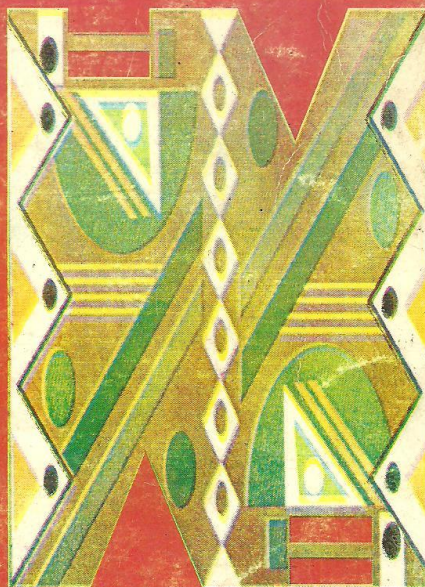


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Students' Crises: The Dimension of Student – Police Relations in Nigeria

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Abstract

Against the background of series of students' crises in Nigeria's tertiary institutions since 1965, the relationship between students and the police has developed into what could be called a mephistophelian relation characterised by fiendishness. This paper gives historical overview of a students-police relations as a catalyst to students' crises in Nigeria. It is recommended that the police, in the discharge of their constitutional duties of restoring and maintaining laws and order should always exercise great restraints in the event of provocations by students. The police and other security agents should be given modern training in civic contact and education.

Introduction

Against the background of students' crises in Nigeria's tertiary institutions over the years, the relationship between students and the police has developed into what could be called a mephistophelean relations characterised by fiendishness. Indeed, both the police and the students treat each other with disdain, mistrust and suspicion.

Police inability to understand the fundamental causes of the psychology of student unrest coupled with their ineptitude in crisis management have more often than not escalated student crisis rather than quell it. Thus, it is not surprising that students who have been a revolutionary potent force in the process of nation building have been the objects of police brutality, indiscriminate killing through gunshots, incapacitation and maiming.

What then are the factors responsible for this strained relationship and how can it be improved? Before taking a retrospective look at the relationship between the police and students, especially within the past three and a half decades in Nigeria, it is essential to briefly have an overview of the works of some authors on the causes of students' crises generally with a view to conceptualizing the phenomenon and to proffer solutions.

Causes of Students' Crises

Students' crisis is a world-wide phenomenon, and speculations as to its causes continue to be lively. Its origin in Nigeria dates to 1944 when students protested against the British authorities who were determined to use the premises of King's College as a base for housing the West African Frontier Force raised in their West African Colonies to help in the Second World War. Prominent among the protesters were the late Chief A. Y. Eke, late Olu Akinfosile, Chief Chukwu-Emeka Odumegwu and late Victor Ovie-Whiskey. It should be noted that in spite of the protest, the Colonial administration went ahead to house the force in that college and moved the students to Obalende. Although the protest was not spear-headed by organised students union, the action of the protesters gave birth to the first instance of protest by Nigerian students. Since then, it has grown to become a regular occurrence in the country. By the Mid-60's however, this changed from its peaceful non-violent form to violent and open confrontation with security agents, leading to destruction of lives and properties as from the 70's.

A wide variety of factors responsible for students' crises have been adduced by some authors. For instance, Adegoke (1980) and Akinboye (1980) argued, from the psychological perspective, that adolescent traits, poor welfare services, political and economic conditions prevalent at a particular point in time constitute students restiveness. Apart from these psychological factors, Akinboye (1980) stressed that the failure of institutions' administrations to provide adequate atmosphere for free expression, deplorable conditions of infrastructural facilities as a result of inadequate funding for maintenance and provision of new ones as well as communication gap over the ban on students unions are also causes of students unrest.

Emphasizing further on psychological factor as a cause of students' crises, Tamuno (1980) stated that the three key factors of leadership, time and circumstances may explain differences in the cause and consequences of student actorism. Like Akinboye, he categorized students into more mature group as well as active and passive groups. He reasoned that this classification helps in knowing the students' leaders and followers.

Altbauch and Lauter (1973) however identified factors of students' crises as the degeneracy of the educational system and infrastructural facilities. Like Adegoke (1980), they agreed that students' unrest can be traced to psychological traits. As part of their

own contribution towards solving student unrest, they suggested dialogue and consultation as a way of expressing their views. They also suggested non-violent and non-destructive protests.

