

Trade Unions and Democratic Option in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT An attempt to find out through interviews the contribution of major Trade Unions on the new democratic dispensation in Nigeria. The major Trade Unions, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) demonstrate their own interpretation of the concept of Democracy. Through their members who also belong to various political parties in the country, the Trade Unions have participated in debates as to how Nigeria could make progress by defending democracy. The gender issue that advocates full participation of women in Trade Unionism as well as in governance and also the patriotic style of Trade Union demands are points discussed in the article. Governments also have come to realize that Trade Unions have demonstrated their willingness to work with political leaders in order to meet with complex requirement and fulfillment for better life for Nigerians.

INTRODUCTION

Under the current Civilian Democratic dispensation in Nigeria, government bases its relationship with Trade Unions on absolute authority. The ruling class strives to brandish the doctrine of sovereignty on all groups within and outside the country. Thus, threat of strikes notwithstanding, at the bargaining (or negotiating) table, government retains the power to accept, select or modify agreements between union representatives and government representatives.

In the final analysis and from the interviews conducted, the general feeling is that Trade Unions do mobilize workers without the fear of being molested, much unlike the situation during preceding military era. From the time full democracy was reinstalled, hardly are union leaders arrested as a result of strikes or industrial disputes. Political leaders are in fact careful in handling labour crises. Rather, heads of government at State and Local levels appeal to labour leaders for understanding and cooperation in making known their grievances.

On its part, the umbrella union in Nigeria, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) our focus for this article is aware of the danger that lies in rigidity of demands. One of our interviewees observes as follows:

“pushing our agitations to the extreme could give certain interest groups chance to exploit situations to their advantage and thus undermine good governance and stability. However, the military should be warned never again to dream of coming back to governance”.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This journal article tries to clarify the influence of Trade Unions in recent political development in Nigeria. Political development here highlights the on-going stages of change in the structures of government. The focus given to the phrase (the influence of Trade Unions in Nigeria), is in the growing support for democracy in the country especially as regards civil and political rights.

There is a debate among experts on comparative politics as to how democratic institutions (among which are Trade Unions) contribute to political stability or, on the contrary to political disorder.

There is no known attempt yet to find out through comparative study why governments in post-independence West Africa tend to be so suspicious about communist ideological incursion into the region. Again, answers are needed as to the reason why Trade Unions are singled out to be most susceptible to communist influence within each State of West Africa.

Trade Unionism was an important legacy of colonialism which was used by nationalists to fight for, and maintain the independence of West African countries. In these austere times, it is clear that Trade Unions do influence the development of democracy in West Africa as regards economic growth. Therefore, the role of trade unionists in fueling opposition against autocratic rule (be it one party or military) needs objective study.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The journal article is meant to test the following hypotheses:

1. that Trade Unionism and Party Politics mutually complement each other;
2. aware of their economic potentiality, Trade Unions directly affect the growth and sustenance of democracy.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For desirable focus, and theoretical analyses, two Trade Unions of different ideological tendencies in Nigeria are being cited. They are: the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).

ON THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

(a) The ASUU

Leaders of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) look at the concept of democracy from the way the Union's affairs are conducted. They refer, with pride to the extent grassroot members participate in the decision making process of the union. The process precludes the leadership from arrogating to themselves all wisdom in decision making through manipulation or hoarding of information. Any action leading to personal power is prevented at all costs. Criticism openly is not only welcome from the grassroot members of the Union, but also encouraged. The above conditions can only be attained after members are educated on a continuous basis in order that they are able to make informed and self-emancipatory choices.

ASUU has an important body called National Executive Council (NEC) headed by the President, followed by the Vice-President, then other officials like the Treasurer, National Secretary, Chairmen of branches. All of them referred to as the Union's Principal Officers take final decisions of the Union. Decisions emanate from reports from branches, headed by various Chairmen. Thus, decisions are never arrived at by any single individual or officer of the Union. Team work cherished by the union illustrates the degree to which a synergy of the individual strength, insights and contribution of members is sought after. All decisions are finally arrived at after long debates, then consensus.

Another aspect of Democracy as illustrable by ASUU is Group Solidarity or the belief that what affects one member or one branch affects all other members and branches of the Union.

For example, the Union's demonstrations are held in solidarity by all branches for various positions which the union feels strongly about. Strikes and boycott of lectures are embarked upon for syndical claims and also whenever officials of the union are victimized unjustly by government through its agents. For example the recent events in the University of Ilorin illustrates this where committed members of the union were brutally treated as a result of the industrial action recently embarked upon by the Union.

