

Divide and rule in academia

The University of Nairobi may have taken giant academic strides since it became autonomous, but it has never been able to manage its political tensions writes DENNIS ONYANGO.

The University of Nairobi started its independent life on a controversial note — not so much over academic decisions but for political reasons. Little has changed since those early days in 1970, when it became autonomous from the University of East Africa, then comprising Nairobi, Makerere and Dar es Salaam.

The confusion began with the news in April of that year that Josephat Karanja, then Kenya's high commissioner to the United Kingdom, had been named the next principal of the college, taking over from Arthur Porter. There had been speculation for months over who would replace Porter.

Forced to apologise

The chairman of the College Council, BM Gecaga, dismissed the reports that Karanja would take over as "press speculation", arguing that no decision had been reached on Porter's successor.

The controversy was fuelled by an earlier decision to abolish the position of deputy principal, then held by David Wasawo. Some saw this as an attempt to ensure that the professor did not succeed Porter. Political decisions were already taking centre stage in university management.

Karanja took up his appointment in June that year. Gecaga changed his tune, saying that the decision had been reached after consultation between the college council and President Kenyatta. Parliament insisted that Karanja had not been at the university long enough to head the institution. Porter had been the college principal since 1964.

The *Sunday Post*, which first reported that Karanja was being considered for the job, was forced to carry apologies twice for the "duress" the report had caused Karanja. Historian Bethwell Ogot was drawn into the confusion when *The Standard* reported that he was also being considered for the position. Ogot, then a lecturer at the university, also denied that he had been shortlisted.

Unfulfilled promises

Thirty three years on, Karanja's promises on taking up the job remain unfulfilled. Addressing first year students in October that year, the vice-chancellor of the newly launched college promised that the students would have "a right to apply discipline to knowledge, to dissent and to question fact". They would be represented in all the decision-making bodies of the university.

Barely a year later, riots rocked the university. It is a legacy that has haunted the university ever since. So early in the University's life, a stand-off had already developed between the students and the administration. The 1971 riot led to a number of students being fined, expelled or jailed.

A meeting between student leaders and Karanja resolved that the fines would be deducted from the students' allowances and Dar es Salaam University students appealed to President Kenyatta to ensure that justice was done to their colleagues in Nairobi.

The Government accused the students of unleashing violence on the public and banned their union in June 1973. The die was cast. Karanja said students were using the union for political purposes. The administration attempted to contain dissent through divide and rule, a policy it has pursued with little success.



POWER TO READ: The University of Nairobi has been dogged by political crises.

Announcing the ban on the students' union in 1973, Karanja said from Taifa Hall: "I hope you will organise yourselves into useful clubs and societies so that you can enhance the cooperative nature of the university. I advise you to leave politics to politicians."

The ban, Karanja said, had been made necessary by the "arrogant and scandalous behaviour" of students the previous year. With the union dead, boycotts became routine. In March 1974, James Orengo, then secretary of the Kenya Students Union, issued a notice that the students would go on strike if the university did not sack the head of Architecture, Prof Jorgenson. The strike was to begin on April 1, 1974.

Orengo also demanded the unconditional readmission of all expelled students and nullification of all exams held after February 25 of that year. Orengo also wanted student representation on decision-making organs as earlier promised.

The Architecture Department was said to be producing only foreign architects amid claims that local students were finding the exams too difficult — a claim their leaders denied. "The issue is not that students find the exams difficult or the standards too high," Orengo said. "The root of the trouble is that the required standard has not been made known to students."

Three weeks later, Karanja agreed at a rally at the Great Court to remove Jorgenson "with immediate effect" and students agreed to sit exams from March 25. But the crisis persisted, with calls for Karanja's resignation even as he maintained he was doing a "splendid job".

"Greatest of contempt"

Responding to a *Daily Nation* editorial that called on him to resign, Karanja replied during an appearance on Voice of Kenya television: "I don't think the fact that the *Daily Nation* and its editors call for my resignation means a thing to me. I treat it with the greatest of contempt, and I think, since nobody else is saying it, I will say that I am doing my job splendidly. And that is not in any way being not humble."

Karanja insisted he would not attend a student's *Kamukunji* again because it was "not a meeting of

sensible people in a sensible way".

Questions on Karanja's conduct were finding their way to Parliament. MP for Mombasa South KS Mwavumo argued that the solution to the university's problem lay in Karanja's removal. There was maladministration, the MP said, adding that under Karanja there was "a tendency to just drag in anyone without qualifications and make him a teacher". But the vice-chancellor maintained that asking for his resignation was a waste of time.

He eventually left in March 1979 amid speculation that he was joining politics. Karanja denied it, however, maintaining that he was so busy running the university that he had no time to respond to such claims. "I have no time to comment on rubbish," he said. By 1983, he was in the race for the Mathare parliamentary seat.

Great purge

His replacement, Joseph Maina Mungai, fared no better. Differences between students and the administration continued and a latent crackdown on lecturers thought to be radical started. It persisted under Philip Mbithi, took office in August 1985 and who was to preside over the university's great purge of radical lecturers and student leaders. The purge started under Mungai with searches on lecturers' offices and homes for "communist" documents and "seditious publications".

Mbithi moved in after student unrest in 1985 and the subsequent closure of the university. Under Mbithi, divide and rule took a dramatic twist, with students being encouraged to pursue district associations and faculty-based organisations rather than an umbrella students organisation. Loyalty among students and lecturers was rewarded with undeserved promotions, money and even Government jobs.

Sell-out student leaders stood better chances of being appointed to administrative positions within and outside the university. Such students could even pursue post-graduate programmes, complete with Government scholarships, even when they were not qualified. Loyal lecturers would be promoted and be made professors without publishing even a newsletter.

"The world was turned upside down," remembers Kilemi Mwiria, a one-time lecturer at Kenyatta University who is now an assistant minister for education. "Previously, the rule in academics was 'publish or perish'. It changed to 'you don't have to publish in order to flourish'."

Series of riots

Dividing the university into various faculty-based campuses was largely a political decision that was meant to contain student activism. It ended up spreading the violent confrontations all over the city instead.

The University of Nairobi Bill was presented to the Fifth Parliament in March 1985. It sought to formalise the decentralisation of the university into six "separate, semi-autonomous colleges".

This was one of the recommendations of a committee chaired by former head of the Civil Service GK Kariithi. The committee was appointed in October 1984 after a series of riots that culminated in students supporting rebel units of the Kenya Air Force which tried to overthrow President Daniel arap Moi in August 1982. This ended up in what Ngugi wa Thiong'o called "a cathartic orgy of destruction".

The University of Nairobi was closed for a year and students made to report to their village chiefs. It was an absurd requirement that sought to make students see themselves as members of their villages and their tribes. Divide and rule had been perfected. Opening the Fifth Parliament, Moi asked the legislators to seek ways of containing student activism. The Bill sailed through. It never contained unrest at the University of Nairobi.

I did not want violence, and I did not want to operate in the darkness. I wanted to do things constitutionally and not just hate people. My idea was to fight peacefully.

— Harry Thuku in his book, *Harry Thuku: An Autobiography*.