

POLITICS IN THE UNIVERSITY DECISION-MAKING

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POLITICAL DOMINANCE

Politics tend to be regarded as the concern of central to the local governments to be associated strongly with the political parties that compete for votes at general, local and the national elections. It is useful to loosen this close identity between government and politics before seeking to apply political metaphors to educational institutions.

National and local politics strongly influence the context within which colleges and universities operate. Central government determines the broad character of the educational system and this is inevitably underpinned by the political views of the major political party. The elements of the formula for political influence and their weighing are the product of the political judgments of the majority party, within the limitation laid down in the legislation.

While national and local governments dominate the broad framework of education, political models apply to colleges, universities and other organizations just as much as they relate to political parties. Here is how Ball (1987) found some sort of resemblance between a university and a public organization.

I take universities in common with virtually all other social organizations to be riven with actual or political conflict between members; to be poorly coordinated; to be ideologically diverse. I take it to be essential that if we are to understand the nature of universities as organizations, we must achieve some understanding of these conflicts (Ball, 1987).

He makes it clear that universities, as many other social organizations are rife with conflict of ideologies begetting to clash. Similar approach of looking at the university organization has been put forward by Victor Baldrige (1971). He conducted research at universities and concluded that the political model, rather than formal collegial or participatory best captured the realities of the life in higher education. Here is how he makes explicit the fact that the very source of conflict in the educational organization is the uncompromising interests of the groups. It is the politics of the interests of opposing interest groups that bring pressure to the process of institutional decision-making.

When we look at the complex and dynamic process that explodes on the modern campus today, we see neither the rigid formal aspect of bureaucracy nor the calm consensus-directed elements of academic collegiums. On the contrary, ... (interest groups) emerge... These groups articulate their interests in many different ways, bringing pressures in the decision-making process from any number of angles... Power and influence, once articulated, go through a complex process until politics are shaped, reshaped and forged out of the competing claims of multiple groups (Baldrige, 1971).

The political perspective is quite apprehensive of the fact that there is always a dynamic interplay between or among these groups in the organization having some kind of support from the forces residing in the external environment. University, for instance, as an integral part of a larger environment does not have bounded entity isolated from this environment. Universities receive inputs, process them and return outputs to the environment. Inputs are presumed to be diverse so are the demands for the outputs. As a result there is a constant play between a university as an educational organization and the environment.

The major different concerns are the ways through which external pressures are imposed into university decision-making. In formal models it is assumed that outside influences are transmitted through heads or principals whose knowledge of external environment reinforces their official authority. The leaders' interpretation of these pressures may then be a significant element in the decision-making process. In political models it is thought that interest groups as well as heads and principals may introduce external factors to get their job done.

Baldrige et al. (1978) stressed the significance of outside interests: as, "external interest groups exert a great deal of influence over the policy-making process." They complained against external pressures and formal control by outside agencies "are powerful shapers of internal governance processes." Various groups, which have an interest in educational institutions, tend to have rather different motivation for their involvement.

The management of the external environment is a significant issue for the leaders and participants in political organizations. Control of the 'boundary' between university and the environment is an important source of influence in the debate between politics and resources.

Decision-making in the Nepalese administrative system falls on the rational category of it, especially in the sense that it is bureaucratic, hierarchical, centralized and unitary. But when decisions are made on sensitive issues, the decision-makers seem to have taken care of extra institutional susceptibilities. Decisions are made in the midst of political pulling and hauling almost in the way as described in Allison's (1971) political model. In most cases both government and university decisions are made with the involvement of many participants as stakeholders. Sorting out decision issues and assigning the responsibility of making decisions to a particular decision-maker is an ambiguous and complex process. However, as the authors of the Phi Delta Kappa National Study (1971) expressed, decision rarely occurs in an isolated form. Since no single decision-maker is likely to be competent to make all decisions, the chief decision-maker has to be advised by the ranks of other administrators. Thus this process of decision-making builds a "decision chain" in which various layers of decision-makers, their purposeful involvement, and their share in the making of decision are clearly experienced to be operated.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Political interests and influence in an organization differ in accordance with the situation of a place and time. Since different people are brought up in

different socio-cultural backgrounds their value systems are naturally not always the same. They differ from place to place and from time to time (Wiles et al., 1981). University decisions, like many other organizational decisions, are also affected by the typical political order that exists in one or the other form in the society (Massialas, 1969). Possibility of affecting University decisions has increased with the passing of the days, months and the years. Political appointment of the chief executive at the University on the recommendation of a selection committee under the chairmanship of a political figure may be attributed to political and governmental influence in the decision-making at this organization. This influence may also be ascribed to the fact that the major portion of the University budget comes from the government. Since a very large portion of the university budget has to be appropriated by the government, the political influence that of the party in power, holding the public purse, naturally is always eminent.

