

The January Awakening in Nigeria

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Few in Nigeria would have the feeling that 2012 is barely a month old. The past few weeks have been filled with events of historic proportions. First, in response to the unpopular 120% hike in petrol price, the people spontaneously took to the streets across the country in stiff resistance and with an 8-day general strike and mass protests, won a stunted victory. After this, the fundamentalist sect known as Boko Haram, which has killed no less than 935 persons in barely two years according to Human Rights Watch carried out its most deadly attacks on state institutions killing over 200 persons in the northern city of Kano, as it freed 100 of its incarcerated members.

It is pertinent in reviewing this situation which Tell a leading liberal weekly in the country describes as “A Revolution Postponed”, to put in perspective the contradictions and convergence of crisis which the Nigerian society is now embroiled in and make projections about the turbulent road that lies ahead. The main focus of this review is on the anti-fuel hike struggle, which is distinct from the Boko Haram mayhem. There are however inter-linkages which deepen with the announcement of the sect on January 24, that it would bomb the headquarters of the Nigeria Labour Congress because organised labour “accepted” just a partial reduction of petrol price instead of the full reversal demanded by Nigerians.

The myth of deregulation and the petrol price hike

The President of the Federation, Dr Goodluck Jonathan started a campaign to hike fuel price, in August last year, well after his elections. According to him, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) could no longer afford to “subsidize” petrol prices if it were to carry out infrastructural development in the country. The outcry was loud. Petrol prices had been raised no less than 20 times since 1988. The reasons given were always the same, the primary one being that more money would be available for development. But the reverse has always been the case. Nigerians from all walks of life thus made it clear that any increase would be resisted. Several organisations started mobilizing against the January 1, 2012 date slated for the implementation of “full deregulation”.

The state responded with what now can be seen as subterfuge. While maintaining its position that deregulation was inevitable, it expressed interest in consultation and a national dialogue. It equally assured the country that any deregulation whatsoever would not start before April 1. This was in line with the resolution of the National Assembly that the 2011 budget (which bore outlay for “subsidy”) would run till March 31. Most groups and Nigerians as a whole who had started mobilisation against an impending fuel price hike, simmered their agitations. For example, barely 24 hours to the hike, a

rally held in Lagos asserting that the postponement of deregulation expressed a (minor) victory for the working people, who must however remain steadfast till April and similarly, there had been arguments for calling off the January 3 protest march organised by the Joint Action Front, also in Lagos, but it was believed that it would serve as a pre-emptive measure and not one to resist what would have been announced.

The FGN's attempt to catch the people off guard as it announced the increment on January 1 did not work. By January 2, the first spontaneous protests erupted in several cities. In a matter of days, the protests grew more organised and demands expanded to include: inquiry into "subsidy" management; cuts in the costs of state governance & even "Jonathan Must Go!"

Popular resistance and forms of struggle

The January awakening in Nigeria invoked diverse forms of struggle some being novel. The most potent of all these forms, and which led to the greatest disappointment with its eventual sheathing was the General Strike which lasted eight days. Mass protests in the forms of processions and rallies which have been features of popular dissent over the decades shook over fifty cities in the country, involving tens of millions of citizens. Never before has such spread and magnitude of mass protests been witnessed in Nigeria. The forms that could be considered novel and which have gained the awakening the epithet of "Occupy Nigeria" Movement, included mass occupation of city centres and parks which became designated as "Liberation Square" (in Kano) and "Freedom Square" (in Lagos), for example. It also included the internationalisation of the spread of the protest movement by Nigerians in the diaspora who organised demonstrations in several cities across Africa, Europe and North America.

While the initial outbursts were spontaneous, efforts at having it organised in different forms started from the very onset. In Abuja, citizens had gathered close to the Eagle Square to sign a people's petition demanding price reversal on January 2. They were dispersed with teargas and over fifty persons were arrested, eight of whom were released the following day, only after the intervention of the National Human Rights Commission, now headed by Prof Chidi Odinkalu, himself a liberal activist.

