

The Ideas and Vision of the 2012 Street Protest in Nigeria

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Abstract

January 13, 2012, protesters took to the streets to protest against fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria. Why does government believe subsidizing consumption of oil is a drain on public finance that will prove unsustainable in the long run? The key question this paper shall examine is on the ideas and vision behind the 2012 Nigerian street protest against fuel subsidy removal. The main proposition in this paper is that government must fight against corruption that has become part of our culture instead of removing fuel subsidy. The objectives of the paper include to investigate: (a) why government introduced the plan to remove fuel subsidy without any regard to how it will affect common Nigerians; (b) high cost of living in Nigeria manifested in high transport cost, food, medicine, rent and low infrastructural services; (c) the reasons for the protest, government's response, implications and gains of the protest; and (d) the rise in the gap between the rich and poor and the exploitation by government against the poor. The theoretical framework for this paper shall be drawn from the Marxist-based social conflict theory.

Method of data collection is through qualitative and unstructured interview with carefully framed questions administered on officials of the Nigerian organised Labour, civil society and government officials as gleaned from the media. The paper concludes that Nigeria is corrupt and a workers' revolution is on the way to break the political and economic domination of the ruling class with the aim of organizing society along lines of ownership and democratic control.

Key words: corruption, revolution, exploitation, unemployment, protest

Introduction

The Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, had a New Year gift embedded in his broadcast of January 1, 2012 to the nation. The pump Price of petrol, which is the most widely used petroleum product in Nigeria, had been increased by more than 100%. This increase came about because of total withdrawal of subsidy from the product. The government had sensitized the citizenry to the need to remove subsidy from petrol, so as to apply such money to the development and improvement of basic infrastructures in the Country.

From the surface, this would have been a welcomed development but the magnitude of corruption in the Country makes every government's policy suspect. President Jonathan even admitted recently that there is a mistrust of government by the citizenry because of corruption (Pointblank News, 2012).

Consequently, the major labour unions in the Country rose as one in condemnation of the increase in the price of petrol. The unions pointed out that in a country where transportation, education, health care systems, etc are in an appalling state, the increase will only add to the suffering of the already overburdened poor. Then, it was reasoned that the gains from the fuel subsidy removal will only end up enriching a few just like several other government programmes. The unions gave government an ultimatum to revert from ₦150 per litre to ₦65. In the ensuing period of accusations and counter accusations many notable economists, academics, lawyers, human rights activists and civil society organizations took sides with the labour unions and challenged the government that it was lying with figures, and that petroleum products were not really subsidized.

So when the period of ultimatum expired, workers were called out on a general strike. Major cities like Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna and Port Harcourt came to a halt. The protest became hydra-headed with the passage of each day and entertainers performed freely to entertain protesters who had occupied the streets and public squares.

For the purpose of clarity and understanding, therefore, having given a brief introduction of the work in this paper we shall divide this work into seven categorical sections.

These include the introduction; the theoretical frame work of the presentation which is the social conflict theory; the ideas and vision of the protest which were not only to restore the fuel subsidy removal but to push forward anti-corruption policies, transformation and reformation within the oil sector and the Nigerian society; the external and domestic implications of the January street protest; the gains of this protest to the Nigerian citizens; government's responses during the strike and after the strike; and in section seven, the last section, we provided conclusions and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical foundations for this work shall be drawn from the social conflict theory with particular focus on social movement theory. We shall be citing the works of Karl Marx who had spent all his life analyzing contradiction and conflict in society. Though we are not going to down-play other scholars who had also developed a body of theories on social conflict including political process and mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000). The field of social protest is broad; in an article of this length we cannot completely do justice to the topic. Despite this limit, we are confident that the trends we are going to highlight are amongst the most important.

Social conflict itself encompasses a broad range of social phenomena: class, racial, religious and communal conflicts; riots, rebellion, revolution, strike, social disorder, demonstration, protest, etc. It is a struggle over claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aim of the conflict group is not only to gain the desired value, but also to materialize, injure or eliminate rivals (Coser, 1967). The parties in a social conflict are an aggregate of individuals, such as groups or organizations, communities and crowds rather than single individuals in a role conflict.

