13 *Learning transformative leadership through student activism in Kenya*

Nathan Oyori Ogechi

Overview

Student protests against learning institutions and the state have been in vogue for a long time. Student union leaders not only participate in such protests, but also mobilise and lead them. This chapter analyses transformative leadership traits of former university student union officials who embraced student activism before and after graduating. Between 1963 and 2013, Kenya experienced multipartyism and single-partyism, resulting in social and political injustices that the former student union leaders fought against. Secondary data about radical former student leaders were collected from newspapers, parliamentary documents, and the internet, while interviews with colleagues provided primary data. Data were analysed for the student leaders' contribution to constitutional changes, observance of the law, ending discrimination, pressing for plural democracy and social justice, and fighting corruption. A majority of former left-wing student leaders demonstrated transformative leadership, and their efforts contributed to realising social and political reforms in Kenya.

Introduction

Student activism occurs when students stage collective actions to 'defend their interests in order to bring change in systems, policies, attitude, knowledge, and behaviour regarding issues affecting not only university life but also society at large' (Garwe, 2017, p. 191). Their collective action often results in change for the public good, especially in a context that is wanting in social justice. This chapter examines the extent to which some former student leaders in public-sponsored Kenyan universities who engaged in student activism demonstrated (and continue to demonstrate) transformative leadership. The studied student activists were leaders of various universities' student unions between 1970 and 2013, during the presidencies of Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel Arap Moi, and Mwai Kibaki, when instances of authoritarian leadership, institutional decay, and management crises were experienced (Byakika, 2021). Consequently, student leaders-cum-activists organised student protests and resistance to bring about government and institutional policy changes. On graduation, some of these student leaders took their knowledge and leadership skills to the legislature, judiciary, and to civil society, with varying transformative leadership impacts.

The questions this chapter sets out to ask are: 'Is there a history of university student activism in Kenya?', 'Have student leaders-cum-activists ever stood for social justice?', 'How have their actions demonstrated transformative leadership and at what cost?', and 'To what extent have they influenced change?'

The chapter discusses how former student activists who eventually assumed public leadership roles remained committed to their conviction of social justice (Bosu, Dare, Dachi, & Fenig, 2009) and unpacks their transformative leadership traits. While acknowledging student activism as an avenue for developing leadership skills, civic engagement, and community involvement (Farago, Swadener, Richter, Eversman, & Roca-Servat, 2018), the chapter takes cognisance of the distinction between left-leaning and right-leaning student activists. That is, left-leaning student activists tend to address, reduce, and eventually eliminate social inequalities based on race, gender, ethnicity, and other social identity markers. In contrast, right-wing student movements support the perpetuation of social inequalities.

The chapter first explores the scholarship on student activism before sketching the transformative leadership theoretical framework on which it is based. According to Shields (2010), transformative leadership goes beyond a leader's intention to bring about transformation; rather, in transformative leadership, one courageously confronts the unthinkable to bring about social justice. In this way, one becomes a pragmatic and non-idealistic leader. The chapter's methodology is described in detail before moving on to analyse and discuss transformative leadership traits identified in the stories of former university student activists. The chapter concludes by arguing that a large number of left-wing student activists made immense contributions to the attainment of social justice in Kenya, even though there were a few right-wing elements and compromised leaders.

The historical context of university student activism

Kenya had no autonomous university until 1970 when University College, Nairobi (a constituent college of the University of East Africa, Makerere, Uganda), became the University of Nairobi (UoN) (Magoha, 2017). At the time of writing, Kenya has 71 chartered public and private universities, constituent university colleges, and universities with letters of interim authority, and over 500 000 registered students (Cowling, 2023).

After 68 years of British imperialism, it was hoped that with independence in 1963, oppression and repression would be over. Unfortunately, only the masters changed, especially during the Kenyatta (1963–1978) and Moi (1978–2002) presidencies. These regimes implemented draconian laws that muzzled and subjugated people (Mutunga & Kiai, 1996). Kenya became a *de facto* one-party

state in 1969, and a *de jure* single-party state in 1982 by enacting Section 2(a) of the constitution, which prohibited multipartyism.

