

Three Facets of Global Student Protest

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In three important countries on three continents, university students are protesting. Governments had better take these protest movements seriously because they have the potential to incite major unrest or even to cause the downfall of regimes. The most serious protest movement is at present in Indonesia, where demonstrations that began at a few universities have spread throughout the country. Student complaints have escalated from protests about high prices and governmental corruption to open, and ultimately successful, demands for President Suharto's ouster.

The other two major protest movements are of less immediate impact, but both have the potential for significant political results. In Nigeria, students are at the forefront of a nascent protest against the repressive military dictatorship of the late Gen. Sani Abacha and his successors. The regime has destroyed the economy of oil-rich Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, executed high profile dissident Ken Saro-Wiwa and, most recently, engineered a patently unfair election with only one candidate—General Abacha himself. So far, the regime has kept the lid on things by repression. Now, however, there are signs that campus-based unrest is gaining strength.

In Germany, students last winter protested against deteriorating conditions at the universities. Lack of funding combined with expanding enrollments have brought Germany's university system to its knees. Classrooms are overcrowded, and students are taking longer and longer to graduate. Students organized the largest demonstrations in Europe since the volatile 1960s to demand more funds for higher education. So far, even though these demands have not been met, protests have subsided, at least for the moment. 1998 happens to be the 30th anniversary of the great European student protests of 1968, a fact not lost on either students or the authorities in Europe. In Germany, unlike the situation in Indonesia or Nigeria, students are not questioning the basic legitimacy of the state, nor do they have the potential of seriously damaging the government. Their concern, at least for the present, is for higher education.

The power of student protest lies in the ability of students to mobilize the campuses and to reflect the frustrations and concerns of the population, and especially of the

educated middle classes. In countries without functioning democratic systems and freedom of expression, student movements can reflect simmering social unrest, and serve as a catalyst of social change or even revolution. It has happened before, and it can happen again. Students, after all, played a central role in the violent uprising that brought Indonesia's Suharto to power 30 years ago.

Students have the greatest potential for major social change in developing countries. Indonesia and Nigeria are classic cases of nations in which the government has limited legitimacy in the eyes of many people. The government was not elected, few outlets for free expression exist, such as an independent press or media, free trade unions, and the regime seldom allows unfettered protest. People cannot vent their political frustration, and the government has no way of gauging public opinion.

Students are the only group capable of mobilizing dissent. They are congregated on campuses where expression is relatively free. Organizing demonstrations is easy, and campuses are often close to the centers of power. Students are to some extent taught to think for themselves in their courses, and their thoughts sometimes turn to politics. A section of the teaching faculty is often critical of the regime, and willing to express such views to the students. Students reflect, to some extent, the attitudes of their families and, since students come in general from the educated middle classes, these views have considerable importance. The campus, in a situation of social crisis, turns into a hothouse of political unrest.

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Government authority, if it moves with sufficient force and determination, can at least temporarily stifle student dissent. Regimes have closed down universities, arrested and sometimes tortured or killed student leaders, and this has often quelled campus unrest. The government of Burma (Myanmar), for example, went so far as to shoot hundreds of students and closed the nation's universities for more than a year to stop antiregime dissent. These draconian measures worked, but turned the nation into an international pariah state and an economic basket case. In Nigeria, the regime may still have time to repress the students, although if it cannot solve the underlying social problems that caused the student protests, the crisis will persist.