The social conflict paradigm is a theory based on society being a complex system associated with inequality and conflict that generate social change. The January 2012 street protest which took place in Nigeria over fuel subsidy removal has confirmed that this is true. The social conflict paradigm views the patterns that benefit some people more than others, due to their social standing. Marx made his views not only to understand society but to reduce social inequality. The contradiction from Marx's analysis in relation to Nigeria is: "How is it that in a country so rich with oil, so many could be poor?". Marx makes a point here, if Nigeria is so rich with oil why is government corrupt while millions of Nigerians are living in abject poverty. Now, is removal of oil subsidy the solution? Clearly the consequence is social conflict. Before going on to discuss the concept of social conflict as given by Karl Marx and other important Scholars, what do we understand by the term 'social movement?'

According to Wikipedia, social movements are a type of group action. They are large informal groups of individuals or organizations which focus on specific political or social issues. In other words, they carry out, resist or undo a social change. For Tilly (2004, p.53) "social movements are a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people make collective claims on others". Whether contention occurs in given societies is no longer in debate, the issue now is concerned about what triggers the emergence of a social movement and its potentials. Knowing, therefore, what a social movement stands for even though we have not started visiting Marx's social conflict analysis and others, what are the basic features and characteristics of a conflict situation? Mitchell (1982) argues that conflicts are characterized by conflict behaviour, conflict attitudes and an underlying conflict situation. While others argued that conflict is characterized by social forces, historical, economic and political forces (Carter, 1996).

Since social movements are a major vehicle through which ordinary people participate in public politics, Tilly (2004) argues that there are three major elements to a social movement:

1. Campaigns: a sustained, organised public effort making collective claims on target authorities;
2. Repertoire (repertoire of contention): employment of combinations from among the following forms of political actions – creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and public media' and pamphleteering; and
3. WUNC displays: participants' concerted public representation of **worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments** on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies.

Scholars like Kriesberg (1982) have opined that in analyzing conflict we need to find out if: (a) the conflict is real and perceived as such. To take us back to our main issue, therefore, the social conflict in Nigeria that triggered the January 12, 2012 street protest, we therefore confirm that this conflict was real because all Nigerians felt that it was realistic and necessary since government is corrupt and had refused to tackle other societal problems like unemployment and poverty.(b) The characteristics of the parties involved in a conflict, those involved in a given conflict are they usually those who have been exploited and oppressed by government? Are they also workers and the common men that do not have access to basic human services? Do the well-to-do participate in conflict situations? (c) What is the relationship between the struggling parties involved with one another? It is believed that sometimes, because of the non-existence of a good relationship between government and its people, conflicts are bound to arise.

Does it, therefore, also imply that the absence of a good relationship between the Nigerian government and its people triggered the January 2012 street protest? Probably yes, because government had no prior dialogue with its people before the insensitive fuel subsidy removal. (d) The last element of a conflict situation is the means used to conduct a conflict, the organizational clarity, the size of the group involved, and the length of the dispute. The last January street protest was well organized and there was a very clear message that was passed to government on the issue of the fuel subsidy removal. The entire workers and people from all walks of life surprised the government by protesting against the fuel subsidy removal.

But what is important is that sometimes, where are the protesters going to get the power to achieve their goals? And moreover the cost of maintaining the coercion of the group can make the protest to fail. Though, this was not the case as the protest in Nigeria succeeded. The Nigerian 2012 street protest can be classified as an over-lap of deprivation and Marxist theories. According to the deprivation theory, social movements have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some good(s) or resource(s). This approach argues that individuals who are lacking some good, service, or comfort are more likely to organize a social movement to improve (or defend) their condition.

Several social conflict theories have roots in the ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883), the great German Political activist. The Marxist approach of social conflict emphasizes a materialistic interpretation of history, a dialectical method of analysis, a critical stance towards existing social arrangement and a political stance of a revolution or at least a reform within societies.

The materialistic view of history starts from the premise that the most important determinant of people's life is the work people do, especially the work that results in the provision of social services of life, food, clothing and shelter. Marx argued that, the way the work is socially organized and the technology used in production will have a strong impact on every aspect of society. Marx saw men and women as being engaged in making society and in creating the conditions of their existence.

Karl Marx (1971) argued that it is not the consciousness of Men that determine their social existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. Marx divided society into several stages conforming to the economic structures of society: feudalism, capitalism and socialism. The central thesis of Marx's writing was applying the materialistic model of society to capitalism. The stage of economic and social development that Marx saw was dominant in the 19th Century in Europe. The central institution which Marx saw in capitalism was private property (tools, factories, Machines, Money and material objects used in production) that is controlled by a minority population.

