

Student Activism and the “Global University” in Tanzania

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In late 2010, university students at the Tanzanian University of Dar es Salaam, the country’s oldest and most prestigious university, were threatening to call boycotts—protesting the government management of its cost-sharing scheme. By February of this year, student fee-related troubles engulfed the university as students walked out of classes and marched into the city, only to be beaten back by the infamous government-deployed riot police, of the Field Force Unit, who used batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd. Two students were shot, and dozens were arrested. Student leaders eventually negotiated an end to hostilities with administration officials for a temporary stipend increase, though no long-term solutions were found.

RECENT DEMONSTRATIONS

The student rationales for protest in late 2010 and early 2011 were similar to those that drove student strikes at the University of Dar es Salaam in November 2008, when thousands of undergraduates boycotted classes and marched through campus, carrying placards. The 2008 protests became a political football in the country and led to a two-month university shut down, though they were not marred by the violence usually associated with Field Force Unit deployment. They also led to no discernible change in policy.

This issue all followed recent university student demonstrations across much of sub-Saharan Africa—in countries including Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. These actions, like university protests around the globe, were responses to pocketbook issues: University budgets have been tightening, fees increasing, and students squeezed for more resources—as the state retreats ever further from education funding. Tanzania’s demonstrations, in a way, are not different. There, students have been incensed at one government practice, in particular: “means testing” for student loans, an outgrowth of Tanzania’s cost-sharing policies.

MEANS TESTING AND INEQUITY IN LOANS

Structural-adjustment pressures and economic liberalization through the 1980s had led to the increased privatization of education in Tanzania, first at the basic and secondary levels and then at the university level. While the government had allowed for the provision of higher education among institutions under private ownership, as part of this policy shift, the introduction of cost-sharing measures in public universities was also integral to the initiative. To ameliorate the difficulties that many Tanzanian students would face in paying increased fees, the cost-sharing policy was coupled with government-funded loans—first, for public-university students in the early 1990s and, then, for the country’s private-university student population in 2004. To gauge each student’s ability to meet the financial obligations of higher education, the Higher Education Student Loan Board developed a means testing application, on which university students would report their parents’ backgrounds and economic activities—information that would then be corroborated by local leaders. In theory, the system was

designed to ensure that students from economically disadvantaged families received government loans to fully cover the cost of higher education. Students from more-privileged backgrounds, then, would receive lower levels of loan assistance or none at all.

The means-testing system, however, had not been working according to plan. Even if the student loan board had access to all the necessary financial information on applicants and their families (difficult in a country without widespread electronic-banking records), the board was reportedly underfunded, understaffed, and besieged by the tens of thousands of applications. The reporting difficulties, and the board's inability to thoroughly investigate applicant claims, led to inequities in the way loan money was distributed. Coupled with continuing allocation problems and the scattered stories of rich students receiving 100 percent loan coverage, as poor students skipped meals or were unable to even reach campus at all, the University of Dar es Salaam student leaders called for the elimination of the means-testing system, under threat of boycott.

STUDENT PROTEST AND UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT

To be sure, student activism has been common at the University of Dar es Salaam, not only in the last decade but throughout its history, and has played an important role in the institution's development. As the country's flagship university, the institution that would become this university was a key part of Tanzania's larger developmental strategy. Yet, the university and its students presented Julius Nyerere—the country's founding father, first president, and creator of "African socialism"—with a conundrum. In the 1960s, the newly

independent Tanzania desperately needed the skilled manpower and highly trained workers that only a university could provide. However, in the view of President Nyerere and others, investments in elite students and their institution were made “on the backs” of the country’s peasantry and were only reinforcing a system that was exacerbating inequalities. Nyerere, like other rulers in sub-Saharan Africa, had frequently violent run-ins with university students through the late 1960s and 1970s, as the government increasingly drew the University of Dar es Salaam into central-planning initiatives. Student protests would only intensify with democratization and privatization measures through the 1980s and 1990s.

UNIVERSITY RESPONSES TO GLOBALIZATION

The case of Tanzanian student protests—and their links to wider university unrest in the era of neoliberalization—can inform wider discussions in many ways. Despite the failure of many scholars to include sub-Saharan countries, like Tanzania, in “global” education models, there are strong similarities between the experiences of Tanzanian students and those of other countries in sub-Saharan Africa with students around the world. Education policies have grown out of Tanzania’s economic liberalization, structural adjustment, and increasing involvement in marketized aspects of the global economy in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, including cost-sharing and educational privatization. These policies have confronted Tanzanian students with different financial and philosophical expectations, just as they have confronted students around the world. Tanzania’s community-minded, and state-centered, educational history under President Julius Nyerere might put recent neoliberal policies in starker relief. For

Tanzanian students, nevertheless, the state's retreat from large-scale public employment, the increasing competition for regional white-collar jobs from other educated East Africans, and the rhetorical emphasis on the "entrepreneurial" creativity only serve to reinforce the new economic realities within the global "market."

At the same time, lest one is lulled into too strong a sense of institutional isomorphism, it can be seen that student activism in the country is also a product of the economic, social, and cultural history of Tanzania—not to mention the specific and sometimes competing political projects of the various iterations of the Tanzanian state from independence to contemporary times. The oft-mentioned idea of the "Global University"—a supposedly universal model characterized by cross-border competition for graduate students, the proliferation of collegiate-ranking systems, and the race to build state-of-the-art research programs in science and technology—simply does not describe the reality of Tanzanian higher education, where administrators and policymakers struggle to expand an undergraduate-focused system, research output is negligible, and gifted doctoral students and the resources they represent primarily flow *out* of the country. Tanzanian universities and university students—like those in Chile, Spain, Germany, and the United States, among others—represent only one in an endless number of responses to globalization.