Another author who shares the same view with Adegoke but with much emphasis on the political aspect is Hanna (1974), who attributed student unrest to lack of academic freedom, non-participation of students in institution's administration and the political situation of the country. He opined that most of the crises are sparked off by unpleasant policies such as the Structural Adjustment programme (SAP) of 1987, as well as the high handedness of the administrators. But unlike the other authors, Hanna concluded by stating that academic freedom and racial discrimination are sources of student unrest in Europe, while political economic factors are sources of student unrest in Asia, America and Africa.

Still on the political causes of students' crises, Becande (1973) stated that African students are more sensitive to political and economic matters in their countries. He stressed further that because of their contribution to political development through agitation and military force, government had to make certain political decisions in their respective countries. This view is equally shared by Adekanbi (1972), who stated that African students have helped in reshaping the political pattern of their countries. Explaining further on this, Rock (1973) stated that students have exercised considerable influence on political decisions. Rock corroborated his assertion by referring to the cancellation of the 1982 census figures and rejection of census figures during Balewa's regime as a result of opposition faced by the government. He also gave an example of the abrogation of Nigeria-British defence pact as one of the political pressures which the Nigerian students exerted on the nation's political machinery.

Digressing from the political plane, Nwala (1980) analyzing from a Marxist perspective, argued that student unrest in Nigeria is a product of bastardized political economy which had to do with the exploitation of the nation's resources by the bourgeoisie class at the expense of the people's welfare. He stressed further that it is this exploitation that made students, as the nation's conscience, rise to challenge the status - quo through condemnation, strikes and protests.

Another ideological colouring to the causes of student unrest, as provided by Babatope (1974) and Oyovbaire (1973), represent a conflicting ideological stand. While Babatope agrees with Nwala (1980) that students' revolutionary exploits are a necessity for a radical change and a resolve of political and economic problems,

Oyovbaire holds a different view and condemns students' militancy as unnecessary and counter-productive.

It is clear from the comments and observations of these aforementioned authors that a multiplicity of factors can be said to account for students unrest. Efforts are made in this paper to review causes of various students' crises that have led to strained relations with the police in Nigeria.

Student – Police Face-Off

The first display of strength between the police and students, which was caused by political crisis occurred in the month of October, 1965. The students of the University of Ibadan had protested against the results of an openly-rigged election by the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) in the Western Region on October 14th 1965. The students barricaded the chambers of the Legislative House to protest the results of the election. Having forced their way in, although they were not violent, police presence was necessary, at least, to put them under check, to ask them to vacate the Legislative premises and to prevent manhandling of the legislators and destruction of property. The students, on seeing the armed policemen, retreated to the campus. The police moved on to the campus boundaries and were violent while raiding the campus. Female undergraduates were mercilessly beaten; some were pulled by their hairs from the bathrooms. Doors were smashed and even students' effects like radio set, musical sets and other items were massively destroyed. Many students suffered head injuries. The then Vice-Chancellor, late Professor Onwuka Dike responded by condemning the invasion of the University by the police and assault on female students who were sleeping at the time and the destruction of property belonging to the institution. The crisis marked the beginning of the strained relations between the students and the police. Indeed, it was a pointer to the students that they were in for a long drawn battle with the police, in the foreseeable future.

This assertion was proved on the first day of February, 1971 when the police shot dead a student, Mr. Adepoju Adekunle, while the students were demonstration over the generally deteriorating boarding conditions and poor catering services in the institution. The Vice-Chancellor, rather than listen to the grievances of the students, invited the police to disperse the protesting students. The arrival of the police aggravated the crisis, and in the ensuing battle with the students, Mr. Adepoju Adekunle, a part two Economics student was killed through police gunshot. Following Adepoju's death, a wave of

protests erupted in other institutions of the nation in sympathy with their Ibadan Colleagues. The students barricaded the streets, chanting their songs and condemning the brutal killing. The chain of protests led to the closure of University of Ibadan and other tertiary institutions nation-wide.

The death of Adepoju deepened the seed of hatred and mistrust of properties became a permanent feature of students/police face-off in Nigeria. This was more clearly manifested in the April, 1987 Ali-Must-Go-crisis which engulfed the nation's tertiary institutions like wild fire.

