

**A LEGAL APPRAISAL OF THE DECLINE OF THE STUDENTS’
MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Students’ unionism in Nigeria represents one of the most enduring and transformative social movements in the country’s modern political history. From its colonial origins in the 1930s, through the emergence of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) in 1956, to the radical resistance epitomized by the 1978 —Ali Must Go! crisis, and the eventual creation of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) in 1980, students were the bastion of justice, democracy, and social reform until its unfortunate decline. This paper adopted the doctrinal method and used the historical and analytical approaches in providing a historical examination of students’ unionism in Nigeria, interrogated its decline and the impact on good governance on the larger society. It was found that the enactment of the Students’ Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree No. 47 of 1989 represented the fossil era of Military regimes toward the students’ movement in Nigeria. Rights were abused and the civil space for the cultivation of vibrant student unionism was constricted. This paper argued that the introduction of civil government in 1999 has been unable to clear the hangover from the Military regimes. The larger impact of this anomaly on the society includes loss of democratic nursery, weakened resistance to impunity and elite capture. This paper recommended statutory guarantees for freedom of association in higher institutions, judicial activism in protecting student rights, legislative reforms to prevent arbitrary proscription of unions and encouraging civic education and non-violent unionism.

Keywords: Student Movement, Governance, Legal Appraisal, Democratic Participation, Nigeria.

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1. Introduction

Student movements have historically played a critical role in shaping socio-political consciousness, democratic governance, and public accountability across the world.¹ In Nigeria, student activism has been a formidable force in national development. The students body acted as a vocal pressure group against authoritarianism, maladministration, and anti-people policies. Through advocacy, intellectual engagement, and strategic alliances with civil society, student movements significantly influenced policy direction, defended civil liberties, and promoted democratic values. The students' movement has an established history as a cornerstone of participatory governance and constitutional democracy in Nigeria.

However, in recent decades, the vibrancy, organization, and influence of student movement in Nigeria have waned. Once-renowned student unions and activist networks have become largely muted, fragmented, violence-prone and disconnected from broader governance needs. This decline progresses with the worsening socio-economic conditions, recurrent education sector crises, and never-abating governance challenges. The apparent recede of students from civic space raises critical legal and constitutional questions, particularly in a democratic society where freedom of expression, association, and participation are constitutional guarantees.²

The eroding footprints of students' movement from the checklist of nation builders is not merely a sociological or political concern; it has profound legal implications for governance, accountability, and the rule of law. The parlous legal framework governing this ecosystem has endangered its existence and functionality. The shrinking civic space for student activism raises the concern of compatibility with constitutional guarantees and Nigeria's international human rights obligations. The broader implication of the weakening of students' movement in the higher institutions in Nigeria is the elimination of democratic nursery and state capture by the elites, leading to weak and diminishing mechanism for democratic oversight and civic education.³

¹ J. S. Omotola, —Student Unionism, Democracy, and Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. | *African Journal of Social Sciences* (2007) (5) (1) 23–41.

² F. Adewumi, —The National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and the Struggle for Democracy. | *Review of African Political Economy*, No.37 (1986) 64-80.

³ A. Adigun, —Students' Unionism and Democratic Struggles in Nigeria. | *Journal of African Politics* 7 (2012): 45–62.

The central problem addressed in this article is the correlation between student activism and good governance vis-à-vis the legal frameworks that undergird and direct their practice. The study seeks to interrogate the parameters for the coexistence of vibrant and ideological base students' movement and public order within educational institutions.

The research questions guiding this study include: What is the historical foundation of the students' movement in Nigeria? Are the extant legal frameworks adequate to protect student activism, or do they unduly restrict it? What factors have contributed to the decline of the students' movement in Nigeria? How does this decline affect governance, democratic accountability, and the rule of law? What reforms are necessary to revitalize lawful student participation in governance?

The objectives of this study are to examine the historical foundations of student activism in Nigeria, interrogates the legal frameworks that govern the students' movement, analyse the causes of its decline from a legal perspective, assess the impact of this decline on governance, and propose legal and institutional reforms aimed at strengthening student participation in democratic processes. The paper adopts a doctrinal research methodology, relying on the Constitution, statutes, judicial decisions, scholarly literature, and relevant policy documents.

