

STUDENT POLITICS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

There is no doubt that students have played a major role as agents of social change in many developing nations. Recent events in South Vietnam, where the students have been a key factor in anti-government demonstrations, in Indonesia, where it seems that students pressured the military to assume power from President Sukarno, in Ecuador, where students precipitated a military coup, and in other areas have shown the importance of students in political developments. There has hardly been a political upheaval in these nations in which students have not taken an active and often crucial part.

What are the conditions which permit students to play so active a political role? In the developing areas, university and sometimes even secondary school students are among the few "modern" and politically conscious ele-

ments in their societies. As such, they are indispensable elements which any government must consider, and whose confidence must in the last analysis be gained if the nation is to achieve the goals of economic development plans and obtain the accoutrements of modernity. University students are, in a real sense, a "presumptive elite." Their education prepares them to take a vital role in a modernizing society, and both they and the authorities realize their crucial position. Often students constitute an important element of "public opinion," since the articulate part of the general population is often quite small, with literacy limited to a relative handful.

Students in many nations are among the easier groups in the society to organize for any purpose. The student population is often relatively

small and homogeneous Class and ethnic backgrounds tend to be rather similar, although trends toward broadening the base of higher education are evident in many areas. Furthermore, the student population is usually highly concentrated. In many nations, one major university centre may contain up to half of the student population. An organizational nexus often exists, usually centred around a strong national union of students. These factors enable student leaders to mobilize demonstrations quickly and efficiently. Complicated newspapers and radio stations are unnecessary; all that is needed is a mimeograph machine, and a few posters strategically placed, to mobilize massive student demonstrations.

In addition to a tradition of political participation and an effective organizational base, students often have a strong ideological commitment. Usually expressed in leftist terms with strong nationalist overtones, this ideological basis permits student movements to function, although at a reduced level of activity, during periods of

political quiescence. This fact insures some degree of organizational continuity — student movements do not have to start anew at every crisis. Furthermore, the students are often considered among the “purest” elements of the society. Unencumbered by outside responsibilities to family, party, etc. — and in a sense alienated from traditional social patterns — students are uniquely able to speak for other emergent modern elements in the society such as the organized working class or peasant movements. As a result, the student organizations often speak for no more than a few thousand students in the university, but give voice to the demands of an increasingly important segment of the society.

Even in the developing nations, students have been unable to retain political initiative once they have acted as a catalyst for political change. Almost invariably, students act as an instrumental element in social struggles which are taken over by some other element, often the military. Indeed, this rather unexpected tacit

cooperation between radical student movements and the military in a growing number of developing nations may be highly significant for future political developments. The fact remains, however, that even where students have unquestioned political impact, they can do little more than precipitate changes which others must implement.

Japan offers a particularly interesting example of student political involvement. In a nation which has entered the industrial age with a vengeance, but still retains many aspects of its traditional past, the student movement has indicated something of the ambivalence which exists in the society. Considered ideologically and morally uncorrupted by many, the students have tried to speak for the working class and other "voiceless" elements in the society, sometimes with notable success. Yet, because of its alienation from many traditional aspects of the culture, the students have been unable to build ongoing support from other elements in the society; and when speci-

fic agitational campaigns ended, they found themselves virtually alone. Japan offers an interesting contrast to the Western industrialized nations, since students in Japan still retain some of their traditional importance, at least in the high prestige universities, and have a crucial political role as a "link" between still inarticulate masses and the mainstream of political life.

In the United States, and in most of Europe, students do not constitute a crucial element in the political equation. In technological societies, the fate of a group of students, or even an entire student generation, is not of vital importance. Individual students, while potential members of the elite, are not necessarily destined for elite status. In America, and for that matter in most nations with a growing system of higher education open to larger numbers of students, the political activities of individual groups of students will have less overall significance, and it will be more difficult to successfully organize mass student demonstrations. In general, strongly

career oriented students are not often attracted to student politics, and this segment of the student population is increasing numerically, particularly as greater stress is placed on the natural sciences.

Students in the developing countries have both a unique responsibility and a unique power. They, perhaps more than any other element in their societies, have the social vision and the modern education to see beyond present, often difficult, reality. This ideological sophistication and political consciousness has led students to take an active political role in their societies.

In a very real sense, students are responsible for the

futures of their countries, for they constitute an incipient elite. The ambivalence between political activism and competent professionalism is felt in many of the developing countries. Politically responsible and ideologically sophisticated student movements can constitute a valuable addition to the modernization process. Governments have too often looked upon students as a threat rather than an ally in social and political progress. With able student leadership and support from government and educational officials, student movements can make a real contribution. — *By Philip G. Altbach in the Dialogue, Vol. I, No. 1.*

MUSIC BEFORE RELIGION

Music comes before religion, as emotion comes before thought, and sound before sense. What is the first thing you hear when you go into a church? The organ playing. — *Alfred North Whitehead.*