The events that led to the crisis at the University of Ibadan, Lagos, Benin, Nigeria (Nsukka) and other tertiary institutions was the arbitrary increase (hike) in feeding and boarding fee by the Federal Military Government. The increase in feeding was from 50 kobo to N1.50k (then) while that of boarding fees was from N150.00 to N400.00. This was done at a time when the University students were expecting free education at all levels. Nigerian students led by Mr. Segun Okeowo, the then President of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) reacted by barricading the streets, singing war songs and destroying public property in what was generally called among students, OPERATION CONFRONTATION. Government reacted by drafting anti-riot policemen to the nation's University campuses. In the ensuing clash between the students and the armed security agents at the University of Lagos, Akintunde Ojo was shot dead by the police. The death of Akintunde Ojo further aggravated the tension as crisis engulfed virtually all the nation's tertiary institutions and by the time the dust settled, eight more students had been killed by the police nationwide.

Police again aggravated the students crisis of 1981 when University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) students took to the streets protesting the gruesome murder of one of their colleagues, Miss Bukola Arogundade, by unknown assailants. Police opened fire on the protesting students who carried only placards. This act succeeded in increasing the death toll from one to five.

Similarly, in 1986, police on the invitation of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ango Abdullahi, fired indiscriminately at protesting students of Ahmedu Bello University who were commemorating the 8th anniversary of 'ALI-MUST-GO' crisis. Many students were killed while others were injured. The killing raised a wave of sympathy demonstrations nationwide. At Kaduna Polytechnic, one student, Happy Danjuma was shot dead by the police.

Again in 1988, police shot a pupil Master by name Funsho Babatunde, while students were demonstrating against the economic hardship caused by Babangida's Structural Adjustment Programme. At the Lagos State University the police shot a student, Mr Kunle Oshinowo in a pre-emptive move to avert anti fuel students riot.

In 1989, during the anti-SAP riot and in 1992 during the fuel scarcity crisis, students nation-wide demonstrated and had a running battle with the police and other security agents although no student was reported dead in these demonstrations. Some members of the public who joined the riot were hit by police bullets in various locations in Nigeria.

The questions that really come to mind are: what are the factors that are responsible for the ageless unbridled skirmishes between the students and the police? Why do the police indulge in shooting defenceless students?

The responses are not farfetched. One of the reasons that can be ascribed to the continuous face-off between the police and the students is lack of understanding of students' psychology on the part of the Nigeria police force. The police lack adequate understanding of the significance of protests in crisis management. To the students, protest is an inalienable right. It is a way of expressing their grievances to the appropriate authorities. It is regarded as a potent vehicle through which their feelings, pulse perception and grievances could be expressed and felt.

However, in contrast, the police regard protest as breaking the law and order, and it is an unacceptable way of challenging the right of security agents. In defence of their high handedness against demonstrating students, the police have sighted the 'law proclamation', which enable them to disperse by force, all persons who have unlawfully assembled for demonstrations. Their action in curbing demonstrations is therefore in defence of the law.

Another explanation for continued police-students friendship relations can as well be adduced to poor education standard and poor training of police staff. This has certainly accounted for their inability to cope with mob psychology as well as equip them with the expertise required for crisis management.

It is certainly in realization of the above explanation that the police force has embarked upon massive educational upgrading of its men and officers. All men and officers were directed to have a minimum of the West African School Certificate (WASCE) or the General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'O'Level or its equivalent, for entering the police force. There is overhauling and reorientation of

the Nigeria Police Force leading to a large number of graduates being employed.

Another fundamental reason why police keep on shooting students with impunity is government's lukewarm attitude to the punishment of officers involved in the murderous killing of students and innocent members of the public during students demonstrations. Government seems to have also failed to dismiss, punish or charge to court for murder any officer that has been known to shoot students during riots. Such punitive measures are expected to have incorporated officers who gave wrong order as well as those failed to comply with police operational regulations during crisis periods.

The policemen who opened fire at students of University of Ife while they were protesting the gruesome murder of their colleague, Bukola Arogundade, by an unknown officer were not punished for killing five students. During the student crisis of 1986 when students of Ahmadu Bello University and Kaduna Polytechnic were killed, the State Police Commissioner justified. The Abisoye Panel that investigated the crisis found him blameless. He was however, transferred from Kaduna to Oyo State.