The scope of this article is limited to student movements within Nigeria, with particular emphasis on their interaction with governance structures at the national level. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to legal scholarship on civic participation and the reinvigoration of students' activism as a cornerstone of good governance in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1. Students' Movement

Student Union refers to the umbrella association of students in a higher institution of learning. It creates a forum for effective interaction among students. It is the government of the students with basically three arms of government namely; the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.⁴ Students' movement on the other hand refers to the organized, collective actions and struggles of students aimed at promoting, defending or transforming educational, social, political and economic conditions within educational institutions and

⁴ Zuokemefa Enebraye Peter and Sese Tuperekiye Ebimobowei, —Leadership and Student Unionism, Challenges and Solutions in the Nigerian Tertiary Education System (Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities)‖ *European Scientific Journal* (2015) (11), (25).

the wider society. It is therefore a shared consciousness that involves mobilisation, protests, advocacy, campaigns or dialogue aimed at bringing about socio-political or institutional change. It is a reflection of generational challenges and values.⁵ For the purposes of this paper, Students' Movement shall be used interchangeably with Students' Unionism.

2.1.2. Governance

Governance, refers to the processes, structure, rules and norms through which collective decisions are made, authority is exercised, and accountability is ensured within a society, organization, or system. Modern understanding of governance postulates that authority in contemporary society is dispersed among various actors such as governmental institutions, private sector entities and civil society organizations.⁶ Effective societal steering requires coordination among these diverse stakeholders rather than top-down government control alone. The governance framework recognizes that solving complex social problems demands resources and expertise beyond what any single sector can provide.⁷ The core characteristics of governance include accountability, participation, transparency and rule of law.⁸

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks:

This article adopts the Social Contract and Participatory Democracy Theories as the frameworks upon which to construct the thesis therein. These theories capture the essence and provide the necessary parameters to examine the relevance of students' unionism to governance and conversely, the negative impact of its decline.

2.2.1. Social Contract Theory

The theory of social contract, in political philosophy, is an actual or hypothetical compact, or agreement, between the ruled and their rulers, defining the rights and duties of each. In primeval times, individuals were born into an anarchic state of nature, which was happy or unhappy according to the particular version of the theory. They then, by exercising

⁵ International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences (Second Edition), 2015

⁶ World Bank, —Governance and Development (Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank, 1992) 14 < <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/604951468739447676>> accessed 20 May, 2026

⁷ Banotes, —Unpacking the Conceptual Framework of Governance in the 21st Century (Governance – Issues and Challenges (2023) < <https://banotes.org/governance-issues-challenges/conceptual-framework-governance-21st-century/>> accessed 27 December, 2025

⁸ *ibid.*

natural reason, formed a society (and a government) by means of a social contract. The theory was expounded by the trio of Hobbes⁹, Locke¹⁰, Rousseau¹¹.

The most appropriate application of this theory is in constitutionalism. The doctrine of constitutionalism is that a government's authority is determined by a body of laws or constitution. Although constitutionalism, also regarded as limited government, is the antidote to arbitrary government. The theory identifies arbitrariness as interference with individual rights and seeks to establish protections for them via the separation of powers and a judicially protected constitution.¹²

2.2.2. Participatory Democracy Theory

Participatory democracy is a model of democracy that encourages active involvement by citizens in the governance and decision-making processes. This theory is traced to the ideas of thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹³ and John Stuart Mill¹⁴. It holds the belief that power ultimately resides with the people and that citizens should have a direct say in the decisions that affect their lives.

The theory captures deliberation as an integral part of open and informed discussions among citizens to reach consensus on important issues. It fosters inclusive and collaborative decision-making process, rather than exclusion and elitism. Holding public officials and government institutions accountable to the people and ensuring that their actions reflect the will and interests of the citizens is a core principle of the theory. Historically, the students' movement view Nigeria as a social contract that must be governed by participatory democracy.