Freedom of expression, assembly, and association were controlled; secret state security agencies collected intelligence; the press was monitored; publications deemed unsympathetic to the state were banned; meetings of over nine persons could only take place if they were sanctioned; and detention without trial was enforced. Although, ideally, universities enjoy absolute freedom, university student leaders and faculty who were deemed too radical were detained (Mutunga & Kiai, 1996), while those who sympathised with the Academic Staff Union were deprived of their passports. There was police harassment of activists, and political assassinations, including those of Tom Mboya (1969), J. M. Kariuki (1975), and Robert Ouko (1990).

Multipartyism was re-introduced in 1991 following pressure from opposition leaders, university students, clergy, the Law Society of Kenya, and civil society, but repression continued throughout Moi's presidency, which ended in 2002. Furthermore, Kibaki's presidency demonstrated its intolerance in 2003 when, during negotiations for a new constitution, Dr Odhiambo Mbai, who chaired the devolution committee of the Constituent Assembly, was assassinated (Ngotho, n.d.).

The post-independence 'big-man rule' (Dulani & Tengatenga, 2020) style of leadership described above required university student union leaders' activism in collaboration with other stakeholders to counter it. Some radical student leaders completed their studies locally or abroad after expulsion or going into self-exile. After graduation, some remained activists as leaders in either academia, civil society, or politics. These include Kisumu city governor Anyang Nyong'o (Makerere University Student Guild); senators James Orengo (Student Organisation of Nairobi University – SONU) and Hassan Omar-Hassan (Moi University Student Organisation – MUSO); parliamentarians Mukhisa Kituyi, Philomena Chelagat Mutai, Tito Adungosi, Mwandawiro Mghanga, Wafula Buke, and Otieno Kajwang (all former SONU leaders); and lawyer-cum-politician Rumba Kinuthia (SONU leader). (See Amutabi, 2002; Byakika, 2021; Imanyara & Maina, 1991; Mutunga & Kiai, 1996; Oanda, 2016 for this information and other details mentioned throughout this chapter.) This chapter unravels these former university student leaders' politics and activism with a view to examining whether or not they demonstrated transformative leadership.

Scholarship on student activism

While there are differing definitions of student activism (Altbach, 1989; Garwe, 2017; Kiboiy, 2013; Martin, Hanson, & Fontaine, 2007; Zeilig, 2008), the framework and definition of activism that this chapter draws on perceives

activism as a process of active civic participation in order to address issues of public concern and bring about political or social change. The chapter distinguishes between soft and radical student activism. Soft student activism is associated with active students who enjoy their time as students, meet many people, gain many experiences, and develop competencies that are not learned from books, namely leadership, self-management, showing initiative, and making decisions (Farago et al., 2018). On the other hand, radical student activism is revolutionary and takes direct action to confront social injustice, unethical practices, corruption, and exploitation, infringement on freedoms, and repression and political oppression of the masses, through undertaking civil disobedience, protests, campaigns, boycotts, and demonstrations (Macharia, 2015; Oanda, 2016).

While student activism has taken place across the continent, most of the literature deals with activist periods or events, as well as their repression, from the 1970s to the present day (Byaruhanga, 2006; Melchiorre, 2020; Ntshoe, 2002; Smirnova, 2019; Zeilig, 2008). In Kenya, student activism has metamorphosed over the years (Klopp & Orina, 2002, Macharia, 2015). In the early years of independence, there were minimal student protests, since students enjoyed free tuition and subsistence, and the assurance of employment after graduation. The first protest occurred in 1969 when opposition leader Oginga Odinga was barred from delivering a public lecture. However, following the replacement of free tuition with student loans, and the murder of J. M. Kariuki, Member of Parliament for Nyandarua North in 1975, student activism became violent, leading to the closure of the only university at that time, the University of Nairobi (Amutabi, 2002; Klopp & Orina, 2002).

