



From Subalterns to Independent Actors? Youth, Social Media and the Fuel Subsidy Protests of January 2012 in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explores issues around the changing nature of social networks and social movements involving youth in Nigeria. Using the youth-driven 2012 fuel subsidy protests, the article raises two fundamental questions. First, do the youth-led protests represent a genuine shift for the youth from being mere subalterns to neo-patrimonial power groups to a more assertive role, which seeks to challenge the power structure in the country, or are they simply frustrated expressions of marginality? Second, in what ways have social media affected social networks and movements and their capacity for mobilization in Nigeria? It appears that the burgeoning youth population in Nigeria has led to a realization by youth groups of their power to substantially affect the course and conduct of governance in the country. On 1 January 2012, the Nigerian government unilaterally decided to remove the subsidy on petrol leading to a 120 per cent increase in the price of the product. The move provided opportunities for youth resistance through social media. This article uses insights from this protest to explore these questions and show the fluid nature of youth social networks and movements.

Résumé

Cet article explore les problèmes liés à la nature changeante des réseaux sociaux et des mouvements sociaux impliquant les jeunes au Nigeria. Se fondant sur les manifestations contre la suppression des subventions du carburant de 2012 menées par les jeunes, le présent article soulève deux questions fondamentales. Tout d'abord, les manifestations dirigées par les jeunes représentent-elles un véritable changement pour la jeunesse qui s'émancipe de son statut de subalterne des groupes de pouvoir néo-patrimoniaux pour assumer un rôle plus affirmé visant à contester la structure du pouvoir dans le pays, ou sont-ils simplement

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des expressions frustrées de marginalité ? Deuxièmement, de quelle manière les médias sociaux ont-ils affecté les réseaux et les mouvements sociaux et leur capacité de mobilisation au Nigeria ? Il semble que la population jeune en pleine croissance au Nigeria ait conduit les groupes de jeunes à se rendre compte de leur pouvoir d'affecter de manière substantielle le cours et la conduite de la gouvernance dans le pays. Le 1er janvier 2012, le gouvernement nigérian a décidé unilatéralement de supprimer la subvention de l'essence, entraînant ainsi une augmentation de 120 pour cent du prix du produit. Cette mesure a offert à la jeunesse des possibilités de résistance par le biais des médias sociaux. Le présent article se fonde sur cette manifestation pour examiner ces questions et montrer la nature fluide des réseaux et des mouvements sociaux des jeunes

Introduction¹

Having suffered severe deprivations and abuse of rights under military dictatorships for nearly three decades, many Nigerians were hopeful on the eve of civil democratic rule in May 1999. They expected the new democratic government to guarantee their fundamental human rights, especially freedoms of expression and association. The incoming President, Olusegun Obasanjo – a former military dictator who voluntarily handed over power to a democratically elected government in 1979 – raised expectations further when he solemnly promised to heal the wounds of the country and institute a regime of equity, order and accountability in the governance of the country. Since then however, there has hardly been order in the country as organized violence and crime have spiralled as a result of the emergence and proliferation of 'youth-led identity-based social movements' (Gore and Pratten 2003:212). From 1999, such groups as the Ijaw Egbesu boys in the Delta, the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in the South West, the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the East, and the Arewa People's Congress (APC) in the north have risen to contest the legitimacy of the state. It appears that civil democratic governance gave many of these youth groups – formed in the mid-1980s as secret societies to respond to the post-SAP economic crises and driven underground by the oppressive and repressive military regimes – the latitude to express themselves (Gore and Pratten 2003; Adebani 2005; Nolte 2004). The inability of the state to contain these groups has led to the emergence of more militant and terrorist groups such as the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Salvation Front (NDPSF), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (The Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad) or Boko Haram, who have successfully challenged the legitimacy of the state and exposed its inherent weaknesses and contradictions. In all cases,

with the notable exception of the Boko Haram terrorist group, the activities of these youth-led groups were mobilized around issues of resource control and marginalization by the state, and are often responses 'to the Nigerian politics of plunder' (Gore and Pratten 2003:211). Meanwhile the repressive nature of military rule and the ruthless suppression of all peaceful protests by marginalized groups unwittingly led to a shift in the loci of power from community elders to aggrieved 'youth' groups who have been using violent means to successfully challenge the legitimacy of the state (Obi 2006). By the early 2000s, violence became the chief means by which power and resources were negotiated in Nigeria such that the disparate Niger Delta militant groups were able to successfully negotiate an amnesty programme in 2009 worth billions of dollars, and set the precedence for the violent confrontation with the state as a means of resolving disputes.

Youth groups were content to use violence, protests or threats of these to negotiate favourable deals with the state, often serving as agents of, or being propped up by, politicians (Watts 2007:650). The twin events of the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States and 'Arab Spring' that led to the overthrow of some authoritarian leaders in the Middle East, however, alerted Nigerian youth to their latent power to influence or even change the leadership of the country and to the use of social media for mobilization. Therefore, when, on 1 January 2012, the Nigerian government, in a unilateral move, announced the removal of the subsidy on petrol, it did not predict youth protest beyond the usual threat of strike by the labour unions. On 2 January, youth flooded the streets in protests, under the banner 'Occupy Nigeria Movement' and set the agenda for the unprecedented national protests and strike that followed which visibly threatened the survival of the ruling elite.

This article seeks to interrogate the issue of youth agency and the instrumentality of social media in the mobilization and organization of the protests. In doing so, it seeks to answer two key theoretical questions: first, do the youth protests represent a genuine shift from being just mere subalterns to neo-patrimonial power groups to a more assertive role, which seeks to challenge the power structure in the country, or are they just frustrated expressions of marginality? Second, in what ways has social media affected social networks and movements and their capacity for mobilization in Nigeria?

