

Occupy Nigeria: 'When the Cup is Full'

Category: Labor, Left Politics, Social Policy
written by newpolitics | August 31, 2012

"To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men." - Abraham Lincoln

Occupy Nigeria came and went like a flash of lightning, but its impact was significant and demonstrated the power that lies with 'the people'. At first, Nigerians did not join the Occupy Movement, which started in 2011 with OWS in New York and spread to a considerable number of countries, but this changed in early January 2012. What exactly changed people's minds? What instigated the Nigerian people to stand up and join the clarion call for change? Understanding this requires at least a basic knowledge of the political and economic milieu of the country.

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with a population of over 140 million people. It is also an oil-rich state, ranked the world's second biggest oil exporter by volume and seventh in terms of oil reserves according to OPEC Annual Statistics 2010/2011. Notwithstanding, World Bank statistics place the Gross National Income per capita of the country at \$1,180, and about 64% of the population lives below the international poverty line of \$1.25 per day as of 2010.

Despite being a major crude oil producer and exporter, Nigeria relies on imports to supply its daily oil consumption due to the incapacity of its major oil refineries (which crashed due lack of maintenance and mismanagement) to meet domestic demand. The country basically exports crude and imports at a much higher price refined oil and petroleum products for local consumption. This makes fuel expensive and unaffordable for the majority of the population. It became necessary to implement a program to subsidize fuel. However, the government spends approximately \$7.5 billion monthly to sponsor the subsidy program and has been running a deficit. Over the years, there were talks of removing the subsidy, but it was always very challenging because oil is central to everyday activities of Nigerians, and because most industries like transport, agriculture, and manufacturing depend on it. It is more or less a basic necessity for households and businesses and is in high demand, especially in the absence of a reliable power supply.

However, on January 1, 2012, the Federal Government, through the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) announced the withdrawal of the fuel subsidy. This action caused fuel prices to jump more than 100%, from N65 per liter to N141 per liter. Nigeria's consumer inflation rose from 10.35% in December to 12.6% in January. Specifically, food inflation rose from 11.5% to 13.1% within that month as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics. In a country with a very high unemployment rate, very low minimum wage, increasingly high cost of living and no government welfare programs, removing the subsidy without a way to mitigate the economic hardship it would cause was nothing short of unconscionable.

One might be tempted to support the government's argument that the subsidy removal was necessary due to the financial burden it placed on the country and the risk of economic collapse. But it is impossible to sustain this argument when you consider the billions that get looted by public officials and flash across the front pages of the news on a regular basis. Alas, the government did not think to go after these funds or take concrete steps to stop the endless embezzlement that poses even greater threats to the economy. To the government, removing the subsidy was an easier course of action. To a lot of Nigerians, though, the subsidy represented the only dividend of democracy that they enjoy in the absence of adequate infrastructure and basic social amenities or benefits. Its removal was yet another way of perpetuating injustice against the people and they were not going to take it sitting down. It was definitely time to act!

Occupy Nigeria started on Monday, January 2, 2012, when a group of people in Lagos, the commercial capital of the country, gathered to protest the new policy. They occupied streets and major roads and marched to the State House of Assembly and on to Gani Fawehinmi Park in a mass rally that pulled over 10, 000 people. Some demonstrated at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, while others rallied on streets holding signs condemning President Goodluck Jonathan's actions and calling for the reinstatement of the subsidy. In the days that followed, the protest spread to most cities in the country, notably Abuja, Ibadan, Kano, Illorin, Benin, Kaduna, Makurdi and Oshogbo.

Government responded harshly in its quest to clamp down the protest. Military and police officers were deployed all around protest cities and some states imposed curfew. Security officers used tear gas and batons and in some instances, lethal weapons against protesters. *Time* Nigeria reported that at least 20 people were wounded and 3 killed in Lagos when police opened fire on protesters. In Kano, about 300 people were reportedly injured and 19 arrested during the protest. Other protesters were killed in Oyo, Kaduna and Niger states, amounting to over 25 persons. Several pictures and videos show police assaulting protesters. Media houses, notably CNN offices in Lagos were raided and journalists and human rights activists like Femi Falana were arrested and detained. Other detainees were arraigned before the Magistrate Court for alleged breach of peace and robbery.

