In much of Africa, as well as in other parts of the Third World, student movements have been prominent in giving voice to a radical nationalist and pan-Africanist agenda in sharp contrast to the narrow, self-seeking and sectionalist pursuits often seen as the hallmark of politicians and political parties. Such radicalism and commitment to a ‘national project’ have ensured that student movements have been at the front stage of reform, spearheading, for instance, ‘Democracy Movements’ or the demand for a ‘National Conference’ at times when civilian and military politicians have been as particularly inept in handling the nation’s affairs. This has been the case, despite their narrow basis in the institutions of higher learning – accessible only to a tiny minority of the population – and despite their privileged class aspirations and perhaps class origins as well. Moreover, the political class which they so vehemently attack for its failure to fulfil national aspirations is to a considerable extent made up of people with university training, some may even have had their first political training as radical activists in the student movement.

This paper reflects on the nature of agency (who will do it!) in the struggle to reconstitute the national project in the face of deepening economic crises and political decay, focusing in particular on the experience of the student movement. It is concerned with the contradictory nature of the movement, including its frequent penetration by the logic of sectionalist politics, not the least at the level of individual campuses. There is a thus a strong case for avoiding to idealise the student leaders and their often highly articulate, patriotic rhetoric. The paper argues, however, that such patriotism is not just an ephemeral phenomenon of no substance, merely reflecting the transitory and ambiguous nature of students as a class category, but is structurally rooted in the national character of the institutions of higher learning (including the national class aspirations of university trained professionals) and in the contradictory nature of power in such institutions (intellectual and bureaucratic). In a context marked by the immaturity, sectarianism, and fragmentation of the ruling class, these structural conditions allow for a certain political space which students appropriate, turning themselves into a vanguard and forming alliances, both nationally and internationally, in pursuit of national reconstruction.