These arrangements within the capitalist formation have led to the emergence of two opposing classes in society: the owners of production (Bourgeoisie), and the workers (Proletariats) whose only property is their labour time which they have to sell to the capitalist. Owners of production are seen making profits from the workers through economic exploitation thereby affecting the social relations and class relationships between these classes that have also brought about class inequalities and differences. The owners of production use their economic powers to take control of the state and economic interest. This economic exploitation in turn leads to political oppression of the workers which results in social conflict.

This political and economic oppression takes many forms in society with even the intellectuals being paid directly or indirectly and religion pacifying capitalist interest. Marx, therefore, viewed this exploitation and oppression as the real issue upon which the superstructure of social, political, and intellectual consciousness is built.

In Marx's final analysis, he sees social conflict as a natural situation in our modern societies and that it is inevitable and unless there is social conflict, societies are bound to retrogress. Though there may be destructions and damages during a social conflict, but the changes and societal reformations are always huge.

There seems to be a consensus among the social conflict theorists in line with Marx's position that contradictions in society lead to conflicts and conflict is good for society to develop. Such theorists include Machiavelli (1531-1948); Hobbes (1651-1947); Herbert Spencer (1898); William Graham Sumner (1883); Darwin (1859-1958) whose discussion on social conflict was mostly based on a biological perspective in which he saw species struggling with one another to survive within an environment and arguing that during this struggles it is only the strongest of the specie that can survive; and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who viewed power in his analysis of the social conflict theory as the ability to carry out own will despite resistance.

In other words, power is related to social conflict because the ruling elites uses power against its people without minding the outcome. It is also a critical element of social existence. As a result of this assertion, people and governments exert their powers over others.

Though he argues that power is also institutionalized and legitimated to produce social order in our societies, but this remains only to the extent it can be possible; and George Simmel (1904-1908) also argued that social conflict is necessary for societal change to occur, since a purely harmonious group (a pure unification) is not only empirically unreal, but could not support real progress.

The Ideas and Vision of the Street Protest

The vision of the street protest went beyond the agitation for restoration of the withdrawn percentage of fuel subsidy. The under-current was a push for anti-corruption policies, transparency, efficiency and institutional reforms. For instance, the protest led to fuel subsidy probe by the House of Representatives which has been very revealing. Consequent upon the probe, the big oil marketing companies involved in the subsidy racket have been exposed and their strategies ranged from round-tripping of petroleum products to outright sharing and pocketing of the money that was meant for fuel subsidy. In 2011 alone, the fuel subsidy cabal had frittered away between ₦1.3 - ₦1.6 trillion (about \$8.125-10 billion) from the coffers of the federal government even when budgetary allocation for subsidy was ₦800 billion (about \$5 billion). In fact, the Central Bank of Nigeria, the Ministry of finance, the Ministry of petroleum resources, and the budget office were all giving conflicting figures. The uncovered magnitude of the fuel subsidy scam has justified the street protest. According to the Report of the House of Representatives Committee, those to be probed by the anti-graft agency (EFCC) are:

121 oil marketers as follows: 17 marketers that did not obtain foreign exchange but claimed to have imported petroleum products; 15 marketers who obtained foreign exchange but did not import petroleum products; 71 oil marketers to face probe and refund N230.1 billion (about \$1.438 billion); while 18 oil marketers committed other infractions. The EFCC is also to probe how 3.171 billion litres of PMS (Petrol) got missing (it was alleged never to have been supplied to the Nigerian market).

Also recommended for further probe are ex-petroleum Products Pricing and Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) executive secretaries, Messrs A. Ibikunle (August 2009-February, 2011) and Goddy Egbuji (February-August, 2011). This is due to the fact that:

1. By PPPRA's representation, the marketers received ₦680.982 billion (about \$4.25 billion) as subsidy for supplying 9,317,145.275 litres of PMS in 2011.
2. Curiously, PPPRA made another presentation that the marketers were paid ₦975.896 billion (about \$6.099 billion) for supplying 12,488,789.611 litres of PMS in 2011.