3. Historical Overview of Students' Movement in Nigeria

The earliest recorded form of the students' movement in Nigerian can be traced to the activities of Nigerians and other West African students in the United Kingdom.¹⁵ They were united under the umbrella of the West African Students' Union (WASU). WASU was founded in London in 1934 by Ladipo Solanke. The nationalist consciousness of future

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1994) 89.

¹⁰ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Peter Laslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988) 271.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* 9GDH Cole tr, Everyman, London 1978) 15.

¹² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, New York 1993) 220-227.

¹³ Rousseau, (n 11) 36-38.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Everyman edn, London 1910) 233-235.

¹⁵ Zuokemefa Enebraye Peter (n. 4).

Nigerian leaders was shaped by the vibrancy of WASU. Students thus became both ideological partners of nationalists and indispensable voices of agitation for the independence of Nigeria.¹⁶

3.1. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS)

The consolidation of student unionism into a movement within Nigeria occurred with the emergence of the NUNS in 1956.¹⁷ The finest hour of students' unionism in Nigeria was in 1960, just before the country's independence. The students' movement led by Dapo Falase and Abidoye Babalola of the University of Ibadan challenged the appropriateness of the Anglo-Defence Pact. The clandestinely signed pact would have exposed the country to attack by the Soviet Union and other countries in the then Eastern bloc in case of war.¹⁸ The reach of the NUNS traversed beyond the promotion of student welfare to Pan-African solidarity. NUNS was the uncompromised ideological voice against apartheid in South Africa and a shoulder for other liberation movements across Africa. The movement reemerged strong after the Nigerian Civil War and helped to erase the fracture of the war. By the mid-1970s, NUNS, under its president, Segun Okeowo, had become a quintessential gadfly of governance and aligning with labour movement.¹⁹

3.2. The 1978 "Ali Must Go" Crisis

The 1978 —Ali Must Go Crisis was one of the most iconic episodes in the history of students' movement in Nigeria. The Obasanjo-led military government increased university tuition and tuition-related charges. The students condemned the hikes and viewed the policy as a betrayal of Nigeria's social contract, thereby, demanding a reversal.²⁰

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Alabi Festus Oluwole & Ige, Akindele M. —Gains and Pains in Students Unionism in Tertiary Institutions of Learning in Nigeria: Way Forward|| *International Journal of Innovative Research in Education, Technology & Social Strategies* (2021) (8) (1)

¹⁸ Ephraim Olabode Olusegun Lucas, —The Decline of Students' Unionism|| *The Nation* (Lagos, 19 May 2010) < The decline of students' unionism - The Nation Newspaper> accessed 08 January, 2026.

¹⁹ Bankole Abe and Theophilus Adedokun, —NANS: The Student Body has Come a Long Way, But has it Maintained its Status?|| *International Centre for Investigative Reporting* (Abuja, 19 April 2023) < <https://www.icirnigeria.org/nans-the-student-body-has-come-a-long-way-but-has-it-maintained-its-status/>> accessed 20 May, 2026.

²⁰ A. Yusuf, et al, —The 21st Century Unilorin Student Unionism|| < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370683582_THE_21_ST_CENTURY_UNILORIN_STUDENT_UNIONISM> accessed 27 December 2025.

The government binoculars of viewing students' movement as a subversive group truncated any engagement on a civil plane or tact in resolving the issues, rather brutal force was used to quell the —Ali Must Goll nationwide demonstrations. The protest, which began in April 1978 in University of Lagos, quickly engulfed several universities across the country. Dozens of students were killed, universities were shot down, NUNS was proscribed and the hike were not reversed.²¹ The template of killing armless students which began in the killing of kunle Adepeju on 1st February, 1971 was religiously followed and the number of those killed increased in 1978.²² The gradual but forceful emasculation of the students' movement had become an unspoken state policy.