The violation of academic and other freedoms (Mutunga & Kiai, 1996) and the clamour for multipartyism triggered protests, to which the responses were police brutality and extended closures of universities (Amutabi, 2002). In attempts to reverse the foregoing ills, student activists collaborated with the clergy, the Law Society of Kenya, former student leaders, and civil society to push for political change and social justice. As Oanda (2016, p. 70) observed:

> While during the 1960s, the nascent universities witnessed student organisations crystallising around greater pan-African issues, shaping the direction of academic and public services, championing decolonisation courses and student welfare issues, the period of 1970 to 1980 saw the growth of radical student movements to resist internal descent into the authoritarianism of the new state.

This chapter analyses the extent to which radical student activists provided transformative leadership to resist the big-man rule, with a focus on instances of student leaders organising in government-sponsored universities between 1970

and 2013. Student activism in private-sponsored universities is not covered, as it was not prevalent (Mulinge, Arasa, & Wawire, 2017).

Frameworks for exploring transformative leadership

While Western leadership studies theory is not always suitable for the study of African leadership (Jallow, 2014), the nuanced theory of transformative leadership described by Carolyn Shields and based on Paulo Freire's perspectives from Brazil on change is helpful. Therefore, student activism in Kenya is examined using the lens of transformative leadership theory (TLT) described by Shields (2010; 2011). TLT is not the same as transformational leadership theory, as Shields carefully argues. According to Bell (2001), transformation is synonymous with processes of democratic change; it is a mantra for almost all social change. Thus, a transformational leader has only an intention and commitment to bring change. In contrast, a transformative leader calls for a revolution (Shields & Hesbol, 2020) and takes action geared towards bringing the desired change. Transformative leadership interrogates and disrupts that which is taken for granted (Hewitt, Davis, & Lashley, 2014).

Consequently, it requires strong leaders who take risks and assume a personal responsibility for bringing about the intended change (Bell, 2001). As Shields (2011) avers, transformative leaders experience pushback and thus considerable courage is necessary. One must ask and answer difficult questions so as to create deep and meaningful change that will benefit all of society (Bieneman, 2011). TLT is 'enriched by theories of democracy, identity, advocacy and social justice' (Shields, 2011, p. 383) and takes into account diversity, power, and culturally responsive leadership (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). It begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and offers the promise of not just greater individual involvement, but a better life lived in common with others. Accordingly, transformative leaders should strive for social justice (Shields, 2011) and 'work to translate [their] vision into transformative action – always engaged in, and often as advocates for, the communal life of [their] neighborhood, school, community, nation, and world' (Shields, 2011, p. 385).

Transformative leadership is premised on two propositions – that is, private and public (individual and collective) good. A balance of the private and public good requires societies and institutions to address issues of democracy, civic life, and citizenship so that civic participation and democracy are strengthened. Transformative leadership is normative, grounded in the values of equity, excellence, and social justice. It is beneficial to the individual and collective good of society (especially the downtrodden), regardless of language, ethnicity, religion, social orientation, gender, identity, academic achievement, or immigration status. It should neutralise all forms of discrimination that drive poverty and inequality (Brown, Ekoue, & Goodban, 2019).

In sum, transformative leadership must work and advocate for goals that are equitable, inclusive, socially just, and deeply democratic (Shields, 2011) and, to achieve these, it must confront political establishments and local traditions (Simons, 2010). Transformative leadership embraces humility, faith, hope, love, critical thinking, solidarity, and reflective praxis (Sorkin, 2016). Effective communication is a central aspect in TLT (Stephenson, 2011). Transformative leadership must be firmly grounded in moral purpose.

The foregoing sketch of transformative leadership theory guides the analysis of student activism and transformative leadership in Kenya.