Between (i) and (ii) above, PPPRA has confirmed that the sum of ₦294.914 billion (about \$1.843 billion) was paid on 3,171,644.336 litres of PMS that might not have been supplied to the Nigerian market (*Daily Sun*, May 23, 2012, P. 5) Even the committee set up by the federal government to verify areas of claims on petrol subsidy for 2011 has uncovered overpayments amounting to ₦430 billion (about \$2.687 billion) to private oil marketers and importers (*This Day*, June 26, 2012).

The protesting workers consistently insisted, before, during and after the strike, that government should expose and stop the corruption in the country.

The Trade Union Congress (TUC) sharpened this vision when its President-General, Peter Esele, commented on the allegation of bribery leveled against the House of Representatives' ad hoc Committee that was charged to probe the fuel subsidy scam. According to Oyesola (2012), he said:

The whole drama is a justification of the cry by the Nigerian people and workers that this government has treated corruption with kid gloves and has barefacedly passed on this crime as increase in the prices of products on the people. This has meant large scale poverty, disease, suffering and deprivation for hapless Nigerians. (Daily Sun, June 18, 2012)

The President-General of TUC concluded by insisting that the only path of honour for those in government, was to immediately commence the prosecution of the fuel subsidy thieves, for such would be the only acceptable course of action to Nigerian workers and indeed, the whole of Nigerians.

Though the street protest against the removal of fuel subsidy ended several months ago, the vision of seeing that corrupt practices in governance are stopped is still alive. This can be seen in the exposition by Segun Oyegbami a civil society organizer, in *Daily Sun* of June 14, 2012. He pointed out that:

Another burning question that our policy makers or administrators should be asked is this... Why is the procurement of subsidy on kerosene being retained amidst all the hue and cry of terrible corruption in the handling of this product? Meanwhile there is continuous illicit diversion of kerosene into the aviation industry as ATK and it is also being fraudulently blended into AGO to the detriment of transporters, owners of big generators, industries and indeed all heavy machinery users. Government brings in the (refined) kerosene and pays the huge subsidy differential of about N85.00 per litre and the product is made to disappear into ruinous enterprises destructive to the economy while the common man still gets it upwards of N130.00 per litre. The same government still retains tenaciously the “kerosene subsidy at all costs” policy while in the same breath making a case for [PMS] subsidy removal. Why this double standard? It is surely in order to continue its selfish and corrupt acts of distributing patronage and largesse through kerosene allocations. Something is seriously amiss; there is palpable callousness, or something like a deficit of human feelings, integrity or social conscience (P. 20).

From the above submission, it is clear that the Nigerian people doubt government’s sincerity and strongly believe that the ruling class is taking advantage of the common wealth.

However, the government has expressed a commitment to prosecute those indicted by the probe committee. With the kind of weak institutions existing in Nigeria, one cannot be too optimistic about the outcome of this process. The nation’s anti-corruption agency, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) has been known to start high-profile investigations that normally end in an anti-climax. Now that the sons of the immediate past and current chairman of the ruling political party (PDP) are among those indicted and are facing prosecution for fuel subsidy scams, the outcome can be very predictable.

Already there is wide-spread skepticism among the citizenry because those to face trial have threatened to reveal the deals with insinuations that the money was used to finance the general elections of 2011 (*Daily Sun*, August 12, 2012).

Arising from the fuel subsidy street protest also, the Nigeria National Petroleum Company (NNPC) which used to be perceived as an untouchable government organ has come under intense scrutiny. Members of the public and some political office holders, especially at the second tier of government like Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi – governor of Rivers State and chairman of governors’ forum, are now asking for unbundling (reform) of the NNPC (*The Nation*, May 28th, 2012). The NNPC is known to maintain several secret bank accounts abroad amounting to billions of dollars. This is possible because as a nation struggling to combat oil thieves, Nigeria does not know precisely how much it earns from crude oil.

The anger as expressed at the street protest also anchored on other economic indices such as unemployment, which according to the National Bureau of Statistics, now stands at 23.9% which is a steady rise from the 5.3% in 2006; below UN poverty line of one dollar per day; failure of infrastructure such as electricity, medical care, education, poor state of roads; and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Even when government and labour negotiated and reached a compromise by pegging the pump price of petrol at N97 per litre, protesters demanded a transparent process of handling the gains of the subsidy withdrawal and bringing those who have been abusing the system to justice. In this regard, the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) through its acting chairman, Comrade Kiri Mohammed, reacted to the accusations and counter accusations of bribery by one of the major importers of refined petroleum products, Zenon Oil, and the House ad hoc Committee that probed the fuel subsidy scam.