3.3. Emergence of NANS

Consequent upon the ban, for nearly a decade, the movement operated underground. The students regrouped in 1980 at the University of Benin, to form the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). The NANS was modelled on the ideological bent of the NUNS. From inception, NANS positioned itself as a mass-based, radical, and anti-imperialist organisation. It declared its commitment to defending the rights of Nigerian students and lacing the struggles with broader democratic and social justice challenges.²³ It was in partnership with iconic mass-based groups like the Nigeria Labour Congress and Academic Staff Union of Universities to preserve the socio-economic space of Nigeria from infestation from bodies like the IMF and neo-colonialists.²⁴

3.4. Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) Protests

SAP was introduced under Babangida's administration in 1986. It was a programme of currency devaluation, subsidy removal, trade liberalisation, privatisation, public sector retrenchment and wage freeze.²⁵ The effects were immediate, as suffering of Nigerians increased geometrically. The NANS mobilised in conjunction with other partners and a nationwide protest erupted. As usual, security forces were given the orders to respond with lethal forces. Again, dozens of students and civilians were brutally mowed down. The template was rehearsed, universities were shut down, NANS was banned, and many student

²¹ Ephraim Olabode Olusegun Lucas (n 18).

²² *ibid.*

²³ Alabi Festus Oluwale and Akindele M. Ige (n 17).

²⁴ Bankole Abe and Theophilus Adedokun (n 19).

²⁵ A. Adigun (n 3).

leaders were arrested, detained without trial, or expelled. The campuses were militarized.²⁶ What followed was the draconian Students' Union Proscription Decree No. 47, 1989. The era of indiscriminate proscription of students' unions, arrest and detention of student leaders without trial, had emerged. In spite of this the NANS emerged and played pivotal roles in the pro-democracy struggle.²⁷

3.5. The June 12 Struggle

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections that were regarded as the freest and fairest in Nigeria was another challenge before the movement. The NANS mobilised students and aligned with civil society groups and pro-democracy activists. There were demonstrations, boycotts, and mass rallies in major cities for the restoration of June 12 and an end to military dictatorship.²⁸ The movement endured intensified repression, universities were militarised, student leaders were arrested, tortured, or forced into exile. The NANS was outlawed several times,²⁹ but the movement continued in resistance and stood as the guardian of democracy until the return to civil rule in 1999.

3.6. Students' Unionism in the Democratic Era (1999–Present)

The return to democracy ought to have brought new opportunities for the recalibration of the NANS. It seems, though painfully, that what the brutality and barbarity of the military regimes could not do to the movement, the subtlety of the Nigerian brand of democracy seems to have achieved it. The NANS seems to have been infiltrated by partisan politics and sheer brigandage. Union leaders are often co-opted by state actors, losing the independence and ideological bent of the movement. The monetisation and fractionalisation of NANS under the overlord of politicians have undermined the movement. The pursuit of personal interest, cultism and imposition of school management —boys as student leaders have clipped the wings of the movement. Thus, while the students and the larger society suffer from misgovernance, the students mutter some uncoordinated words of *aluta*, as the movement lies prostrate on the ashes of the past revolutionary fire of ideological strength and organizational unity.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ F. Adewumi (n 2).

²⁸ Ephraim Olabode Olusegun Lucas (n 18)

²⁹ Bankole Abe and Theophilus Adedokun (n 19)

4. The Legal Framework Governing Students Unionism in Nigeria

4.1. Constitutional Provisions

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria³⁰ provides as follows:

Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other person, and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interest...

This section guarantees the fundamental right to freedom of association. The broad spectrum of this right is highlighted by the phrase —or any other association. Definitely, the students' movement and like associations find their constitutional right of existence under the phrase. The full benefits of Section 40 of the Constitution are enjoyed when in community relationship with other rights as provided in the Constitution and other extant laws. Section 39 of the Constitution³¹ guarantees the right to freedom of expression, which the associations require as tool to communicate their ideas. Section 38 of the Constitution³² protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Together, these sections create a democratic space where citizens can organize, participate, and advocate.

