

Problems of Institutional Accountability and Transparency: The Case of University of Maiduguri Students Union Government

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Abstract: Accountability can be seen or defined as an acknowledgement of responsibility involving the giving of information and explanations about activities. Transparency in a business or governance context is honesty and openness. Transparency and accountability are generally considered the two main pillars of good governance. The implication of transparency is that all of an organization's actions should be scrupulous enough to bear public scrutiny. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to explore the problems associated with student union government in relation to accountability and transparency at the University of Maiduguri.

Keywords: Accountability, business, public scrutiny.

INTRODUCTION

Students Union Government is an essential arm of the University. The participation of students in running their activities in the University system gives them the opportunity to develop leadership skills and to understand University problems first hand in order to educate their congress from time to time.

Gaining entrance into the leadership position of Students Union Government has changed greatly over the years from simple identification and picking up of articulate and vibrant leaders to now the election of rich and influential individuals. Each phase of transformation is a reflection of the larger Society's political climate.

During campaigns for offices, students these days spend huge sums of money. Some borrow it while others collect contributions from groups and associates. Such debts are expected to be paid back immediately successful candidates assume leadership positions. Thus they are either accountable to themselves or to the group which they are indebted to. Consequently, by the end of their tenure, funds are embezzled and the welfare of students left uncatered for. The rights of those who elected such leaders are thereby bastardized. UMDC [1].

It is in this light that this paper will examine accountability and transparency in Students Union Governments of Universities. The authors have chosen the University of Maiduguri Students Union Government as a case study. The paper will first of all briefly explain what account ability is all about. Secondly, it will describe the structure and functions or objectives of the Students Union Government of University of Maiduguri. Thirdly, the will examine the problem of accountability/ transparency in the recent

University of Maiduguri Students Government. Finally, the paper will conclude with a Discussion on the reasons for the absence of accountability in Students Union Governments of Universities in Nigeria.

Accountability/Transparency

Each of these concepts refers to an ability to explain or account for one's stewardship either in writing or verbally to the community that entrusted one with a responsibility in respect to one's duties and responsibilities of a given position. Accountability can also be seen or defined as an acknowledgement of responsibility involving the giving of information and explanations about activities.

Student's union officials are therefore expected by their constituency to be accountable. Accountable government is therefore government that is alive to its responsibilities whereby persons and groups of people to whom positions of authority and control of resources are entrusted do from time to time render explanations

on how these positions and/or resources have been managed. UMDC [1].

Students Union Government: Structure and Functions

Students Union Government is the central organ of student union activities. Its major responsibility is to liaise closely with the university authority in order to improve the welfare of the students generally. Specifically however the Students Union Government of University of Maiduguri has the following objectives as per its union constitution:

- To mediate between school management and students;
- To look into and safeguard student's welfare;
- To safeguard and protect student's interest;
- To inform and educate students about rules governing/affecting students' day-to-day activities in the University.

To achieve both the general and specific objectives above, offices are created for various officers to be elected into appropriate offices each year by the congress through secret ballots. These offices include the President, the Vice President, Secretary General, Financial Secretary, Treasurer, Welfare Secretary, Director of Sports, and Director of Socials. Each of the offices above has responsibilities attached to it by the Students Union Constitution. UMDC [1].

To ensure smooth operation of the students union, the University of Maiduguri has established various structures for communication and execution of student's demands and needs. The University has Dean of students, students affairs officer and students counsellor/adviser. These officers are directly involved in the governance of students on the campus. The students are thus accountable to the officers mentioned above and also to their fellow congress men. UMDC[1].

Problems of Accountability and Transparency in University of Maiduguri Students Union Government

In University of Maiduguri the Students Government has been, for the past five years, facing problems of mis-management and accountability. The union has been characterized by impeachments and suspensions of officers. There appeared to be general lack of commitment to know, understand and follow the constitution of the students union as every executive member virtually ignored or trampled upon the provisions of the constitution, which relate to all the offices and financial procedures involved. Thus, officers measured other officers' roles, and financial records were either improperly or scantily kept. In addition there is the problem of supervision of the Students Union Government by the university authorities which appeared to be due to the absence of

cordial working relationship between the office of the Dean of students and that of students Affairs. Consequently, the two offices have been operating in parallel giving conflicting directives to the Student Union Government. UMDC [1]

The cumulative effect of all the above was the dissolution of the Students Union Government by the higher authority of the university and the setting up in October 2nd 1996 of an Ad-Hoc Committee to investigate into the problems of the dissolved Students Union Government. We have given below some abstractions from the major findings of the Ad-Hoc Committee to illustrate the confusions, mis-management and total absence of accountability that characterized the Students Union Government before its dissolution. UMDC[1].

