

# DAILY NATION

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## Students and protest

THE year 1968 marked the heyday of student power in Europe and America, and the signs are that, with the exception of relieving lulls, the spectre is now haunting Africa.

The root of the cleavage between university administrators and students (and alas, between governments and student organisations) seems to be a failure in diplomacy. Coupled with this is the very questionable assumption that students should be ordered about from a pedestal of unquestionable wisdom.

The first thing to note is that students have a vital role to play in society, and gone are the days when a university was regarded an ivory tower. True, some African universities still harbour reactionaries, and worse still, a good number of reactionary zombies. But when all the allowance is made, the fact still remains that students are among the cream of any society and that they should be encouraged in every way possible to contribute the maximum towards nation-building.

Of course students are in the main inexperienced. The French students during their "revolution" in 1968 tried to dump the paternally rigid (and outmoded) de Gaulle's administrative machinery in the River Seine although they had no alternative regime to offer. In that sense they were anarchists or nihilists. But with mature restraint and foresight, students can still offer suggestions as to how public affairs should be run. Old age has no doubt something to do with wisdom, but then, antiquity is not really the same thing as wisdom.

Surveying the fate of the student in Africa, it is fair to say that his role in the post-independence period has of necessity taken a new dimension and that misunderstandings are bound to be there.

Here in our country we have had our own misunderstandings which on the whole seem to arise out of lack of well-oiled channels of communication. The same seems to apply in many other places. Though communication is two-way traffic, we must point out that students have sometimes been the victims of hard-headed bureaucratic approach, where administrators deal with students in terms of statistical figures. The student faced with such uncompromising stands can have only one recourse, namely, protest. This can take many forms — demonstrations or vain attempts to occupy a campus in the best Cohn-Bendit style. The militant students at Lusaka have attempted this, though unsuccessfully.

The thesis seems to be that unless governments and university administrators understand fully that students are not out to criticise for the sake of it, victimisation will continue, and as in all cases it is the grass which suffers.

President Joseph Mobutu of Congo-Kinshasa in June dismissed all students from Lovanium University and ordered all the Congolese among them, to be drafted into the army for two years, and this after campus rioting, saying that the students were morally as well as physically rotten. And in Zambia, troops were ordered to occupy the Lusaka University after militant students seized control of the campus in protest at President Kenneth Kaunda's policy over arms sales to South Africa. The University of Dar es Salaam is experiencing a dislocation of administrator-student relationship following the rustication of the leader of the university's student organisation.

Overall, it seems a healthy sign to see students questioning the way our leaders are governing us. Of course, demonstrations should be rooted in genuine grievances, but at the other end of the spectrum, there is no justification for crying "wolf!" whenever students stage a sit-in or a demonstration.

To always remind the students that they depend on public funds for their education may be innocuous, but certainly misplaced. After all, every member of a society benefits from the public purse in one way or another.

A university cannot afford to be a factory for producing marionette-minded graduates, people with no constructive perspicacity, independence of mind and originality. We are training people who will be expected to make decisions on leaving the university, people who can innovate and people who are prepared to be champions of the under-privileged who are the majority. It is only when we treat students as mature people (and when their actions allow just that) that we can expect them to fit in that noble role.