4.2. Statutory and Regulatory Framework

4.2.1. African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

The African Charter on Human and Peoples Right has been domesticated by Nigeria, so it is an Act of the National Assembly.³³ Some of the provisions of the Act align with Section 40 of the Constitution.³⁴ Article 10 provides that: —Every individual shall have the right to free association provided that he abides by the law...³⁵ Article 11 guarantees that —Every individual shall have the right to assemble freely with others. The exercise of this right shall be subject only to necessary restrictions provided for by law in the interest of national security, the safety, health, ethics and rights and freedoms of others.³⁶ Thus, Section 40 of the Constitution³⁷ and Articles 10–11 of the Act³⁸ are in alignment. They protect the rights

³⁰ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (CFRN), Section 40.

³¹ CFRN.

³² *ibid.*

³³ African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act Cap A9, LFN 2004 (ACHPR).

³⁴ CFRN.

³⁵ ACHPR.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ CFRN.

³⁸ ACHPR.

to association and assembly, which of course, includes student unions and other organizations.

4.2.2. Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree No. 47 of 1989

The law, an SAP military era dictatorship decree³⁹ remains in our statute book as the only specific statute that regulates students' unionism in Nigeria. The tone of the law, *ab initio* is of course, combative, restricted and couched to justify the subversive label on the movement. How the decree found its way and remain the only specific statute regulating this critical segment of the society in a democracy is a sad demonstration of legislative insensitivity. Its constitutional alignment and the lawfulness of the law itself in democratic setting is questionable.

Section 1(1) of the decree provides thus: —As from the commencement of this Act, student participation in all union activities shall be voluntary, and confined to individual campuses of universities or institutions of higher learning or any other similar institutions.¶ The voluntariness of the students' movement is *res ipsa* as there is no record in history of any forceful recruitment into the folds of the movement. Therefore, the purported legislation on the voluntary participation in student activities is superfluous. The real intention of the law by confining unionism to individual campuses is to kill the movement. The constitutional latitude of Section 40 does not confine any assembly to a restricted location, therefore, the provision of the decree, purporting to do so is in violent confrontation with the Constitution. The confinement provision is therefore null and void.

The unconstitutionality of the decree continues in Section 2(2) of the decree. It provides thus: The Governing Council, Vice-Chancellor or any authority or person in charge of or in control of the university or institution of higher learning may, after conducting investigations with respect thereto, proscribe any such society. No individual or institution, except the court, can arrogate to itself the powers to derogate from the rights enshrined in the Constitution. The powers purported to be conferred by the decree is *ultra vires* and a usurpation of the powers of the judiciary. Whatever is stated as justification in section 2(1) of the decree goes to no issue.

The layers of absurdity of wielding *ultra vires* power rises up to the Minister or his delegate, whose opinion is a conclusive warrant to breach the right of assembly of the

³⁹ now cited as Cap. S24, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004.

students.⁴⁰ The façade of this decree is heightened by the failure to define what constitute —public interest and public safety—. These requirements for the breach of this right are wholly determined by the whims and caprices of either the authorities in the schools or the opinion of the minister. This hangover still regulates students' union existence on campuses today.

It is the position of this paper that the Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree is an affront to the Constitution.⁴¹ It offends the freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution⁴² and other extant laws⁴³. This is because:

- i. It does not meet the democratic thresholds of justification under section 40 and other relevant sections of the 1999 Constitution;
- ii. The National Assembly does not have the legislative vires to enact a law that offends the Constitution; therefore, the same cannot rightly be deemed a law enacted by the National Assembly; and
- iii. The enforcement of the law will contradict the Constitution, stifle the rights of the students and initiate disorder.

4.3. Judicial Attitude to the Students' Movement

The Nigerian judiciary has acted a vanguard in advancing the rule of law, equity, and justice in actions involving students. The courts in several occasions have intervened to save the academic destinies of many students that would have been destroyed by mindless expulsion and unconstitutional reactions to students' protests. Though many are still lost today because of lack of resources or the needed resilience to challenge their unjust expulsion in court. In the case of *Garba v. University of Maiduguri*.⁴⁴ Garba and his comrades had led a protest and were expelled for challenging the system. The Supreme Court quashed the expulsion and declared it unconstitutional as it gravely offends the principle of fair hearing. The Court further condemned the action of the University as both the accuser and the judge.