The first major organised forms of action were on January 3, in the two largest cities of the country. These were the protest march led by the Joint Action Front in Lagos, and a rally in the Kano City Centre under the aegis of "Occupy Nigeria". The Joint Action Front which was established in 2004 by pro-labour civil society organisations, including most of the socialist left groups in the country is the civil society arm of the Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) which along with it includes the two labour federations, NLC & TUC. Its protest march had been planned as a pre-emptive action that might have drawn at best a few thousands. It became a major platform for venting the rage sweeping through the land in the heat of popular and rising struggle which at the time was still largely spontaneous.

In Kano, "Occupy Nigeria" had been formed by a number of civil society organisations and activists in October last year, with a major aim of resisting any fuel price hike, and drawing inspiration from the Arab Spring and the Occupy (Wall Street) Movement globally, fight for a better Nigeria. By the next day, the rally in Kano became an occupation which lasted till about 1.30am the following morning when it was dispersed by gun-totting anti-riot policemen. At least five persons were killed in that attack. (Police had earlier on January 3 killed the 23-year old Muyideen Mustafa at Ilorin in the heat of one of the spontaneous, peaceful protests then rocking the nation. He would be the first of no less than 20 citizens martyred in the course of the anti-fuel hike struggle). After the general

strike was called off, the organisers of the “Occupy Nigeria” group in the state teamed up with other forces to establish the United Front for Good Governance which has faced attacks, including the beating up of one of its leader and the local university teachers union chair Dr Buppa, by State Security Services operatives who then tried to whisk him away, but were stopped by protesters.

There were several other attempts at occupying or protests that designated themselves as being or being part of an Occupy Nigeria movement. In Abuja, this could arguably be said to have started on January 6, with youths with some six young men and two ladies staying put overnight in the surroundings of Eagle Square. The size of this group increased to about 35 persons at the time it was dispersed in the early hours of Monday January 9 by policemen who beat them up. Several scores more joined this Occupy Nigeria/Abuja during the day or late at night, but did not sleep overnight as these determined youths did. The group, whose membership includes young activists around the new Coalition of Youths Against Fuel Price Hike, continued again despite several attempts at curbing it, in the course of the general strike at what was dubbed “Freedom Square”, by the NLC, in the commercial nerve centre Wuse district of the city. But after the strike, the occupation now takes place only late in the evenings after working hours.

In cities such as Port Harcourt, Benin and Ibadan, several groups have also described themselves as part of Occupy Nigeria while protesting under the banner of several coalitions, such as the Coalition to Save Nigeria which organised a demonstration in Benin City before the strike commenced and the United Action for Democracy, which is an affiliate of JAF in Port Harcourt, for example.

In Lagos, the “occupation” assumed a carnival-like atmosphere in the Save Nigeria Group-dominated Gani Fawehinmi Freedom Park, where no less than 500,000 people gathered everyday from dawn to dusk with speeches made and revolutionary music blaring through huge speakers, throughout the duration of the general strike. The Gani Fawehinmi Park at Ojota, the entrepôt of the mega-city was where the December 31 protest march led by the National Conscience Party and the family of the late gadfly Chief Gani Fawehinmi who had been its founder had ended with a rally. The JAF march of January 3 established the park as the locus of mass activity in the state. In no time though, the Enough Is Enough/Save Nigeria Group, which had emerged as a liberal force of civil society in 2010 demanding a resolution of the constitutional crisis the country was then sliding into as the then President Yar'Adua seemed to be in a comatose state, took charge of that space.