Data and methodology

The chapter employs a qualitative approach and draws on both primary and secondary data sources such as newspaper reports, the internet, parliamentary records, and personal interviews. Through newspapers, as an important source of primary data (Meyer, 2018), historical records of events involving student leaders are described. Two daily newspapers, *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, were selected, alongside the now defunct *Weekly Review* and the *Nairobi Law Monthly*. From the two daily newspapers, stories about former university student leaders' activism were collected, while the latter two provided weekly and monthly in-depth analysis of the happenings. Through online searches, Kenya's bicameral parliamentary records and content about some legislators who were former student activists were accessed. Further, through a snowball technique, suitable former university student colleagues of the leaders were identified and interviewed. Both online interviews and phone calls were used to obtain interviewees' views about their former colleagues' transformative leadership. These interviews gave more detailed insights into the motivations and aims of the former student leaders' activism.

Transformative leadership traits

Using data from the newspaper stories, emerging leadership patterns and themes were identified and treated as transformative leadership traits. The traits include: fighters against discrimination, protectors of sanctity of life and justice, political change agents, sticklers for the law, and fighters for genuine constitutionalism. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions in relation to these traits, and their responses were analysed through the tenets of TLT characteristics.

Fighters against discrimination

TLT considers all forms of discrimination and inequity to be social injustice (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). It is important to note that the student leaders on which this chapter reports are by necessity progressive as far as issues of ethnic

and sociopolitical diversity and equality are concerned. Those they lead demand this of them, and require them to be knowledgeable and eloquent, taking a stance to reduce discrimination on grounds of gender, ethnicity, race, or economic status. This is not always the case for senior university leadership, for example at senate or faculty committee level. As one former student leader states:

> The reality of political mobilisation inculcates in a conscious student leader an inclusive and tolerant approach to the concerns of all students. Thus, whether in a university senate disciplinary committee or a national platform, the student leader is by instinct prepared to detect and fight any form of discrimination. The protests which the likes of Hassan Omar-Hassan, James Orengo and Mwandawiro Mghanga led against the government of their time were against the disenfranchisement of their political and economic choices.
> (M. Mwambeo, personal communication, 27 August 2021)

This quotation indicates that while it is possible to perpetuate injustice against students through university structures and committees, in such cases, the student leaders who were studied courageously defended their constituents. Soft activism is an invaluable approach to use in such circumstances, and the student leaders included in this study employed critical thinking and effective communication in line with TLT (Stephenson, 2011). These student leaders also employed radical activism, as is evident in Hassan Omar-Hassan (MUSO), James Orengo (SONU), and Mwandawiro Mghanga (SONU) leading street protests to confront state-perpetrated injustices (Amutabi, 2002).

Furthermore, espousing TLT's public good, inclusivity, equity, and non-discrimination values (Bukusi, 2017), James Orengo fought racial discrimination in UoN's architecture department in 1973, where a Danish departmental chair used to 'fail' all African students, claiming that Africans had no intellectual capacity for architecture. Orengo organised a strike because he could not tolerate baseless racism. Orengo's fellow student leader observed:

> He has remained consistent as a fighter for justice and equity. His act of fighting racism at the School of Architecture is a testimony. The white lecturer was fired and things changed. Even as late as yesterday he was addressing judges in a court case telling judges to remain truthful to the constitution.
> (K. Ongeti, personal communication, 26 June 2021)

At that time, Philomena Mutai, who edited the UoN student journal, *The Anvil,* also wrote a scathing editorial on this racism, and this led to her suspension. Courage such as Orengo's and Mutai's is crucial if a transformative leader is to achieve the intended transformation (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). The price paid by Orengo was self-exile in Tanzania after the abortive 1982 coup d'état, and also,

after he was repatriated in 1983, he was detained and tortured, and only released after a protracted trial.

Tito Adungosi, Mwandawiro Mghanga, and Wafula Buke (all SONU) also showed bravery by fighting for increased democratic space against the Moi regime. For their actions, Mghanga and Buke were detained, while Adungosi paid the ultimate price of dying in prison.