In another judicial intervention, Yinka Odumakin and seven others were expelled from the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) for leading a peaceful protest. The

⁴⁰ Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Cap. S24, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004, section 3.

⁴¹ CFRN 1999 (Amended).

⁴² Ss 40, 39, and 38 CFRN 1999 (Amended).

⁴³ Articles 10 and 11 ACHPRA.

⁴⁴ (1986) 1 NWLR (Pt. 18) 550 (SC).

Oyo State High Court set aside the expulsion and ordered their reinstatement, citing the University's failure to grant the students fair hearing.⁴⁵

Evidence abounds of the position of the judiciary against the highhandedness of the authorities and lack of tolerance for the opinions of the students on campuses.⁴⁶ Though doubt abound of what would be the position of the present Nigerian judiciary, considering the alleged rot⁴⁷ that has bedevilled that institution now.

The legal battles of the students have revealed the consistent pattern of arbitral wielding of power by the authorities to clamp down on the voices of students. These legal challenges reflect a broader struggle over the balance between institutions' authority and student rights in Nigeria. They raise constitutional and democratic questions about civic space, guaranteed freedoms vis-à-vis the training of students in the higher institutions, and institutional accountability in higher education.

5. Causes of the Decline in Students Movement Vibrancy in Nigeria

Beginning with the excess deployment of power and use of life ammunitions against students on 1st of February 1976, the spiral down in brutality against students by authorities has continued. The use of fire arms by the law enforcement agencies to quell student demonstrations is the first dart against the students' movement in Nigeria.⁴⁸

Following the death of Adepeju, the Military Government of Gowon set up the Justice B.O. Kazeem Commission of Enquiry. The whitepaper of the Commission found that it was the failure of the police to heed the advice that the use of fire arms was prohibited on campus that led to the sudden death of the Student's Union leader. Subsequent Commissions,⁴⁹ were set up as more strings of unrest unfolded. The Government resorted to pick and choose on the white papers depending on the one that suit them. The failure of Government to implement the white papers of Commissions of Enquiries such as headed by Kazeem, Abisoye and Akanbi were regrettable episodes that flushed the students' movement down

⁴⁵ Yinka Odumakin v. University of Ife (Unreported, Oyo State High Court, 1988).

⁴⁶ University of Ilorin v Oluwadare (2006) NGSC 35; University of Ilorin v. Adesina (2014) 10 NWLR (Pt 1414) 159; Oluwaseun Ogunyemi v. University of Lagos (2017); Federal University of Technology, Minna v. Olutayo (2018) Legalpedia (CA) 11991.

⁴⁷ Femi Falana, —The Rot in The Judiciaryl *Premium Times* (Lagos, 27 May, 2013) <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/136274-by-femi-falana.html?tztc=1>> accessed 20 May, 2026

⁴⁸ A. Yusuf, et al (19).

⁴⁹ Mohammed Commission of Inquiry, Abisoye Commission and Justice Akambi Panel. See Eunice Omoregie, —Student Unrest in Nigerian Universities: Looking Back and Forwardl (2005) *Journal of Social Sciences* 10(1), 17-22

the drain of decline and constitutes an obstacle to the growth of active unionism in Nigerian campuses. The Commissions frowned at the use of firearms on campuses and advocated reduced role and less involvement of authorities in the activities of the Student Unions.⁵⁰

The invocation of draconian law such as the decree⁵¹ and obnoxious policies by the authorities in the guise of instilling discipline in the students have resulted in a form of violence-prone-resistance within the student body and decline of intellectual and ideological base resistance. The suppression of the right of students is rife in Nigeria today. 52 students of Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma in Edo State were arrested on the 10th January, 2026. The arrest followed a peaceful protest against insecurity in Ekpoma, which later turned violent because it was hijacked by hoodlums. The students were arraigned before a Benin High Court on Monday, 12 January, 2026 on the charges of malicious damage and armed robbery. Many of the students said they were sleeping in their hostels when they were arrested about 3am. They have been remanded at Ubiaja Correctional Centre, while the case was adjourned until 26th February, 2026.⁵²

The infiltration of the movement with *egunje* or —settlement syndromel⁵³ by authorities and politicians is a devastating weapon that has corrupted the young ideological minds, divided the ranks of the students' body and decimated the movement. What nation wilfully indoctrinate its youth, its future, in the dishonourable acts of corruption? How can we so mindlessly sacrifice our tomorrow on avaricious altar of our today?