He called on the federal government to implement the Report of the House Committee without distraction (*Vanguard News*, June 13, 2012).

The Implications of the January 2012 Street Protest in Nigeria

The attempt in this section is to explain the implication of western nations and European governments over this street protest in Nigeria and also to explain what it implies to the entire domestic environment in Nigeria. The essence of this section in this analysis is to investigate the roles played by western nations and other world bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world over fuel subsidy removal. On the domestic scene we want to investigate how the Nigerian government came about fuel subsidy removal, and to find out how the people of Nigeria have reacted to this fuel subsidy removal. The issue at stake is that, was this protest externally motivated or was it the work of domestic forces within the Nigerian polity?

Domestic Implications

Before discussing some of these domestic implications of the January 2012 street protest one after the other, we must first of all take into cognizance the fact that this protest within a couple of days paralysed the mainstream of the Nigerian economy and commercial activities came to a halt affecting not only government but even citizens themselves that planned this protest. The protest disrupted not only economic activities in the country, it made the Nigerian government to lose a staggering ₦794.5 Billion (about \$4.962 billion) within 5 days of the strike. Even though we may mention the point of security somewhere in this analysis, another serious implication of this strike at the domestic level, was the deteriorating security situation in the country as government was already deploying troops to some of the major cities as criminals and vandals started to loot and destroy government properties.

The government being what it is known for, started witch-hunting labour officials silently who did not want to compromise the interest of Nigerians and other Nigerians who were speaking openly against government. It is in the light of this that we shall discuss the domestic implications of the January 2012 protest in Nigeria below.

The first major implication of this street protest in Nigeria is that at long last, there is a growing accountability building up in the Nigerian system. Gone are the days people in government will just get up in the morning and announce the implementation of a policy that is not in the interest of the people. The practice of unaccountability and mismanagement in government will soon be a thing of the past as the common citizens and ordinary Nigerians are becoming aware and informed about government's activities. It was unbelievable and surprising, following the few days of the protest and shut down of various sectors, for one to imagine that anything other than a policy reversal will be announced by the Nigerian government. Government hastily came out with a clear programme of projects from the subsidy money titled "SURE-P" (Subsidy reinvestment and empowerment programme) with a committee monitoring implementation.

Secondly, within the domestic Nigerian environment, the street protest implies that even where there is a great danger of hoodlums taking advantage of the protest to destroy government's properties and cause loss of human lives due to trigger-happy police shooting, there is also great hope for the citizens of Nigeria. It was noticed that the protest brought about a source of unity between Nigerian workers from all walks of life, in spite of religious and ethnic differences, to protest against government for removing fuel subsidy.

Thirdly, poor national security was thrown up. Nigeria is blessed with a lot of solid minerals and crude oil resources.

Apart from corruption, unemployment and low infrastructural services, the country is known to have a very poor and porous national security. With the poor timing of fuel subsidy removal and with the increasing spate of terrorist attacks and militants' invasion in the Niger Delta region of the country, there may be a potential and renewed military incursion in government. So, ideally Nigerians are not opposed to fuel subsidy removal per se, but the timing and the hidden intention of government because they know that subsidy removal is targeting the corrupt "cabal" of fuel importers who benefit from the subsidy. The question the citizens of this country are asking is why is why can't we tackle corruption, arrest top politicians who are culpable, groups and government officials sponsoring terrorist activities in the country? As it happened elsewhere, a phased subsidy withdrawal would be a humane approach and not the way the Nigerian government is going about it.

Another domestic implication of the fuel subsidy removal is that a new generation of Nigerian citizens has emerged within the Nigerian society with a new consciousness and awareness arising from the events that took place in the Arab uprising in the Northern part of Africa. Ordinary Nigerians have become better informed and knowledgeable about governmental policies and are now demanding that the terms of the social contract between the Nigerian people and the constituted authority must be re-written in the interest of peace and national security which will bring about a sense of accountability among political leadership in the country. One outstanding feature was that many people from the middle class came together and formed a social movement known as "Save Nigeria Group" which rallied a lot of support for the protest.