With much more financial resources than JAF, it made food and water available for the hundreds of thousands of citizens that stayed at the Freedom Park all day. Celebrities and liberal activists graced its dais, wherefrom they demanded for radical reforms, stating clearly that corruption and not Nigerians should be killed by the state. JAF along with trade unionists under the aegis of LASCO, on their own part, organised daily processions through different parts of the city with tens of thousands in tow. Several smaller “Freedom Parks” were also established in different strongholds of the working people and youths, such as Alimosho, Ikorodu, Surulere and Ebutte Metta. JAF in the second half of January commenced establishing branches in these areas as part of its mobilisation towards the next phase of what could very well be an unfolding revolution.

It is pertinent at this juncture to analyse the general strike which was the heart of the popular resistance while it lasted (with the streets as its soul) and which with the way it ended, led to condemnation of the trade unions and provided a safety valve for the state and the system it represents for the postponement of the hour of revolution.

NLC/TUC General Strike and its suspension

There were calls from several quarters for an immediate declaration of a general strike. But only the National Executive Council (NEC) of the trade union federations could summon such. On Wednesday January 4, NLC at Abuja and TUC at Lagos held NEC sessions where it was resolved that an indefinite general strike and series of mass protests commence on January 9 if petrol price was not reverted back to N65 from N141. A joint communiqué "In Defence of the Nigerian People on Fuel Price Increases!", was issued. Radical civil society organisations and activists were at both sessions and extracted a promise that the strike would not be called off without such all embracing meeting which would include civil society as well as the NEC members of both federations. This was based on fears from the trade unions suspension of earlier general strikes over the last twelve years.

The strike paralysed the country for the eight days it lasted. Across the length and breadth of the country, workers downed tools, in the public and private sectors as well as in the informal economy. Small scale employers and apprentices were not left out. It was only in the South Eastern state of Ebonyi that workers in the public sector dejectedly went to work even as private sector employees joined the strike. This was after the state governor declared that there would be no pay for public servants who joined the strike. In Nigeria the "no work, no pay" rule is always declared by employers during strikes (including this recent general strike) but the trade unions undermine this through insertion of a "no victimisation" clause in agreements reached when grievances are deemed resolved. The Ebonyi state governor had however enforced this anti-workers principle in the aftermath of a local strike there in September.

It was not just the strike that was a resounding success. The mass protests and demonstration of solidarity across ethno-regional and religious divides that went with it were such as the nation had never witnessed before. In more than 50 cities, tens of millions marched in one accord. Non-Muslim protesters surrounded Muslim protesters in defense when they held their prayers, and in several cities in the North such as Funtua in Katsina and Minna in Niger, Muslims organised themselves into bands that surrounded Churches in protection on Sunday, in response to the earlier proclamation of Boko Haram that it would unleash violence against Christians in the northern parts of the country.

In Lagos, the various rallies and processions centrally and in various local theatres of popular activity involved no less than a million citizens. In Abuja where no mass procession had ever had more than 5,000 citizens, the first day witnessed some 20,000. It doubled the next day and for the rest of the week, despite the fact that many had to trek from far distances as there were very few buses on the roads, no less than 50,000 citizens marched in resistance behind the banner of organised labour.

Why then were the mass protests called off on January 17 and less than 24 hours later the strike called "suspended? This is a question that many find difficult to find any answer to other than "treachery". The answer might not be that simple though; the trade unions primarily represent the working class but are trapped within the rubric of "collective bargaining" ideology with its penchant for middlegrounds & compromises, in a pluralist approach.

It is apt to look at the reasons organised labour gave for its action though. These were threefold. First, the security situation had degenerated, with increased tension in the land. Second, the state had accepted to probe the subsidy regime and the general state of corruption in the oil industry. And third, while labour still "rejects" the mere reduction of the hike instead of a reversal that still represented (partial) victory.