The lack of mentorship, resulting in a chasm between the past and present students' leaders has created room for charlatans and *gbemites* to stride the civil space like colossus. This in turn has led to poor communication skills among some student union leaders, contributing to low vibrancy and arid advocacy.⁵⁴

The hydra-headed challenges of cultism are active threat to the movement. Cultism is a blight on the glorious history of the students' movement in Nigeria. Yet, it emerged as a

⁵⁰ T. O, Adeyemi, Causes, Consequences and Control of Students' Crises in Public and Private Universities in Nigeria. —(2009) *Educational Research and Review*, 4 (4), 156-163.

⁵¹ Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree No. 47 of 1989.

⁵² Osagie Otabor, —AAU Students, Others arraigned Over Protestl (The Nation, Abuja, January 13, 2026) < AAU students, others arraigned over protest - The Nation Newspaper> accessed 13 January, 2026.

⁵³ Editorial, —NANS, the Fight for Student Rights Must Begin Againl *Indy Press, University of Ibadan* (Ibadan, 22 October, 2025) < <https://indypressui.org/2025/10/22/nans-the-fight-for-student-rights-must-begin-again/>> accessed 20 May, 2026.

⁵⁴ Joel Augustus-Daddie and Isah Adamu, —Mentorship, Good Governance and Development in Nigerian Organizations: A Comparative Analysisl *NIU Journal of Social Sciences* (2023) 9(4): 43- 49

form of resistance to the climate of oppression and intimidation foisted on the students. Cultists have brought untold hardship on the student populace.⁵⁵

Politician recruit and arm students for their dirty jobs and campaigns, while the school managements exercise indiscriminate power of proscription of unions, imposed lackeys as students' leaders in opaque, violent-prone and reason-challenged electoral processes. The unspoken government principle of divide-and-rule set the students against themselves, just to frustrate cohesion and united measures against impunity.⁵⁶

6. The Consequences of the Emasculation of Student Unionism in Nigeria

The deliberate derailment of the students' movement has robbed the nation of its future. A future robbed in perfidy cannot reach out in patriotism. Students' unionism is a nursery for political leadership and civic consciousness. The movement has historically served as a crucible for democratic values, political consciousness, and civic responsibility in Nigeria. The student movement was once a formidable force, producing national leaders, holding governments accountable, and often shaping public discourse. However, in recent decades, this once-vibrant space has suffered a significant decline, and the consequences reverberate far beyond the campuses. It is particularly troubling because the products of the campuses are the manpower feeder of our nation's institutions.⁵⁷ The next time you question the moral gaps or incompetencies of our institutions, kindly pause to examine the replenishes products. Some of the consequences of debasing the nursery are:

6.1. Loss of a Democratic Nursery

Students' unions traditionally serve as early platforms for democratic participation, leadership grooming, and policy engagement. When students no longer participate in free, fair, and autonomous unions, the democratic nursery withers, the opportunity to learn how governance structures operate is lost, the students grow politically apathetic, disillusioned or prone to manipulating the system, and the internalization of autocracy becomes a norm, having been governed without voice or choice. The fair share of the society is having a citizenry less inclined to demand transparency, accountability, or justice from political

⁵⁵ Olusegun Mayegun —Cultism, Campus Violence and Students' Leadership Developmental Processes" an invited paper for the students' Leadership Training Programme organised by the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights at Lagos on 31st May, 1996.