There is also this huge implication is that the idea of removing the subsidy equates to "deregulation" of the downstream sector of the oil industry as witnessed in the past decade in the telecoms sector. This is highly suspicious to most Nigerians because the gains went to just a few individuals. For the downstream oil sector to be deregulated there has to be a new legislation put in place. The Petroleum Industry Bill, which separates the functions of the national oil company, provides regulations and policy-making but still enmeshed in political machination, would therefore need to become law. Without this law being passed, the implication is that the NNPC at present remains the "epicentre" of corruption in the oil sector in Nigeria and will be spreading its corruption to the private sector. This implication goes further because the Nigerian citizens would want to see a much higher percentage of crude oil to be refined locally, rather than the current reliance on imported refined fuel. Also to ensure a favourable local pricing policy that does not depend on state subsidy. Without any of the above, therefore, including building blocks for deregulation, removal of fuel subsidy will not favour and inspire confidence amongst the citizens who long ago lost faith and hope in the Nigerian government.

Another conspicuous and obvious implication is that as at now, most Nigerians are living in abject poverty. With most Nigerians being very poor, they would simply not be able to bear with the removal of the fuel subsidy.

To say that the Nigeria government did not foresee the massive resistance that was coming on the way from the Nigerian citizens is unbelievable. The implication is also that social dialogue between government and its citizens is very poor with a huge disrespect and disregard for its citizens.

External Implications

An analysis of the external implications of the January street protest over fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria reveals that the western nations and the international community had a role to play in this protest as they have already done in other Countries (Cameroon, Ghana, and Guinea Conakry). On December 11, 2011, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, visited Nigerian authorities to present her road map towards the invocation of an "African spring". The meeting with President Jonathan was not an accident but it was a predetermined meeting by the IMF's governing body. As it has been said, the IMF has for quite a long time been canvassing amongst African nations. This visit to Nigeria and other African countries invited some frustrations which comparably escaped the "Greed" wall street recession which has been marauding and collapsing European and middle Eastern economies, with hardship, riots and change of government, including the popular "occupy" protests still plaguing the United states and some European nations.

We must not forget the August 11, 2011 "Robin-hoods" riots in the UK, the collapse of the Greek economy, which likewise affected the middle East with Arab Spring revolution. The induced chaos by IMF among African nations is not different from what they did in Indonesia during the Asian financial crises. On a more global perspective, it implies that these western nations and the IMF/World bank's Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) will continue to restrict and siphon from the South, developing world and Africa particularly. It implies further that African leaders will continue to be rats before the elephant leaders of Western nations by continuing to be dependent on western ideas and policies.

In Africa, and in Nigeria especially, the government is gradually killing its people with some of these ideas and policies, as its citizens are dying of hunger, unemployment, poverty, corruption, insecurity, and poor infrastructural services.

The Major Gains of This Protest

Since the beginning of protests and strikes in the history of Nigeria, this has been the most successful protest because of its impact on the Nigerian government. Some of the gains after the protest include the following:

- The strike emboldened ordinary Nigerians and raised a new awareness on wasteful expenditure
- It paved way for genuine negotiations with government that have been crippled for many years now.
- It forced government to decisively move against the massive and crippling corruption in the oil sector
- It pressurized government to reduce the cost of governance, address accountability issues, and current lapses in the oil sector as well as intensify efforts towards the speedy passage of petroleum industry bill
- It forced government to set up the Justice Belgore committee to deliberate and identify further palliative measures that will usher the impact of the policy on the citizenry
- The protest did a lot to enhance national unity, rebuild trust amongst Nigerians, and contributed more towards national consensus and nation building than government policies have contributed in the last 10 years.

The most important issue on the gains of this protest is that government was forced to abandon its earlier position that its decision is irreversible.

The week-long strike caused government to quickly amend its decision on the fuel subsidy removal from one fell swoop to gradual. We believe that because of some of these enormous gains, the organized labour decided to suspend the strike pending genuine negotiations with government due to the platform that the citizens had raised.

Government's Response

The Nigerian government's response to the street protests can be examined from two perspectives. First, the response during the strike, and second, the response after the strike. Before the strike Nigeria was producing more than 2 million barrels of crude oil a day, though the vast majority of Nigerians see limited benefits from their country's natural resources. Nigeria has four oil refineries that presently only operate at about 23 percent of the installed capacity and as a result, has resorted to importation of refined products to meet the needs of its citizens. The government paid the importers subsidies in order to control the price, kept low at \$1.70 a gallon, thus ensuring that Nigerians were able to buy, until January 1st, 2012, as one of the benefits of the crude oil they produce. Unfortunately, government removed the subsidy even when the local refineries are not functional and against popular opinion in the country.