The state and its friends; contradictions and “consistency”

The FGN was obviously thrown aback by the upheaval that greeted its hike in the price of fuel. Since the year 2000, barely a year after the restoration of the Republic, fuel prices had been increased no less than 7 times. Each time, there were general strikes and mass protests in response and after a few days; it would announce a “reduction” which actually amounted to significant increases over the status quo ante. While Nigerians always called for full reversals and organised labour would echo this as it commenced general strikes, the new price would be accepted as a compromise position, the trade union centres would call off the strikes and the masses would grumble that labour had once again “sold out” and then we would all continue to live, even if not happily, ever after, until another round of increases.

Many Nigerians had come to cynically believe that the FGN actually raises the price of fuel beyond its target with this scenario in mind to then negotiate downwards to its earlier goal!

This time around, the matter was not that simple. The world as a whole is in a tumultuous state of flux and Nigerians are living witnesses to how regimes have been overthrown and millions are in movement to realise the possibility of another world. This influenced the fight back of the masses and this resistance led to the deepening of the contradictions within the circles of the state. But it still maintains a coherence of its anti-people line, even if it through its legislative arm in particular, it seemingly genuflects to people’s power and goes through the routine of a prologue for change.

We have seen the lies and subterfuge that preceded the fuel price hike. The extent of deceit and fraud on “subsidy” management would however not be revealed until during the on-going public session of the House of Representatives ad-hoc Committee constituted to look into the “subsidy” regime. Scandalous discrepancies emerged in the figures presented by; the ministry of finance; ministry of petroleum; central bank of Nigeria; petroleum products pricing agency & Nigerian Customs.

While the Minister for Petroleum claimed that only private operators import petrol, the Nigerian Customs showed that up till December, the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) was a major importer of the product. As if this was not bad enough, its records showed that the mother vessels with which NNPC imported this were more often than not berthed in the waters of Togo and Benin Republic. With this, the Comptroller General of Customs rightly pointed out that the problem was not so much one of “smuggling” of “subsidized” petrol meant for Nigeria to neighbouring West African countries, as it was a case of “diversion”.

Interestingly, the FGN had always claimed that the quantum of petrol consumed daily in the country was 35million litres (this in itself is a big laugh! More objective analyses put the figure at between half and two third of this. Besides, this amount includes locally refined PMS which the PPPRA earlier said accounts for 20% of consumption). But the PPPRA Executive Secretary, one Reginald Stanley who had signed the New Year announcement of fuel hike further informed the House committee that what the FGN had been paying for was 59million litres pay day, leaving 24million litres unaccounted for, as the Farouk Lawan the committee chair made explicit.

Lies, fraud, deception, roguery & barefaced thievery in high places were clearly hallmarks of the subsidization of corruption in the oil sector, which the masses are now to pay for. But before this revelations which actually hardly strikes most Nigerians as suprising, the state as “the executive committee of the ruling class” showed itself not only in the form of coercion, but as well that of deception, in the heat of the strike,.

The National Assembly made what many consider an “historic” decision when the House of

Representatives cut shut its recess to pass a resolution moved by Tajudeen "TeeJay" Yussuf, a seasoned activist from his student day at UniJos, that the FGN revert the price of petrol back to N65 per litre. This was on the eve of the General Strike. During the strike & protests, the Senate passed a similar resolution. The leadership of both chambers played mediatory roles between labour and the FGN which was now presented as being solely the state by being the executive arm of government, as if the state and its apparatus of governance do not include the legislature and judiciary as much as the executive arm! More importantly, when the FGN rather reduced the price to N97, there was not so much as a whimper from our honourable and distinguished legislators despite this being clear disregard of not just their resolutions to the contrary, but indeed their legislation that the 2012 budget year start only on April 1.