Protectors of sanctity of life and justice

Life is sacred and TLT calls for justice to be served on perpetrators of violence regardless of ethnic background, creed, or social status. Many student activists followed that call. For example, when member of parliament J. M. Kariuki (a Kikuyu) was murdered, Orengo (a Luo) was practising law in Kericho town. He travelled to Nairobi and mobilised university students to demand justice for Kariuki. In this, Orengo demonstrated a recognition of the sanctity of life, and the need for peaceful coexistence while embracing the values of interdependence, compassion, human dignity, reciprocity, and collective unity (Ngunjiri, 2014). In 1983, Rumba Kinuthia (SONU leader) risked his life as a defence lawyer in a court-martial for the 1982 abortive coup d'état air force soldiers who were accused of high treason.

However, the TLT claims about justice, at times, prove idealistic. In some instances, student leaders redefined the concept of justice depending on context:

> With their participation in bodies that advocate the rights and opportunities of students, the student leader has to delicately balance between keeping order and discipline versus the need to give comrades a chance to finish their studies and enjoy life in college. Hence, this fluid understanding of justice by many student leaders makes only a few of us sticklers for the law. This calls for a continuous bargaining and lobbying to ensure that comrades are always right. I think many student leaders defended justice depending on their interpretation of situations.
> (M. Mwambeo, personal communication, 27 August 2021)

According to the principles of transformative leadership, with its emphasis on both individual and public good, student leaders operating according to TLT ought to act according to existing institutional laws since these have been made in a democratic fashion – in other words, with the participation of the student fraternity. However, it seems that when students appear before university disciplinary committees, student leaders who sit on these committees tend to side with the student being disciplined and, in so doing, potentially defeat justice. Two possible reasons for not serving the ends of justice are that the leaders are trying to curry favour with their constituents and safeguard their votes

in subsequent student union elections, or that they consider the policy being followed to be contextually obsolete or requiring amendment at the time of the committee's sitting.

Political change agents

Student activists contributed as change agents in the fight against political repression in Kenya, participating in many events that put pressure on government. In 1979, SONU leaders Rumba Kinuthia, Mukhisa Kituyi, and Otieno Kajwang were expelled for leading demonstrations against government excesses. In 1982, SONU chairman Adungosi led students to celebrate the abortive coup: he was jailed for treason, and died mysteriously in prison in 1988. In 1991, Orengo not only joined those advocating for a multiparty government, but also represented Oginga Odinga's National Development Party in the High Court, where he courageously demanded that Justice Dugdale disqualify himself from hearing the case, as he was known to be against fundamental human rights. He was not cowed by the judge's threat of 'one more word and you have it' (Maina, 1991, p. 31), and he soldiered on in the case.

MUSO's Omar-Hassan was expelled from Moi University in 1994 for advocating for the change of the university name, arguing that the university was named after an illiterate despot. Omar-Hassan was readmitted in 2003 when Kibaki pardoned all university students who were expelled during Moi's presidency for fighting repression.

Despite the examples provided, there are instances of former student activists who compromised their convictions. Since Kenyans have been seen to mobilise politically along ethnic lines (Biegon, 2018), some of those former student leaders who ventured into politics have been forced to renege on their convictions in order to survive:

> One is, therefore, pushed to choose subscription or malleability, hence survival, or insist on a new brand of leadership and face the brutal wave of this political mainstream. Proof is what those who were firebrand student leaders eventually become on the national political platform. We are agents of political change, but for a while or in changing ways. James Orengo, Hassan Omar [-Hassan] and Anyang Nyong'o have at some point stared at political despair for daring to oppose the political hegemony of their regions. Ideology should be couched within the political expectations of a people and those they follow at a time. Out here, one is not the boss of political waves because there are established paths that will take long to alter. However, I note that time has set apart some student leaders as

> genuine fighters for justice and political change while others have
> come out as apologists of ethnic hegemony and parochial governance.
> (M. Mwambeo, personal communication, 27 August 2021)

