

No student activism at main campus

By DENNIS ONYANGO

Activist students' politics was for a long time a preserve of the University of Nairobi's Main Campus. Currently, however, radicalism seems to have taken root at the Kikuyu Campus. What is stirring the teachers?

"Probably radicalism is everywhere. The youth always want to take lead. Among students, activism depends on what is at stake," Dr. Odegi Awuondo, a senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University, says.

The University of Nairobi is no longer the thorn in the flesh it used to be to the Government in the '70s and early 80s. What killed the fighter's spirit?

"There have been more purges and rehabilitations, students' deaths and detentions at the Main Campus than at other universities and campuses," Mr. Musoso, at the department adds.

"The lecturers have realised it is a waste of time talking to a government that does not listen. They now make technical appearances in class and go out to do other things," a lecturer says

But Mr. Musoso says there are other factors explaining the shift in student politics, to Kikuyu Campus, Kenyatta and Egerton Universities.

Kikuyu Campus, Mr. Musoso says, has many youthful and liberal lecturers, who would like to see things done the way they are supposed to be. Main campus has old lecturers who are conservative and determined to maintain the status quo.

Besides, he explains, many lecturers at the main campus have known terrible times before. Some of them are watched keenly by the administration. Knowing which side of their bread is buttered, they have decided to halt.

Musoso adds that the other universities are smaller, compared to Main campus or the University of Nairobi as a whole. Dr. Awuondo could not agree more but not before he asks, what happened to the belief that there is strength in numbers?

He has an answer. Kikuyu Campus, Kenyatta and Egerton universities are concentrated in one place. The relationship between the students is therefore very personal, unlike the situation at the Main Campus or the entire University of Nairobi.

Close students' interaction facilitates agitation. The main campus is segmented, Dr. Awuondo explains, saying that the main reason for dividing the university into many campuses separated by faculty and distance was to reduce the strength of students, believed to lie in their numbers.

Conditions for organising have been made more difficult at the University of Nairobi by segmentation. The segmentation has alienated students from one another. The sense of community has been destroyed. It is possible to have a very serious issue but it may only affect a faculty. That is not the case in KU where students are at one place and whatever happens affects almost all students. But has KU not always been at one place? Why have they not taken lead in the past?

Dr. Awuondo has an answer to this too. The University of Nairobi, has always taken



lead in all issues. This goes back to its historical origins and its location. It gets information before other universities. Being the first university in Kenya, it was always at the forefront.

Yet there is an interesting observation. At the University of Nairobi, the assumption has been that whatever does not affect the Faculty of Arts will not generate much heat. Radical approach to issues is confined to this faculty. Some have reasoned that students at the faculty are less busy, hence engage in acts of violence, to feel the gap. Dr.

Awuondo disagrees.

Contrary to popular belief, radical student politics indicate that students have absorbed what they learn. It does not indicate emptiness. A little radicalism is healthy to learning, Dr. Awuondo says.

To justify this, Dr. Awuondo says standards were higher in the 70s than they are now. At that time, students radicalism was at its peak. He criticises the separation of disciplines that were meant to supplement each other saying it has led to half baked graduates.

The separation of government and sociology was for instance meant to contain radicalism. There are Marxist ideologies in both Sociology and Government. The marriage of the two produced sharp students who could articulate critical issues. That is no longer the case, he laments.

He also cites the absence of a unifying students body, but is quick to emphasise that students' activism depends on issues at stake. We know what is at stake in Kikuyu or at KU, Egerton from last December.