The FGN on its part tried its utmost to use "propaganda", blackmail and attempts at divide and rule, as much as it could. The labour unions were alleged to be in the pay of the so-called "cabal" which benefits from the "subsidy" to the detriment of the masses! Wrap around lines of trash in black and white espousing how pious and good intentioned the state is with its deregulation policy could be found on every single major daily newspaper and weekly magazine. Shadowy groups such as "Nigerian Youths Coalition for Fuel Subsidy Removal" comprising lumpen elements that were paid the pittance of a mere N1,000.00 in a nearby alley, after attacking Labour House on January 6 were constituted to support such avowed captains of industry like Agedo Peterson a member of the presidential economic team who is also CEO of both Stanbic Bank and Cadbury Nig. Plc, in singing nonsensical lullabies of the el-Dorado Nigerians would blissfully enter with the magic wand of fuel hike.

As if this were not enough, the embers of ethno-regional division were consciously stoked by the ruling class particularly by its cabal of "elders and leaders" from the Niger Delta region which President Jonathan hails from. They claimed Jonathan as their son who must be protected against the country and sang to the high heavens about his sincere motives which the masses who feel the pinch were merely too dumb to see, without a word about the patronage they live on, which has not brought about any visible improvement in the lives of Niger deltans through industries and job opportunities that they never created of course, despite the millions if not billions of naira they are worth, without any entrepreneurship. Taking a cue from them, (ex-)Niger delta militants barricaded the same oil rigs they once used to blow up, to protect these against being shut down by the oil workers unions (this was a major reason why PENGASSAN could not shut down the flow of oil as it was made clear to them that any attempt to do such would be met with bullets from the "militants").

All these could not stop the genie of working people's power which like a fearsome spectre stalked the land for 8 days. Even in Bayelsa state, the heartland of the Niger delta and Jonathan's state of origin, while mass protests on the streets were not possible due to threats by the elders and militants alike, the strike was still total with offices and businesses under lock and key.

The final card of the Presidency and indeed the ruling class as a whole, despite the mimicry of support for the popular rage by a number of its representatives was that of unveiling its ever present (more or less covert when it could be, brazenly overt when push gets to be shove) teeth of dictatorship; deploying troops to the streets. Residents of Lagos, Kano, Abuja and other major cities where the battles between incipient revolution and disgraced reaction had raged for two weeks woke up to find soldiers, anti-riot police men and even sailors and air force personnel totting mean looking rifles and with armoured tanks, on the streets. That same morning, by 7.00am, President Jonathan addressed the nation. He claimed very much like Hosni Mubarak had done, that, miscreants and hoodlums had "hijacked" the strike and mass protests. For good measure, he also accused partisan forces of seeking to turn the mass anger against the fuel price hike to one for regime change. With jackboots and artillery to enforce "acceptance" of N97/litre, the state, in its war against the people had won reprieve for a while for the ruling class. Law and order had been

restored and an end brought to the beginning of the seething revolutionary situation in Nigeria. There would still be a few skirmishes in Lagos, Abuja and Kano, with Octogenarians tear gassed and occupier youths dispersed, but this would be footnotes to that chapter which closed with the "suspension" of the mass strike. All signs though point at this chapter being more of a prologue.

The friends of President Jonathan and his cabal in government are not limited to other members of the ruling class in Nigeria. Madame Lagarde of the IMF was in Nigeria a few weeks before the price hike promoting the supposed veracity of a creed whose god is dead; neoliberalism which lies delegitimized, shamed & shaken across the world even if the biceps of the old worn out but cunning man which capitalism is, still props this its most apt incarnation.

The chief priest of the shock doctrine, Jeffrey Sachs was more explicit in commending the FGN for daring to whip Nigerians with the scorpion of hike in fuel price. The views of citizens & the killings of no less than a score of human beings during protests against the shocking hike meant little to this supposed democrat who would alleviate poverty.

Some of the friends of the FGN came as wolves in sheep clothing to the masses of Nigeria. Probably the most visible of this was Barak Obama, President of the United States of (part of) North America. He loudly expressed the view that protesters had the right to demonstrate. But of course was silent on his position with regards to the price hike itself. Western imperialism learnt its lessons fast from the slow motion with which it almost got its foot in its mouth on the way down for Ben Ali & Hosni Mubarak. It had to seem to be on the protesters side from the onset in Nigeria, incase that would signal the spread of revolutions in sub-Saharan Africa. While being one with its local quislings that rule Nigeria and other countries in the periphery of global capital, it has to seem to be our friend so that if -in its view, but when, in ours- we win, it could be relevant in giving direction as it now does in Libya (& this is no plus for Gaddafi either).