Despite all this, protesters did not relent. On January 9, 2012, the Nigerian Labor Congress (NLC), after a series of unsuccessful negotiations with the government, declared an indefinite national strike. The NLC is very influential since it basically represents the entire labor force of the country and is reputed for locking horns with the government on behalf of the people over repressive policies. The persistent protests coupled with the strike forced the government to go back to the negotiating table and reach an agreement with NLC. It accepted to reinstate a percentage of the subsidy, reducing the price from N141 to N97. In addition, it undertook to launch a mass transit intervention program and rehabilitation of some major railway lines in the country to facilitate cheap transportation and create more jobs. The NLC agreed to these terms and called off the strike and appealed to protesters to cease demonstrations. NLC came under a lot of criticism for the compromise it made with the government. First, the people felt they were not consulted before the agreement was made; and second, since the subsidy was reinstated only in part, it meant they were still going to shoulder a certain amount of additional financial burden. However, it was a significant victory and many protesters decided to accept that.

Occupy Nigeria is considered a success today and the question that comes to mind is 'why'? Several factors accounted for its success. First, the combination of the protests and the strike was unprecedented and attracted popular participation and support. The National Human Rights Commission released a statement emphasizing the fundamental nature of freedom of assembly and the need for the government to respect that and refrain from use of force. Nobel Prize literature laureate Wole Soyinka also warned that Nigeria might be spurred into yet another civil war if the government was not careful. The Nigerian Bar Association and Nigerian Medical Association as well as other stakeholders expressed their support. In Lagos, prominent activists, musicians and actors like Femi Falana, Tunde Bakare, Femi Kuti, Banky W, Kate Henshaw, Bimbo Akintola, and Desmond Elliot joined the protest and made speeches at rallies. In the northern part of the country, for the first time in a long time, religion was not a barrier. In Kano, a core northern state volatile with religious crisis, in a show of what many referred to as rare solidarity, Christian protesters stood guard and acted as cover for Muslim protesters while they said their prayers. The people were united in this one cause from north to south, east to west.

A second factor that accounted for the success of Occupy Nigeria was the effect of the strike on the economy. The economy was practically paralyzed and government found itself losing money it was hoping to save by removing the subsidy. Media reports, though inconsistent and imprecise,

indicated that the amount lost in the first six days of the strike was between N207 billion and N2 trillion. The stakes were high and the government could not afford to remain adamant.

However, the most essential factor was the strong resolve and solidarity demonstrated by Nigerians. Nigeria is a country with more than its share of socio-economic injustices; a country that struggles daily with the devastating effects of corruption; a country where the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is constantly expanding. Notwithstanding these problems, citizens have generally seemed content with verbal complaint without overt action. Elie Wiesel notably said: "there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest." For Nigerians that was the defining moment—the last straw that broke the camel's back—and once the protest started there was no stopping it. The spirit was too strong to be broken even in the face of government brutality and the dead bodies and injured victims that laid in the wake of violent crackdowns. It became evident to the government that the people were serious about their demands and it would be completely impossible, even foolhardy, to ignore them; thus the compromise.

Though Occupy Nigeria was a direct reaction to the fuel subsidy removal, on a much deeper level it was a resistance to the injustices and corruption that have plagued the country for a long time. Perhaps the biggest success of the movement was not the reinstatement of part of the subsidy, but the awakening of the people to the reality of the power they have and the duty they owe themselves and the country to condemn injustices and be more involved in the affairs of the country. The protest was also significant because it ushered in a people-driven anti-corruption campaign. It exposed the massive embezzlement that was going on in the subsidy program. The government was forced to set up a committee to investigate the allegations. The committee uncovered an embezzlement scandal implicating staff of the Nigerian Petroleum Corporation, the PPPRA, petroleum marketers, and companies amounting to about two trillion in Nigerian currency. Already, there are allegations that those involved are attempting to doctor the report. This has been the trend in the country where most embezzlers end up escaping justice and funds are never returned. But Nigerians are on alert now and hopefully, anything short of justice would be unacceptable.

But where is Occupy Nigeria now? It is easy to say that the movement ended after the agreement was reached. And in a way, this is true. However, Occupy Nigeria is very much alive in the hearts of Nigerians. So although the physical protest is gone, the experience created a bond, a new spirit in the minds of the people that will serve to foster future collaboration for change and ensure that they are given due consideration and actively participate in matters that affect them.

Putting this in the international context, this rings even more on point. The Occupy Movement transcends boundaries and binds people throughout the circumference of the globe. This resolute and unprecedented solidarity is ushering a new emphasis on people's governance, which will hopefully stand the test of time and usher in a new dawn of leadership that will redefine what we currently call 'democracy'. This is especially true since, although in principle power lies with the people, in practice, the same people are regarded as the 'followers'. And sure, the people will follow, the people will tolerate the 'leadership' and its excesses; but when these excesses turn into gross injustices and threaten the very foundation of democracy, then the people will act, and they will protest until there is change...because THE PEOPLE ARE THE 99%!

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