Also Aliyu Nababa, Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) who was the leader of the team of the fifty-two mobile policemen that carried out the dastardly bloody operation of those who were initially ordered to be tried and locked up were later released without being tried. They only recorded case of police disciplinary measure involving Gregory Tarobuyor, Assistant Commissioner of Police, who led seventy-two police for Zaria, ABU riot and was retired for his gross incompetence, insensitivity and ineptitude. However, the leader of the team, ASP Dankalo and the officers that killed Kunle Oshinowo of Lagos State University while the students were demonstrating against the fuel crisis were left unpunished.

Obviously, it appears that this attitude of not punishing police officers who indulge in shooting defenceless students coupled with the earlier stated 'law of proclamation' seem to have encouraged them to continue to perpetrate dastardly acts of shooting demonstrating students with live ammunition.

Be that as it may, it is pertinent to observe that the condition under which an average policemen reacts, during student crisis is a contributory factor to their high handedness during students' demonstration. The Nigeria policeman is a product of the violence of the society. He is of the view that the student is within the framework of what he perceives as the 'privileged class'. A paradox thus emerges out of this scenario: the police as an instrument and object

of oppression and the police perceiving student as a symbol or index of oppression. The students who are seen as an enlightened group and being objects of oppression perceive the police as a visible instrument of oppression. There, then evolves a kind of suspicious and fiendish perception of each other. The result is lack of understanding of interest and causes of action of one against the other. The oppressed poorly paid policeman, in order to display a brave act, vents his venomous anger on the wrongly perceived privileged class, and through misplaced aggression, he over-reacts to students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has shown that, within the last three and half decades of the last century, the relationship between students and police has gradually deteriorated. A number of factors have been adduced to be responsible for this unwholesome trend, prominent among which are poor students' welfare, insensitivity of university administrators to students' plight and their urge to invite the police to campus coupled with the seeming contradictions in the Nigerian society.

In order to put an end to the police / student skirmishes, all the causes of student unrest that have been highlighted in this paper should be addressed and given priority attention. The issue of students' welfare which has been a veritable source of students' crisis should be properly tackled. The campuses should be made more conducive to teaching and learning. Provisions should be made for functional amenities and suitable teaching infrastructure. Obsolete materials should be replaced and the damaged ones rehabilitated.

Administrators of tertiary institutions should make judicious use of the resources at their disposal to provide and maintain these facilities.

To evolve a smooth and friendly relationship between the students and the institutions' authorities, student-staff liaison committees should be set up.

To reduce death of students, police and other security agencies should not be invited to the campuses to quell students' riots: if there is any pressing need for their invitation, the institutions must have to be closed at least for twenty-four hours. The recalcitrant students should be forcibly ejected by the institution's security agents. Even if the police men are invited, those dispatched to the campus or scenes of students' protest should not carry lethal

weapons. This measure will forestall and prevent the incidence of 'accidental discharge' in the face of provocation by the students.

The police, in the discharge of their constitutional duties of restoring and maintaining law and order, should always exercise great restraint in the event of provocation by students. Under no circumstance should lethal weapons be used against students even if there is urgent need to shoot at all. Rubber or dummy bullets only should be used to scare them and this should be done by shooting into the air. Even before this, the police should have informed the protesting students of their intention to shoot or to use weapons against them through their public address systems. The police could also use their weapons, such as baton, teargas, hot water and police dogs to disperse the protesting students. This is to remove any incidence of students' deaths which had characterized student/police relations since 1971.

More importantly, the police and other security agents should be given modern training in civil contact and adequate education. Educational development of all the rank and file of the police and security agents as well as exposure to modern training will enhance their understanding of students' crisis and how to manage it. It is hoped that with this development, the police will have a better perception of students' struggles and agitations. Consequently, they will be able to handle students' crisis. Efforts should be made to discipline security agents who indulge in illegal and unwarranted shooting of students during protests or demonstrations.

On the other hand, students should inform and obtain permission from the police before they embark on any protest or demonstration. If such permission is eventually granted, student leaders on behalf of their colleagues should sign an undertaking with the police that there would be on breach of peace, willful destruction of property, and that they would eschew all forms of violence and confrontation with the police and security agents. Lastly, there should be a student-police relations committee. This should comprise the student leaders, the police public relations officer (PROs) and the Dean of Students Affairs of the neighbouring institutions. This committee will ensure that there is a flow of communication between the police and the students, especially during the times of crisis. University administrators should desist from the practice of inviting police to campuses whenever there are problems in the nation's tertiary institutions.

It is hoped that if these suggestions and recommendation are adopted, the incidence of student/police clashes will be minimized, if not completely eradicated, in the next century.

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