With regard to the context of Nepal, where organizations of both government and non-government sectors are so structured as power is always centered at the highest echelons of the organization, and administrative and financial decisions are not only centralized but are allowed to flow top-down, it is not surprising that educational and higher educational decision-making is concentrated in the hands of the central government. The government has diverse controlling powers over the University organization, as it has over many other public organizations. Whatever information and comments (*Tippani*, in the Nepalese term) that the administrators of the lower echelons of such organization provide in a case keeps on moving up to the next higher authority until it reaches the top. The final authority that decides on the case is always the chief executive of the organization.

Since, government is at the top of the national power structure, it is likely to use diverse ways to influence decision-making at any higher educational organization as it does to scores of other organizations within its wide national domain. Because it has control over the resources, policy, and goals of the university, it naturally can exert influence over the process of its decision-making (Pfeffer, 1992). Concerned government departments and their officials not only tend to exercise influence in the decision-making of an educational institutions like this, they also have the formal and legal legitimacy to prescribe policies for them when it is felt necessary (Haq, 1975). Having recognized this power of the government, the university authorities, at times, are rather inclined to offer such controlling opportunities to the bureaucrats in the government or to the political interest groups attached or opposed to the political party in power. These dominant figures are either consulted prior to the decision that are going to be made, or decisions are made under their formal or informal pressures. This tendency of theirs may, for the time being, relieve the organizational decision-makers from the hot criticisms on the decision of sensitive issues that they happen to make under the specific circumstances, but, at the same time, they would also have to bear the mood of a defeated warrior.

Sometimes the decisions already made by the institution on their own are stalled, or made inactive. Decision-makers at any huge organization like a university are at times forced to change their decisions or even alter the importance on certain aspect of decision already made under the pressure of the people occupying dominantly influential political status or superior bureaucratic positions in the government (Newman, 1987). Shrimali (1971) also had noted a similar approach to the government's political control and influence, and stated that government, as the highest and the most influential institution in a country as well as the major political constituent, naturally has the power to exert influence on higher education decision-making, beside on other administrative affairs of it.

Officials of the concerned government agencies, or people's representatives from local to the central levels, have reasons to observe for themselves whether public resources mobilized for the development and maintenance of the institution are used appropriately. It falls upon the institutional leaderships to assure and reassure the community and their leaders by means of appropriate performance at their institutions in order to convince them that the resources that they have provided are utilized in a proper way. It is their responsibility to make certain that the wishes and aspirations of the people attached to the institution are adequately met. The recent trend, however, shows that the political agencies outside the institution are not only disgruntled about the performance of the institutions that they have something to do with, but have gone much farther on even in interfering the decision-making activities of an institution. This is seen to be happening especially, at a time when leadership at the University is feeble and, consequently, fail to respond to the issues appropriately and in a timely manner. This may sometimes be observed as an intervention on the independence of the University. Whether it is an intervention on the independence of a university or it is just a gesture of help, still needs to be discerned. But the intention of the doer is always of prime concern. The unexpected and undesired actions of the superiors, meant for the intervention of the rights of the subordinates, could well be termed as an authoritative act (Newman, 1987). Wherever the source of this act might be, the fact of the matter is that it could hardly be welcome in an educational institution like a university that is commonly expected to run on its own and under the set rules and regulations of its own.

MacKinnon (1965) perceived a double risk of authoritarianism. If the power of an organization is in the hands of a few, the few will dictate the many, and if the power is in the hands of many they will dictate the few. In such a difficult situation the loyalty factor of a decision-maker is always at stake. With regard to the institutional loyalty in such a decision-making atmosphere, what Spring (1993) stated is worth taking into account:

The loyalty of educational politicians is divided between their organization and their political support. In fact, divided loyalties are what distinguish educational politicians from educational bureaucrats. The bureaucrats are primarily loyal to the organization, whereas the educational politicians must perform a balancing act between the needs of the bureaucracy and the demands of their political supporters (Spring, 1993).

Hence the farther the decision-maker is from the institutional loyalty the greater would be the chances for political influence or even interference for him to succumb to. Therefore, the power should be in the hands of both as prescribed by MacKinnon (1965). There should be a system of check and balance in the exercise of power in an organization. It is important that the institution of a university stature should have the systems to deliver both organizational autonomy and functional automation in the general maneuver of it. In the absence of such a situation, it is difficult for the university administrator to work impartially and also to justify his/her loyalty and obligation to the institution. A good deal of exercise in the decentralization of power and also letting the rules of the institution to work are something that could be called for in minimizing such anomalies (Newman, 1987). If clear distinctions between rights and the duties among levels of authorities are specified, it would, to some extent, do the balancing job.