ASUU as a union has not been in good terms with governments in Nigeria for a long time now. Hardly any Minister in charge of Education (almost all of whom are academics drawn from Nigerian Universities) has not clashed with ASUU on matters concerning improvement in Higher Education. President Obasanjo has been very critical of ASUU. For example at a recent convocation ceremony at the University of Calabar the President not only projected his worst lashing out on members of ASUU, but also declared that his administration would declare war on the union and that God would work for him in this war. He not only portrayed the union as totally irresponsible but stated that they were strike prone, selfish and totally unconcerned with the fate of students.

ASUU's understanding of democracy obliges its identification with other sectors of the working class. Regarded as a "leftist" organization, ASUU's membership of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) has not been steady. Although it had been effective before 1980 within the umbrella NLC, following the Ahmadu Bello University crises in 1986, ASUU was deaffiliated from the umbrella union. This was due to the extreme radicalism of the union which constituted a posture rather uncomfortable for the military regime of the time. It is however interesting to note that the democratic beliefs of ASUU was shared by the NLC leadership. Moreover, Marxist-prone unions in Nigeria shared similar democratic ideals with ASUU.

Even though ASUU is not a member union of the NLC nor of its sister umbrella union, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) the unions agree generally on matters concerning Nigerian workers.

(b) The NLC

Comrade Adams Oshiomole, the President of the Nigerian Labour Congress, bares as follows his mind on what the concept of democracy is all about in an interview held with him:

"No one must continue to sit on the fence or

else the fence must collapse. People must ask questions and insist that political leaders must give account of their stewardship because the people must get a feedback. Parliamentarians must go back to their constituencies to exchange views with the grassroots. They must ensure that programmes of government are followed in the interest of the people."

During the interview, Comrade Oshiomole cited the example of George Bush, President of the United States of America, who explains at length to the American people why America must remove Saddam Hussein warning that they (American citizens) must be ready to pay the price.

Oshiomole insisted that the blame for the failure of Democracy in Nigeria should be put squarely on military rulers. Citing the anti-corruption panel headed by Justice Oputa, Oshiomole felt that concrete proofs were made which exposed the misconduct of some military leaders. Even though Oputa tried his best concerning attempts to expose some past military rulers, he was not given the power to convict. In the present democratic setting, every suspected criminal should go through the due process of law. Oputa's findings, all the same, pricked the conscience of many Nigerians. All doubts about democracy were also allayed since it was now clear that very senior military administrators were screened and impartial judgement was passed on their previous activities. This can also be taken as dividend of democracy. The story is also told of a retired military administration of Bayelsa State who went to his residence by helicopter because the roads were unpassable due to neglect. Farmers and fishermen in oil producing States generally were the worst hit regarding the spoiling of crop lands and the pollution of water. Navigable waters have been destroyed over the years due to insensitivity of the past military regimes. Democracy has changed all this.

THE GENDER ISSUE

It is already widely known and accepted that women constitute a powerful force for democratic change in Nigeria. Women's participation in Trade Union activism therefore will enhance labour union's influence in the new Democratic process in Nigeria. Conferences have been consequently organized for instance by the NLC in November, 1999 and later in October, 2000 in efforts to realize NLC's ambition towards integrating more women into the mainstream of the union and its affiliates. The goal was and is to make sure that not less than 30% of key positions of the NLC is given to

women, in order to encourage their participation in activities of the Union. Equally, men need to be lightened on the need to encourage women to come on board to Trade Unionism.

Agreeing with the fact that women are inadequately represented at the higher cadre of Trade Unions in Nigeria, a woman Trade Union leader in an interview gave the following reasons for this anomaly:

- lack of education due to cultural factors which give greater access to formal education to men rather than to women. It needs be explained that formal education leads to enhanced position of employment especially at the public service level. It is the formal employment that engenders trade unionism. The fact is that there are fewer women than men in this sector of the Nigerian economy due to unequal access to formal education.
- socio-economic poverty which encourages men to dominate in labour matters stretching especially to property matters in Agriculture and/or Industry.
- religious beliefs in Nigeria whether Christian, Muslim or Traditional which place women appendages or at best helper to men. Nigeria is dominated by male chauvinists.
- from the above, it becomes clear that the Trade Union's understanding of democracy within and outside the union is lopsidedly in favour of men. For example, men keep voting themselves to leadership posts within the NLC. Men generally try to make trade unionism unattractive to women. How? Male chauvinists within the union conduct businesses in a way that is most unfavourable to women. In matters of timing of meetings, manifestations, symposia, locomotion and such like a woman is at disadvantage since she thinks, first and foremost of her home comprising children, husband and extended family members all for which men reap benefit! Being a mother and a wife, is much more important to a woman than labour activism. One woman activist asks rhetorically: "Would you, Sir, allow your wife to travel often to take part in demonstrations or labour rallies, meetings, strike negotiations at the expense of your home?"