Secretary General

The Secretary General seems to know his duties and responsibilities. But his long absence from office due to his father's sickness appeared to be responsible for some of the problems associated with his office especially the question of the number of the receipt booklets left behind. The Secretary General being the nerve of the Union was expected to keep all records and correspondences on behalf of the Union.

Although he informed the committee that he was not very much so involved in financial affairs of the union, the committee found out that the sum of N 16,000 was allocated to his office and spent in the following order: He printed 12 booklets at the cost of N 1,500, purchased 100 file Jackets at the cost of N 2,500, and used the balance of N 500 on fuel and transport. The Secretary General also collected a loan of N 1, 000 which he was yet to pay back to the Union. UMDC[1].

The Vice President

The Vice President, who is next to the President, informed the committee that her responsibilities did not include finance. At a stage however, she had ordered for the release of N 35, 000 from the Bursary Department after the Dean of Students had endorsed his signature. The money was to be used as stay-back allowances for the EXCO and principal officers of the SRA. Although she claimed that by then the President was away from the university, it was later confirmed that the President was available but refused such request because he felt the purpose of the withdrawal was not justified. UMDC [1].

It was made clear to the committee that the Vice President had at one time mobilized a faction of the EXCO and assumed the duties of the president. She also wrongly informed the Committee that at that time the President was no longer interested in the affairs of the student union, and was seldom seen for

consultations. She said she and her team (the rest of the EXCO) approved the upward review of the stay back allowances from N 30 per day to N 100 per day without the consent of the president. She said it was in her capacity as the Acting President that she distributed the sum of N 35,000 to various offices as follows: N 13, 174 as stay back allowances for EXCO members; N 1, 140 to the office the Financial Secretary; N 2, 650 to the office of the Welfare Secretary; N 1, 750 to Director of Sports; N 5,000 for the repair of Vehicles, and N 3,360 for SRA Principal officers allowances. UMDC[1].

The President

The President, who was unanimously elected by congress, had the intention of doing his work well according to him. He informed the Committee that he was very conversant with the constitution of the Student union, but at a stage communication gap was created between him and members of his EXCO. He said he intended to operate budget system and informed all officers to prepare their budgets, but officers refused to present their budget proposals to him.

He said the Union vehicle was supposed to be in his care and he shall approve its use for each officer when the need arises, but the dean of students had called him and directed him to release the vehicle to the Social Secretary, which he did. He said the Dean also endorsed his signature before the N 35, 000 was released to the Vice President; a proposal he had earlier refused to sign, because the purpose for which the money was to be used was not justified. He informed the committee that his political debacle with members of his EXCO has external influences, because he was aware that the EXCO wanted to impeach him at all cost to satisfy the wishes of some people. He said out of the N 40,000 withdrawn from the STUDENTS UNION ACCOUNT, only N 16,000 was spent with his approval; that was the money approved for the office of the Secretary General. He said the Vice President had approved money both in his presence and absence. He gave example with the N35,000 unconstitutionally withdrawn from the Union Account with the assistance of the Dean of Students. UMDC[1].

He said, he was not aware of constitution of the five (5) man Finance committee by the Director of Sales, as well as the Gala Night organized in his name and the N8, 000 received from kiosk owners because none of these was reported to the executive members. The Committee, through its investigations, was able to establish that there was financial mismanagement in the Student Union Government as contained in the allegations. The Executive members of the Union did not follow the Constitution as it relates to finances. For example, all monies realized were kept by individual members as it came to their hands; which is a clear violation of the Students Union Constitution which

requires that monies collected must be handed over to the Treasurer to be deposited into the Union's Account within 24 hours. Similarly, members of the Executive were disbursing money at will without approval, while some with approval but without retirement.