⁵⁶ Samson Obaloluwa Ojo and Adebayo Ola Afolaranmi, —From Protests to Progress: Unlocking the Potential of the Nigerian Youth for Political Reforml *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 5(4):100-115

⁵⁷ Aluede, O, et al, (2005) —Student Unrest in Nigeria Universities: Looking Back and Forwardl (2005) *Journal of Social Sciences* 10 (1), 17-22.

leaders, breeding passive compliance rather than active citizenship. As a result, institutions outside campuses become less responsive, more autocratic, and less scrutinized.⁵⁸

6.2. Muted Voices of Reason

As an ideologically and principled based movement, the students' movement in Nigeria was the gadfly of social justice and accountability. It strode regally as the voice of hope from anti-military campaigns to pro-democracy advocacy and anti-austerity march. The suppression and disfigurement of this critical segment of our society today removes a powerful counterbalance to executive and institutional overreach. The muting of these voices of reason and resistance emboldens undemocratic practices not only on campuses but also in government. University administrators often model their disciplinary and governance systems on wider political authority, enforcing bans, suspensions, and unjust policies without recourse to law. At graduation, these young minds have been poisoned by the chalice of crookedness as a way of survival in our society. The wider implication of the gagging of this ecosystem is the cultivation of the culture of impunity that echoes into the larger society, where power is exercised arbitrarily, and dissent is punished, not debated.⁵⁹

6.3. Policy Blotch and Elite Capture

The decimation of vibrant student unionism creates the needed vacuum for higher institutions' management, and by extension, political elites, to dominate policy formation without checks. Students are not consulted on decisions that affect them directly.⁶⁰ This mirrors the elite capture seen in national governance where policies serve vested interests rather than the public good. The absence of meaningful student feedback gaps degrades the legitimacy and weakens implementation of institutional policies. The policy direction raises generations of students steeped in this skewed system and accepting non-consultative governance as normal, weakening public engagement in national policymaking.⁶¹

6.4. Normalization of Repression

Higher institutions are now spaces where surveillance, censorship, imposition of unpopular leaders on students and suppression are normalized under the guise of "maintaining order." When students are punished for speaking out, they learn to self-censor. This mirrors national trends where journalists, civil society actors, and citizens face similar pushback.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Bankole Abe and Theophilus Adedokun (n 19).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Alabi Festus Oluwole & Ige, Akindele M (n 17).

The use of "disciplinary committees" to mask vested interest mimics national tools of repression. Unfortunately, students transition into society with reduced expectations of liberty and heightened fear of dissent, further eroding participatory democracy.⁶² Of course, the campus is a miniature of the state. When a higher institution becomes undemocratic or at best a caricature of democracy, the students learn by observation to normalize these values. The long-term effect is systemic, manifesting in a society governed not by law or reason, but by repression, opacity, and electoral frauds.

7. Recommendations

The Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Decree should be immediately repealed and a constitutionally-aligned legal framework setting the parameters of students' movement be enacted to regain loss grounds in students' unionism.

Administrators of institutions of higher learning in Nigeria must be reoriented to relate with students and the movement as the democratic nursery and leadership pool for our nation.

The process of recruitment into positions of leadership in the students' unions should be transparent and fair without interference from the school management. The students should be allowed to elect their leaders in a free and transparent elections.⁶³

The students' movement should be insulated from the corrupting influence of politicians. The students should be reoriented to reject —government candidates in their elections to students' unions leadership positions.

Past student leaders who led in the glory days of the movement should make deliberate return to the campuses to nurture and mentor the younger ones on the principles of unionism.

8. Conclusion

The history of students' unionism in Nigeria reflects the trajectory of the Nigerian nation itself; rising from colonial resistance, through post-independence crises, military dictatorship, and democratic transition. While the movement today faces significant challenges of decline, repression, and corruption, its past underscores the critical role of youth in shaping society. The decline of student unionism in Nigeria is not an isolated institutional failure; it is a key symptom and contributor to the broader democratic and good governance decay in the nation. The death of the union is, in effect, the death of justice in miniature. If we are to revive governance and accountability in Nigeria, then the

⁶² F. Adewumi (n.2).

⁶³ *ibid.*

campus, the seedbed of civic culture, must be among the first places where reform takes root. For Nigerian democracy to deepen, student unionism must reclaim its ideological foundations, rebuild unity, and resist co-option. Only then can it continue to play its historical role as the conscience of the nation.