Despite the above disadvantage, women approve the move by the NLC leadership to ensure gender equality at the leadership level of the union. It is increasingly agreed that women perform more creditably in areas like teaching, nursing, medicine than men. In matters relating to Textile, Health matters and other areas relating

to home stability.

What then are concrete steps to be taken to encourage women to participate in Trade Unionism? The question put to a number of women brought reactions summarized as follows: One major solution is to grant women economic empowerment. On this, poverty alleviation programs should be put in place for women (“who constitute the poorest gender in the world”) in order to enhance their economic independence as well as to ensure equal access to the same employment opportunities as their male counterparts. Economic empowerment leads naturally to political empowerment. Here, 30% representation should be reserved for women in all appointable positions of decision making in public life. Another step is in relation to health. On this, women should have access to good health facilities especially regarding sexual and reproductive health. Next is family matters. The family is undoubtedly the basic unit of society. Women should receive comprehensive protection and support for maternity, motherhood and parenting. After all the matter of procreation must not be a basis for discrimination. Furthermore, all kinds of violence against women must be prohibited. On education, both men and women should have equal access at all levels. All steps recommended should be subsumed under Human Rights and Freedoms where the rights of women should be highlighted.

One interviewee focuses on the fact that women themselves must strive for freedom from discrimination through campaigns, seminars, workshops. Here, women already in leadership positions at all levels of public and private endeavours must come together to speak and enlighten their audiences on the benefits derivable from participating in Trade Union activism. They also can share their experiences with up and coming younger women in order to encourage them that whatever they might be going through now is for a short time and that through determination and patience they will get to the top like their male counterparts. This interviewee disagrees with the suggestion that certain leadership positions are unsuitable for women. A woman should pull herself together, struggle harder than men to achieve better results. She thanks the new NLC leadership under the Presidentship of Comrade Adams Oshiomole, who, achieved this through workshops, conferences organized on women empowerment. She adds: “I must confess to you, that both men and women in Labour Unions in Nigeria today are better enlightened. This is surely a right step

in the right direction. To answer your question concerning the possibility of having a political party exclusively for women, my opinion is that there can neither be an all men party nor an all women party, all are citizens of Nigeria with equal rights entrenched in the constitution. Moreover, the purpose of democracy is to entrench benefits of citizenship without gender consideration. Actually, women must work very hard as I have earlier advised, to work their way up within the political party of their choices. No man will go through the rigours of organizing and participating in the activities of a political party and, at a stage give up a top leadership position to a woman from the blues just because it is a woman. What we are saying is that women should come together as a group to support any party that is seen to take interest in women, observable in manifestoes and programmes. Let me illustrate by saying that at present we have a women’s group in the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) watching the execution of the programmes of the party. As soon as we notice insincerity on the part of the so-called Party Caucus, we will pull out en masse from the party.”

The summary of views expressed by women activists is that efforts towards engendering equality between men and women not only in Trade Union activities but in national life should start from home. It is within the family home that parents should treat their male and female children equally. For example, all children should do the same house chores without discrimination. Equal access to social, educational and economic opportunities must be upheld, thus when they grow up they can regard themselves as partners in progress. The argument that the male child keeps on the family name should be debunked as regards socio-economic progress. On religion, the consensus is that only in the Islamic North and some parts of the Southwest of Nigeria is the doctrine that women should hardly be seen is emphasized. This doctrine affects women’s rights to education and it is a clear social injustice in the name of religion.

In answer to the question put regarding women’s contribution to the current democratic dispensation under Chief Obasanjo, the reaction is that this period has given the best offer to women since the independence day in Nigeria, even though better deal could still be attained. Right now, more women have been appointed to the cabinet than hitherto; so also is the number of Advisers to the President. Similar situation exists in states and local areas where a woman Deputy Governor (Lagos State), majority leader

women members of State Houses of Assembly, Chairpersons of Local Governments all now exist.

On the role of women in workers' demonstrations and negotiations, interviewees believe that women stop at nothing to achieve their set goals. Examples are cited concerning the Niger Delta struggle of recent where women are said to have high jacked the struggle against the government and foreign explorers of crude oil. The result is that male youths are becoming more violent than before on the matter. The fact is that women are more emotional than men but in the end, women get involved when their special interests are in danger. For example, the question of salary increase affects the home front. What a woman wants, she gets 100% one hundred percent because they are more direct in negotiations than men. One special example is women's request for the extension of maternity leave from three months to six months. In conclusion, there is better and quicker success when women are included in negotiation and inevitable showdown with male dominated government.

