

# Divisive politics on campus

If the Government decision to split the University of Nairobi into six colleges was meant to water down student activism, writes DENNIS ONYANGO, it has failed miserably.

When it comes to management by crisis, the University of Nairobi has seen it all. At the centre of almost every decision the University made at the peak of the Nyayo Era lay a desperate attempt to contain student activism and stem the radicalisation and politicisation of the university — all of it coated in sweet euphemisms to conceal the reality.

When the Government split the university into six semi-autonomous colleges in November 1983, the official line was that the decentralisation was necessary for the university to provide better services to students and staff. Parliament moved fast to enact the University of Nairobi Act of 1985 to legitimise the split of the university into six constituent colleges.

The reality was that the Nyayo government, even more than the university administration, had been shaken by the activism that had gripped the university, ending with students participating in the 1982 coup attempt. The university was closed for 14 months. When it reopened in October 1983, the students showed no signs of remorse though they had lost valuable time.

## Desperate times

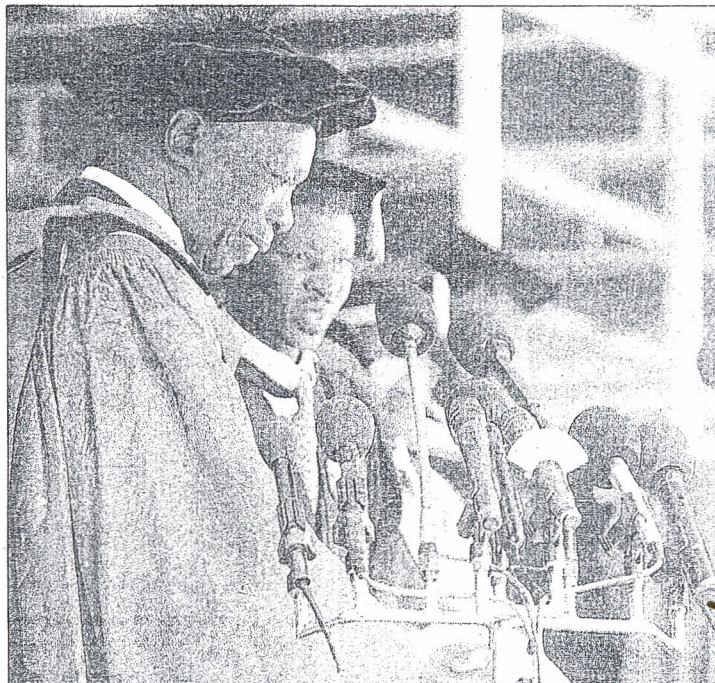
The students had been readmitted after signing forms pledging good conduct. But they promptly set up a campaign to revive their banned union amid the threat of a new wave of riots. Something had to be done. It was a desperate time that required desperate reaction. The decision to split the university into six "separate, semi-autonomous colleges" was taken even before the legal requirements were put in place.

It was not until March 1985 — two years after the fact — that the University of Nairobi Bill was presented to the Fifth Parliament seeking to formalise the decentralisation. The urgency of the matter was underscored when President Daniel arap Moi took up the matter personally, urging legislators to seek ways of containing student activism.

## Resolving problems

Each of the new colleges was to be administered through two boards to cover management and academic affairs. Both boards were to be answerable to the University Council through the Senate. This arrangement, the university explained, would leave the vice-chancellor with only coordination work to do. They would concentrate on resolving the problems of the various colleges and look into matters affecting the university's relationship with other bodies, particularly the Government.

But suspicions mounted when the administrators of each of the new colleges received circulars detailing what was expected of them.



MOI THE CHANCELLOR: The President made a personal appeal to Parliament to seek ways of bringing university students to heel.

They were required to prepare rules and regulations "governing the conduct, behaviour and discipline of staff and students of the college" for approval by the Senate and the Council. It was an attempt to create suspicion among students and prevent them from acting as a block. The reasoning was that most activism emanated at the Faculty of Arts, but almost always led to the closure of the entire university. Decentralisation meant only the college that rioted would be closed. There were attempts to instil the belief in students in other colleges, notably law and engineering, that they were special and too busy to engage in activism.

## Major riot

In 1985, however, a major riot rocked the university involving students from almost all faculties situated in colleges great distances apart. It began in early February when students, most from the main campus, boycotted classes in sympathy with five of their colleagues who had their scholarships withdrawn and three others who had been expelled. The riots left at least one student dead, 15 jailed and others expelled. Other colleges soon joined the boycott, but the humiliated administration closed only the main campus. After all, they were generally affected by the same issues; in some instances, it was purely a matter of pride and a show of might: none of the colleges wanted to be seen to be made up of cowards too timid to confront the administration or the Government.

## Costly experiment

By 1990, decentralisation had become a costly experiment that turned the city and neighbouring Kiambu district into a battlefield whenever students had a problem. All riots inevitably ended up at the city centre — the very place where decentralisation was meant to keep them away from. Decentralisation may have decongested the main campus, but it also succeeded in ensuring that destruction caused by student unrest was felt all over Nairobi and its environs.

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Authority, ensuring he had little time to engage in what he did best — journalism. The *Kenya Times* failed to rise to the occasion, soon losing its sharp focus and getting mired in the politics of the day. It was distributed in all Government offices and some schools and, until recently, carried all the Government tender advertisements. It was also used in the run-up to the first multi-party General Election in 1992 to do some dirty work via its infamous Kanu Briefs.

## Sharp criticism

In an environment increasingly intolerant of dissenting opinion, the *Standard* Editor-in-chief George Githii earned sharp criticism in Parliament and was forced to quit following his criticism of detention without trial. Peter Kareithi learned the criticism of the regime was not the done thing when he tried to explain the closure of East African Bag and Cordage but instead saw his *Financial Review* banned. Reason: he had said that a son of a "senior politician" had brought in gunny bags!

*Beyond*, edited by Bedan Mbugua, was banned for questioning the queue-voting system and exposing the rigging patterns. Mbugua was jailed for his efforts. Although the Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the Press, the Moi government liberally interpreted several colonial-era laws that restricted free expression.

## Constant attack

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, the Press was under constant Government attack. Journalists and editors were harassed, arrested and detained for writing and publishing views critical of the Government or favourable to the emerging opposition.

Others were picked up from newsrooms — among them Wahome Mutahi, Mugo Theuri and Njuguna Mutonya — and whisked to Nyayo House and on to Kamiti Maximum Prison. The media had been silenced with barely any protest. This fear led to self-censorship.

Although the print media was relatively independent for decades, the regulatory framework for broadcast media allowed abuse and manipulation in the issue, withholding and revoking of broadcast permits and frequencies. This paranoia continued until President Moi was on his way out. In April 2001, he even ordered police to monitor and record all speeches at political rallies. It was an impractical order and was quietly ignored.

## Relatively candid

Despite all these attempts to clamp down on the media, the print media have remained relatively candid and independent. Today, the mainstream print media comprises five daily newspapers — the *Nation*, *Taifa Leo*, the *East African Standard*, the *People Daily* and the *Kenya Times*.

Nevertheless, the Nyayo Era's draconian rules have not changed despite a promise by the incoming government that they would be done away with.

On Monday this week, police arrested and questioned the *Standard* Group's CEO, Tom Mshindi, *Sunday Standard* Managing Editor David Makali and Associate Editor Kwamchetsi Makokha in connection with a front page article disclosing statements by suspects in the murder of National Constitutional Conference delegate Odhiambo Mbatia.

The police want the three men to disclose the source of their information, contrary to journalistic practice worldwide. Ultimately, it seems, absolute freedom of the Kenyan Press is a dream to far.