This response before the protest had a poor timing, moreover, the people were not adequately informed about government's action. Government's action before the strike was not only undemocratic, it shows government's corrupt tendencies and its unwillingness to tackle other serious social issues like violence, insecurity, unemployment, poverty and other social vices affecting its citizens.

Government's response during the strike was that the removal of the fuel subsidy would give the government the means to fix the country's many basic infrastructure problems, though citizens saw this objective from government as deceptive because the government in the last few decades has been plagued by corruption and mismanagement problems especially in the oil sector. Also, there was a crackdown on protesters as government ordered the police and the military to stop the protesters by all means. This led to the shooting and killing of some protesters.

Government's response after the protest was a speedy setting up of committees to probe the crippling corruption going on in the oil sector. The appointment of the Belgore committee was a means of restoring the hope and confidence the citizens have lost in government and the oil sector. On the 9th of February, 2012, President Jonathan went ahead to appoint his rival in the just concluded presidential election, Nuhu Ribadu (former chairman of EFCC), as Chairman of the new Presidential taskforce on Petroleum revenue. The role of this task force is to track revenue paid to government, and the monitor crude oil production and export.

On January 16, 2012, government also responded by giving in to labour's demand by restoring a percentage of the subsidy, thereby bringing down the price of petrol. It is also worthy of note that those who have been indicted by investigative panels are facing trial no matter how highly placed. It could also be argued that the government is trying to be sensitive to its citizens' feeling about the economic struggles, introduce accountability measures, reduce cost in governance, bring fraudsters especially in the national assembly for trial if found wanting. The protest has successfully come and gone but then some of the issues still remain on ground.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The visit of the IMF's managing director in December, 2011, to Nigeria and the subsequent broadcast of the President on fuel subsidy removal triggered the street protest of January, 2012.

Nigerians protested against the fuel subsidy removal because of its poor timing and inability to reach a consensus before implementing the policy. The paper, after the introductory analysis, went on to provide the main cube of this discussion which is the theoretical framework that analysed social conflict theories as a foundational base for social protest. The Marxian view was analysed that society is a complex system associated with inequality and conflict that generates social change.

The protest had both external and domestic implications. The genealogy of the protest is linked back to the visit of the IMF managing director to the country and the subsequent broadcast of the President on fuel subsidy removal. This external interference shows that western nations and the international community are still siphoning from the wealth and mineral resources of African states. It reveals further that the west and its allies are bent on introducing another African spring in African states by urging African governments to implement fuel subsidy removal. As a matter of fact, western nations are capitalizing on the corruption of African leaders to suppress the development of the continent. The recession going on in some parts of Europe and the global oil crises affecting the world, are to force African oil producing countries to cut down the price of their oil as they have done somewhere else. It implies further that African leaders including Nigeria are economically dependent on the international community.

There were some huge domestic implications of this protest especially the impact on citizens living on less than one dollar a day who may not afford the high living standard when fuel subsidy is removed. Though economic and commercial activities came to a halt all over the country, for the first time in the history of Nigeria a general strike succeeded as the strike recorded some gains.

The strike has come and gone but lessons must be learned by all groups that were involved in the protest. Labour has to partner with civil society groups in order to build a strong movement of visionary civil society activism under one strong national platform that will keep such a struggle in future. It has been noticed that the absence of this kind of platform in Nigeria has made such protests unworkable in the past. The organizational discipline that survives such a movement must also be put in place and every one must work together during times like this to bring government to a check.

Though the Nigerian government has promised to deal decisively with all those indicted in the probe of subsidy scam, it has to be mentioned that if the trial turns out to be a sham, more crippling protests may occur again. That contradiction which Marx was discussing is not unconnected with the high level of corruption in the Nigerian Society. With citizens' awareness on governance, there is going to be a social revolution by Nigerian workers and other members of society that is going to break the jinx of the economic and political domination of the ruling junta or class and set up public ownership of governance and its properties according to the principles and terms of global and ideal democracy.

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