THE STRIKE OPTION

The Nigerian worker would like to be treated as a person, not as an object of labour, irrespective of wealth or status. This translate to recognizing his human dignity and subsequently his human rights. Lack of adequate communication or simply communication gap creates problems between workers and employers. When workers lack necessary and regular information from management, they start to dream and eventually come up with images. Therefore, regular communication is vital in labour management relationship. Thus in a scenario where a labour union and management unilaterally take action which should have been discussed jointly or at least brought to the attention of the other party, the result is industrial dispute or strike.

When a labour union presents its demands to management, it often expects immediate implementation without realizing that it is good labour – management relations to discuss such demands such that a mutual agreement may be reached. Where the management fails to implement such agreement, often as presented, the workers automatically embark on strike action. Most of the time, demands are for improvement in the wage structure and general conditions of service.

Effectiveness of a strike action by workers depends on the proportion of workers involved and the number of man-days loss. Thus, strikes

could cause serious economic repercussion. Actually almost all strike actions have some impact or the other on those not directly involved in the disagreement especially the general public. For example, when a cement factory workers embark on strike action, the various suppliers who depend on the factory would have to curtail or indeed suspend their operations. Effects of the strike are also felt by many citizens and companies that depend the products from the factory.

What we discovered in our research interviews is that the worker who embarks on strike is aware of the consequence of his action. He is aware of the economic and social impact of his action (or inaction) and that this will not go unnoticed but rather will have some effect on the community. On the other hand his action (or inaction) will eventually lead to gain or loss accruing to himself.

The following information was obtained from an interview with the General Secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Public Corporation, Civil Service Technical and Recreational Services Employees. This information concerns the steps taken to get his union's grievances to government for action. The Union is structured along the Federal set up in Nigeria. Thus, it has branches all over the States of the Federal Republic with a council running the affairs of each State branch. Grievances concerning conditions of service are thoroughly discussed and outlined at this level. If such grievances can be resolved locally, that is, on the local government or State level, so be it. However, the question of conditions of service goes beyond this level as it is dealt with at the national level.

Issues that are negotiable and spelt out while those that cannot be discussed through negotiation are pencilled down for confrontation. For ease of action the following are four levels of action by the union. At the apex we have the Supreme Council based in the nation's capital city, then three councils coordinating the senior civil servants, middle level and lastly Technical and Junior Civil servants. A concrete example of demand is the 25% wage increase championed by the NLC. Here a letter was addressed to the Head of State through the level of the Union's Supreme Council working with the leadership of the NLC. When negotiations broke down, the other levels (Senior, Middle Level and Junior Civil Servants) acted by embarking on Press War using press conferences as a kick-start. This war entails communiqués to sensitize public opinion. We also printed and distributed handbills to all levels of the society targeting especially market women,

traders, transporters. Handbills were also pasted on walls at strategic areas of cities. Here we threatened to go on strike and shortly after, we embarked on a two-day warning strike and finally went on an indefinite strike. All along, we sought and obtained legal advice and support.

Generally, strikes are rather suspended than called off. The reason is to permit implementation of agreements reached. Again, full satisfaction is hardly ever obtained but negotiation continues ad infinitum. In all, strike, as a weapon, is the only part of collective bargaining with government that workers brandish. In the present democratic dispensation, it appears to work effectively.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The first hypothesis that Trade Unionism and Party Politics mutually complement each other and the consequent second one have been proved to be true in this article. Workers constitute the major moving force in the economy of Nigeria. There is hardly any company, institution, or government parastatal in Nigeria without a workers' union. Political Parties grouped under a particular ideology or the other comprise members of the working class forming the majority of such parties. Conversely, majority of workers in Nigeria belong to one political party or the other of their choice.

In the study leading to this write-up, conducted in the main through interviews, we discovered that the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the umbrella Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) play tremendous role in the political and economic progress of Nigeria. For example, in the matter of industrial relations, the new democratic option in Nigeria has opened a new era in the manner of resolving disputes. There is now a clear difference between worker-government relations during the erstwhile military governments as compared to the present civilian democratic administration.

The gender issue also has been given a positive consideration due to the encouragement hitherto absent, given to women as to participation in both Trade Unionism and Party Politics.

For sure, no social system is fully democratic which concerns itself solely with the mechanisms that allow for free competition and election *without having at its core the advancement of the material interests of the working people and the*

deprived segments of the population. What has emerged in the present democratic dispensation is that government has realized the need to shape and define labour objectives in such a way as to keep pace with the increasingly complex requirements of the people of Nigeria. Government is also trying to ensure that the inevitable social, political and economic changes are directed towards the fulfillment of Nigerians for a better life. In conclusion, Trade Unions play a crucial role in this development. It is therefore manifest that Trade Unions and Government are partners in the development of democracy in Nigeria.

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