The United States has not stopped at its prankish support of our right to protest (but not our protest itself). Barak Obama also expressed its concern about the menace of Boko Haram. A few days later, the Nigeria-US Commission signed an agreement of cooperation the contents of which remain largely obscure. This poses grave danger for the masses of this country & must be exposed for what it is. Everywhere the yankees have gone supposedly to make the country better & more peaceful became worse & terribly blood soaked.

In pointing out the contradictions on the FGN's side & its friends of the same plumage, we can actually see a bizarre consistency. It is that consistency of placing profit over people, the greed of the few over the needs of the many & of the dictatorial disposition of a bunch of elite over we, the immense majority of the population, even within "democracy".

In lieu of a conclusion

The troops have been called off the streets as I write this piece. The Inspector General of Police has equally been replaced in the wake of the Boko Haram massacre in Kano. The Joint Action Front and other groups still maintain their stand on total reversal to N65/litre. Even the trade unions did not accept the mere reduction nor call off its strike, rather "suspending" it as they foresaw a stalemate. What possibilities could lie ahead, & what lessons could we draw from the first dash in what could well be much more than a sprint of resistance & revolution?

It is quite certain from the current situation that without system change, chaos will continue & indeed deepen in Nigeria. The revelations from the House committee's public sessions are enough to justify full reversal of petrol price to N65/l, at the very least, & to earn not a few persons extensive

stays in prison yards. But these exposes in themselves will not bring about these drastic steps. It will take mass mobilization & recapturing the moment of January 1, which might have been lost in its pristine form.

Here could probably lie a major problem of fixation in the perspectives of many who seek alternative pathways for society, in the country. The issue of fuel price is indeed quite critical in so many ways in our country. It is not impossible that the next round of eruption might still be around it. It is very likely that many battles still lie around it in the future. But I personally do not see the next chapter unfolding on its hinge. The inflationary trend it has already sparked up is more likely to set off a wild fire of strikes for wages increment.

But this fixation in perspective flows from a deeper problem, the near collapse of radical alternative politics on any significant scale before the popular dam of rage burst. However, while the best time to have planted a tree was 20 years ago, the next best time to plant it, if it has not been planted, as the Kanuri say, is now. It would equally entail a lot of joint work, as well as the transformation of how organisations & united fronts work. Not a few of these on the sidelines have rather amusingly tried more to frame roles and actions in the past few weeks in appropriative ways than to deepen organising.

Deepening organising would entail the transcendence of fighting against power to fighting for power. Establishing organs of mass power from below is crucial for a genuine revolution as we saw a year ago in Egypt. It is however not enough to guarantee taking decisive steps towards system change. A new form of partisan politics would be required of the period we have entered, where the streets & workplaces take the main seat from electoralism as the road to power.

Meanwhile, the trade unions in Ghana are poised for a general strike to protest a 20% hike in petrol prices on December 28. This is quite instructive as it is a major indicator of the spread of revolutionary pressures across sub-Saharan Africa as the whole world gets ready for a year of worsening economic realities, political disillusionment with the old order & the drawing of ever expanding numbers into the arena of contestation of power on the way forward.

We would have to express our solidarity with our comrades in Ghana, just as working people & youths across the world expressed their solidarity with us during our recent struggle.

The January awakening in Nigeria is part of the global movement of working people & youths against the system of capitalism which fosters our exploitation & oppression. It is in this light that it is equally the opening chapter of what would most likely be a long drawn class war between the ruling class of cabals in the country and the masses, the movement of the people.

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P.S.

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