This excerpt shows that although many former student leaders have demonstrated courage as transformative leadership change agents, they have had to compromise their convictions in order to survive and retain leadership positions, because Kenyan politics mobilise around ethnicity. Nyong'o and Orengo (Luos) lost their parliamentary seats in 1997 and 2002, respectively, for contesting on behalf of the Social Democratic Party against the dominant political parties in Luoland (the National Development Party in 1997 and the Liberal Democratic Party in 2002). On both occasions, these dominant parties fought against the Kenya African National Union dictatorship. However, since Orengo and Nyong'o were not sponsored by these locally popular parties, they lost elections. What this hints at is that ethnicity is the major hindrance to achieving transformative leadership through student activism in Kenya.

Sticklers for the law

This trait relates to those university student leaders who practised law, especially during the darkest days of Kenya's political history. Many underground groups were formed to press for democracy, including the Mwakenya movement and those who produced the *Pambana* (Struggle) newspaper. Whenever members of these groups were arrested, few lawyers were courageous enough to represent them in court for fear of the consequences. However, SONU's Kinuthia represented 15 members of Mwakenya at a trial characterised by 'terror and intimidation' (Mburu, 2000). The charge was sedition (Mburu, 2000) and the members faced a possible jail term of 10 years.

In 1997, Orengo exhibited moral courage (Shields & Hesbol, 2020) when he attempted to change the status quo for the public good by initiating the private prosecution of George Saitoti, a vice president and minister of finance, for his alleged responsibility in the Goldenberg scandal. Through the scandal, approximately US\$157.48 million was lost in fake gold export compensation paid to businessman Kamlesh Patni. In the 1990s, nobody could have imagined prosecuting a vice president, but this is what Orengo did. Furthermore, Orengo broke ranks with his political party chairman, Kijana Wamalwa, because he had cleared businessman Ketan Somaia, whose company had been involved in a financial scandal that was unearthed by the auditor general. Orengo argued:

> If we want good governance, we must protect our institutions and
> public offices without fear or favour. Parliament, the Public Accounts
> Committee, the opposition and Ford Kenya have been compromised
> on this matter and we must have the courage and integrity to say so.
> (*Weekly Review*, 1997, p. 4).

Although Orengo's actions did not achieve a great deal of success, in line with TLT (Shields & Hesbol, 2020), he demonstrated moral courage by questioning the justice system that protected those in authority in a society where power was inequitably distributed. They had abused their fiduciary responsibility and acted not for the public good, but for self-aggrandisement.

Fighters for genuine constitutionalism

A constitution that is responsive to the aspirations, wishes, and needs of the governed facilitates ethical leadership and good governance. If the constitution is not serving the people as desired, transformative leaders need to press for either a review or a total overhaul of the constitution. Kenyan student activists contributed to bringing about constitutional change by working with civil society, religious groups, lawyers, and NGOs. The re-introduction of plural, multiparty democracy in 1991 came about through the repeal of Section 2(a) of the Kenyan Constitution, which only allowed for a one-party state. This constitutional change was a result of concerted efforts by many players, including student activists working with other stakeholders (Imanyara & Maina, 1991, p. 21).

The doyen of opposition politics, Oginga Odinga, collaborated with the 'Young Turks', who included former student leaders Orengo and Kituyi, in 1990 and 1991 to deliver multipartyism. Kabando wa Kabando, as chair of SONU in 1992, was also actively engaged in reform politics. Some pro-reform activities were repulsed with force, as happened when Rev. Timothy Njoya and other demonstrators who were demanding constitutional reforms were flogged by police outside the National Assembly Building (Mwaura, 2007). Student activists' contribution was also crucial in the enactment of the 2010 constitution of Kenya, which expanded democratic space through the devolution of government from the centre to the newly introduced county governments. The new constitution also enhanced local participation in decision-making.