INFLUENCE OF STUDENT POLITICS

One of the most effective agencies at the University for influencing University decision-making is the student body. This group often plays a key role in political, economic, and cultural transformation in the developing regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Altbach, 1968). With every major student agitation in countries such as ours, there are far-reaching political results. The students, who are, young, energetic, educated, and highly sensitive about their civil and political rights, can be a powerful political support force to the political parties in the developing countries. They are concentrated in a particular location and can easily consolidate themselves for their actions (Altbach, 1968).

Because students are the strong, powerful, and consolidated force in the higher education system, decision-making authorities at the University, and in the government, are found to have given a reasonable amount of consideration to them when making major decisions. Since student organizations are conveniently said to be the 'sister organizations' of a political party, they too are swept away by the wave 'created by their so called 'elders.' The institutional decision-makers who, although, make decisions for the cause of the institution, face problems, at times more serious, when their decisions do not very much help one group or the party, but somehow harm the other.

Keeping in mind the power of the students at the university in the countries like ours, the political parties, have thought it imperative to greatly intensify their influence on the student sector. Their overall strategy towards winning the students' strength seems to grab the student unions at the campuses throughout the country at any cost. They do so by letting university student elections held entirely on factional political party lines. On this ground, the apparent nexus between political parties and the splinter student groups at the university is clearly understandable (Altbach, 1968; Eakin, 1972; Kamalavijayan, 1979). These writers seem to be in accord about the widespread politicization of education and students, not only in newly independent and the developing countries such as Nepal, but throughout the world.

Describing the extra-educational attachment between university students and the politics in the present day world, as Eakin (1972) argued, that the students of today are highly politicized. The nexus between the two has caused politics overpowering the education and not the other way round. Actually it would have been much different a situation had education overpowered the politics as a result of the nexus. Whenever they are found active with the political parties they are immediately exploited by the politicians for the use and advantage of their pretty interest, as Eakin (1972) further stated. Establishment and the operation of student government almost at every university institution have contributed to the benefit of the organization of their own political affiliation rather than to their personal educational betterment. He saw that the nature and the purpose of such student government is not quite positive in contributing to the career development of a student, particularly in the sense that those students who are active vehemently to their own student government are the ones who have a tough time to succeed their academic career. At times they appear to be aggressively negative in their approach. The major part of their job during that time is to press their grievances to the institutional administration and that too for the gains of the political parties that they are affiliated with (Eakin, 1972).

POLITICS IN EDUCATION

The much greater involvement of a student body in politics seems to have sent a message that students do not even mind to set their political ambitions higher than their academic goals. Political parties are eager enough to grab such students and groom them to become the cadres. With this regard, as Harold Gould (1972) realized, such politically active students tend to believe that the political services that they render to the parties are more rewarding and of greater positive consequence than the academic achievements that they acquire for themselves. The jealously politically Influential students at the university are given the highly craved political responsibilities, so that they could effectively mobilize educated youth in line with the aims of their own political party. Thus the political leaders are allured to pick up these glamorous students as their cadres even before they complete their regular studies. For Altbach (1968), this was one of the ways to bring politics into campus; and once politics enters the campus it hardly ever leaves the four walls of it. Social or even political leaders never tire of speaking about relieving educational institutions from politics, but when it comes to the reality it seems just unrealizable, since either they are not quite honest to what they say or they implicate just the opposite to what they profess.

Describing the role of students in bringing external politics within the campus to influence administrative and decision-making authorities Dr. Srimali (1971) expressed that a university succumbs to external influence when students join hands with politicians and groups with vested interests to promote their gains. With respect to the role of students in exercising politically guided influences in any major issue of a university decision making, Dr. Kamalavijayanam (1979) stated that whenever there is an issue of major decision-making at the university to affect the students, the political parties take immediate initiative to support students, in the manner the students support the movement

launched by the political parties. Therefore, in this context, the students, who are divided into groups, have greater chances to bring external politics inside the domain of a university. The main purpose of bringing party politics into the university would be to influence the administrators at the university and intervene the execution of their professional authorities.

Not just at any big educational organization like a university, but even in the decision making of the overall public administration, it is the politics of power that play a considerable role. It is not the legitimacy of a decision-maker gained through one's own assumed decision-making expertise, but his status, power and political connection that are counted the most in the making of a decision, exactly in the way as Hofstede (1991) believed with reference to decision-making in the less developed countries. At present, when the politics of Nepal is so fluid and the government highhandedness is so colossal that university decision-makers have very few opportunities in hand to make policy decisions entirely on their own, devoid of an influence of any kind from the external environment. It is not so easy for them to work in a politically unstable situation where even national educational priorities could not be made irreversibly confirmed.

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