One of the Executive Member of the dissolved Student Union has even organized a Gala Night in town with a view to generating revenue without the knowledge or approval of the Executive. He also single-handedly set up a finance committee to supervise and collect revenue (ground rent) without the approval of the Executive. The same student was also found in possession of all the Student Union receipts including those inherited from past Student Union government, but could not render a single receipt booklet whether used or unused to the Committee. He also combined his official work with his private business. Finally, he had organized a sports Fiesta and realized proceeds of N 10,000 but did not render any account of money realized.

The Committee had also established that the dissolved Executive of the Student Union, apart from being ignorant of their constitution, were also misdirected and ill-informed. This could be seen in the use of the Student Union vehicle. Instead of the Vehicle to be in the possession of the President, the Dean of Student had directed that the car should be in the care of the Welfare Secretary. UMDC [1].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say without mincing words that the Students Union Government in the University of Maiduguri has been lacking accountability and transparency for some time now. The activities of its officers have been characterized by blatant neglect of the constitutional provisions of the Union on the one hand, and on the other, by outright looting of its meagre resources. What is then responsible for all this?

Ignorance of the provisions of the constitution as they relate to the duties and rights of all the officers and to the financial procedures involved has been advanced by the Ad-Hoc Committee that investigated the Students Union Government. Another reason given by the Ad-Hoc Committee is undue influence by the then Dean of Students.

While the two reasons above are important, we think they merely scratched the surface of the problem ignoring the roots of the problem which lie within the wider socio-economic and political context of the Nigerian Society. In other words, all we are saying is that the lack of accountability and transparency in the Students Union Government of University of Maiduguri is a mirror-image of the problems as they occur in the

larger Nigerian society. For instance, it cannot be over-emphasized that most public servants in Nigeria lack accountability and transparency. They run the offices they occupy as though the offices are their private properties with no accountability to anyone except to themselves.

The looting and mis-management of public funds and property by public servants are such that one wonders whether it is not better to substitute the phrase "public servant" with a more appropriate one "public looters". The serious nature of corruption in Africa in general is such that one scholar described the Africans system of government as "klepto-cracy"; meaning the government being run by thieves [2]. The Nigerian system of government, as rightly noted by Ekpo [3], is perfect example of "kleptocracy". This is because "from the highest to the lowest practically everybody is involved in the kleptocratic circulation of wealth" [3].

Given the serious nature of corruption in government in Nigeria, it is not surprising that the Students Union Government of the University of Maiduguri was as corrupt and inept as demonstrated in the main text of this paper. The University of Maiduguri Students Union Government (UMSUG) and indeed the university bureaucracy are not islands unto themselves. They are well entrenched into the Nigerian Society. To therefore give better explanations for lack of accountability and transparency in UMSG in particular and in Students Union Governments (SUG) in other Nigerian Universities in general, we need to understand the dynamics of corruption in Nigeria in general.

A number of explanations for corruption in Nigeria have already been given by several authors [4, 5]. One explanation that appears most appropriate however is the political economic explanation which views corruption in Nigeria as being basically the product of neo-colonialism [6-9]. Neo-colonialism in relation to Nigeria means first and foremost that the Nigerian economy is dependent on foreign capital which exploits the Nigerian economy in collaboration with the indigenous private business and bureaucratic class, which results in further underdevelopment of the Nigerian economy - the process known as the development of underdevelopment [10, 11]. In other words, instead of the economy to become a fully developed or industrialized capitalist, it has become something else - a retrograde combination of communal, feudal, capitalist and mixed economy modes of production. Moreover because capitalism is not well developed, the state is enabled to control a number of industries and many major resources of the country thereby making the state a primary source of capital accumulation. Thus, the combination of underdeveloped economy and the turning of the state into primary source for capital accumulation have meant the

subjection of the State to all forms of embezzlement, extortion and other corrupt practices.

We can confidently extend the theory above to Students Unions of universities. The politics of accumulation from the resources of the UMSUG is equivalent to the politics of accumulation from the resources of the state in the wider Nigerian society. It follows therefore that to get an accountable and transparent Students Union Government and indeed, University authority, we need to evolve a strong and relatively independent economy as well as an accountable and transparent national government.

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