Learning leadership through activism

Based on the transformative leadership traits identified, it appears that the university student leaders of the period studied learned many things beyond what was taught in class or recorded in the literature by engaging in leadership and activism. Similar to Nigerian student activism, the ground for leadership training in Kenya is activism (Chiamogu, 2018). Through their leadership at university, student leaders bring tenets of transformative leadership theory into practice in line with Shields and Hesbol's (2020) claim that transformative leaders ought to be pragmatic. The leaders referred to in the foregoing analysis relentlessly fought for a multiparty system; freedom of the press, association, and assembly; and the prevention of violation of the law, and against racial discrimination.

While the focus of this chapter has been on university student leadership in the past, the traits identified and discussed here have a strong bearing on current and future leadership. Leaders must understand the ills facing their societies and strive to bring inclusion, equity, excellence, and social justice. The status quo must be disrupted to achieve the desired free society, and this can only be done if the leader is committed and courageous. The student leaders described achieved this through radical student activism.

Mastery of oratorical and public speaking skills, as espoused in TLT (Stephenson, 2011), served the former student leaders well. This is because mobilising students to demonstrate against a government requires convincing messaging through language and diction that appeal to the target audience. The fact that Orengo managed to convince and mobilise students to demonstrate in the city streets against the government following the murder of J. M. Kariuki implies that his messaging was well crafted.

Many of the former student leaders engendered transformative leadership results not only in their institutions, but also nationally and internationally. The scale of influence varies from individual to individual, but some continued with their activism to the extent of graduating to national, regional, and global leadership, as did Mukhisa Kituyi, who served as the UN Conference on Trade and Development Secretary (2013–2021).

However, some student activists did not persevere in their leadership roles after graduating. Some abdicated activism either after failing to realise their ambitions, especially in politics, on first attempt, or after realising that the society in which they were contesting for leadership was still conservative, ethnically inclined, and not receptive to their ideas. As noted, transformative leadership is a process of learning from the past, but this requires humility and the ability to respectfully challenge past practices, while simultaneously displaying the courage to advocate for new practices and a new future, despite a turbulent context (Bukusi, 2017). Thus, student activists who sulk and surrender need to learn that transformative leadership requires emotional intelligence (Simons, 2010). They should learn to navigate the conservative environments they work in, as Nyong'o and Orengo did after losing their parliamentary seats when they contested on unpopular political party tickets in their home areas. They re-engineered themselves and went on to make serious transformative leadership contributions when they later served in the executive as cabinet ministers, during the time when the transformative 2010 constitution was promulgated.

There is no gainsaying that student activists paid a price for their actions, including suspension and loss of study completion time, expulsion, self-exile, detention, torture, and death. Regardless of these, in this period of Kenyan history, university student activists constituted a powerful group, and most governments feared them (Akintola, 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how radical former university student leaders contributed to transformative leadership in Kenyan society. It emerged that many of the former student activists' leadership traits were in line with the characterisation in TLT of a transformative leader who works towards political change and social justice for both the private (individual) and the public (collective) good. The chapter demonstrates that the former student leaders, by being political change agents, contributed to Kenya's sociopolitical transformation in alleviating racial discrimination, especially in education, the resumption of plural democracy, calling out corrupt practices, and the promulgation of the 2010 constitution of Kenya.

The data analysis indicates instances where the former student leaders' interpretation of the law and policies was contextually determined, and thus contradicted what could be expected of sticklers for the law. Further, the discussion has shown that not all former student leaders remained in overt radical leadership roles after graduation, while others compromised their positions, albeit briefly, for survival. Notwithstanding, the role of university student activists in realising a transformed society in Kenya remains crucial.

#TransformativeStudentActivism

Students learn leadership through activism – a complicated but informative case study from Kenya.

Questions for discussion

1. Identify and discuss five transformative leadership traits one can learn from former university student leaders in your country.

2. On the basis of transformational leadership theory, critically analyse the significance of student activism for the realisation of social justice in an African country.

3. 'Commitment without courageous and disruptive action against the status quo is impotent'. Discuss the statement with close reference to transformative leadership theory and university student leadership.

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