A 'Lost Generation'? Youth, Violence, and Political Engagement in Contemporary Africa

African youth appears to be at the margins of the African society. Despite constituting the majority of the African population (under the age of thirty-five) and being at the centre of social interaction and transformations, youth

play only a marginal role in the political, economic, social and cultural processes of their societies (De Boeck and Honwana 2005:1). As Jon Abbink (2005) describes it, 'they are marginalized in national state policies and have a weak legal position'. This is quite unlike the youth of the 1960s to late 1970s who, due to the newly won independence and economic boom, had an easy, quick and enjoyable socialization into responsible adulthood. In distinguishing between Africans who grew up in the 1960s to late 1970s and their successors – those who grew up in the 1980s upwards – Donald Cruise O'Brien (1996:56) describes the latter as a 'lost generation'; a disempowered, stunted and now bitter youth with less access to the means of becoming adults, and their 'youth' at 'risk of becoming indefinitely prolonged'. The sight of young school graduates with no formal sector employment, and in no position to set up an independent household came to signify the predicament of this 'lost generation' (O'Brien 1996:57).

For the majority who do not have access to education or skills, they simply grow up in dire conditions of social exclusion, with health problems, especially AIDS, and crisis within the family due to poverty (Abbink 2005:1). The option open to them is to engage in violence and insurgent movements of various kinds, as well as criminal activities, to which they are so easily recruited (*ibid.*). Most of them however, become trapped in the vortex of 'youthness' even when they grow older since they continue to appropriate the space of youth as a means of accumulation. In Nigeria's Niger Delta, for instance, where violent insurgency is shaped by the politics of extraction and rent seeking, remaining a 'youth', even when one is above fifty years of age, is essential to remaining relevant as violent youth groups have supplanted local or community elders as the real sources of power in the oil producing communities. With population growth on the rise, outstripping food supply and economic growth, the proponents of this view see no hope or prospect that the situation will change for the better in the near future.

But not all agree with this bleak picture of African youth. Some have criticized the 'lost generation' thesis for overgeneralization and underestimating young people's agency (Bray 2010:294). They contend that the 'lost generation' theorists sought to apply to a whole generation the experiences of a small minority of young people and severely underplayed the resilience of so many young people struggling to make a living even in the face of adverse circumstances. Not only did large-scale research in the early 1990s conclude that the whole idea of a 'youth crisis' was a myth created by those who mistook a range of intractable problems in which young people find themselves to mean a 'youth crisis' (Slabbert et al. 1994:26), another survey in South Africa showed how most youth maintain a very positive and ambitious attitude to

life, contrary to what the 'lost generation' theorists postulate.² For example, the spectacle of child soldiers in Africa has become permanently edged on to the consciousness of Western watchers or analysts of Africa. But it may not tell the entire story. As Smith (2011:100) argued:

The little boy clutching an AK-47 taller than himself featured as a prominent image of the continent, despite being taken out of context. Would international audiences have been similarly perplexed by the discovery of young fighters had they been told that 40 to 50 per cent of the Africans south of the Sahara were younger than fifteen? All over the world, a "child soldier" is an oxymoron. But in Sub-Saharan Africa, a child soldier is more of a redundant statement given the sheer availability of youth. In fact, academics and journalists should have emphasized that only an estimated 200,000 out of a total of some 300 million children joined the fighting when there were no good schools or jobs for them, often no home or a parent left, and warlords urged them to live and rule by the gun.

What is more, researchers have found that in Africa, children and youth, in the face of severe chronic poverty and disempowerment, still show 'initiative and dexterity in using the available social, cultural discursive and imaginative resources to make sense of highly problematic familial and neighbourhood relationships, and to reduce the pains caused by them' (Bray 2010:295). Being the most active and energetic category of the population, the youth are wont to create new and innovative ways to 'resist, subvert and manipulate' their exclusion and marginalization (Iwilade 2013:5). One of the tools that has come in handy for youth to subvert their exclusion and marginalization is the widespread use of social media – Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messaging service (BBM). From being just mere tools of social interactions for young people, social media has become, for the African youth, a tool for mobilization and class action against oppressive regimes and classes on the one hand, and a tool for keeping themselves informed about the global discourses on democracy and development on the other hand. The successful use of social media to initiate, mobilize and coordinate the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests, and most especially, the 'Arab Spring' that led to the overthrow of long-standing dictators and created a protest culture in North Africa and the Middle East was not lost on youth in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, when the Nigerian government announced a policy the youth considered as deepening their marginalization, they wasted no time in reacting.

The 2012 Fuel-subsidy Protests

What we are witnessing with 'Occupy Nigeria' is a generational transfer, as young, social-media enabled activists gradually take over the baton from

unionist stalwarts. Nigeria's young population is increasingly letting go of the deferential attitude of their parent's generation. In the south at least, young Nigerians are beginning to ask questions... At long last, there is accountability pressure building up in the system. (Jeremy Weate cited in Iwilade 2013: 9). Subsidy on petrol is an emotive as well as a political issue in Nigeria. Perhaps, in a moment of candid honesty, Nigeria's former military President, General Ibrahim Babangida remarked: the issue of subsidy should be seen more as politics and not economics.... It is better to seek political solution to the subsidy discourse than invoking the sentiments of economics (Odenyi 2012).

So, when late in 2011 the government of President Goodluck Jonathan decided to remove the subsidy on petrol, it knew that the decision would, if not well handled, lead to social unrest as labour unions and civil society groups have a history of vigorously protesting such policies whether under military or civilian regimes. Beginning from October of that year, the government started to consult with labour unions, civil society organizations (CSOs), youth groups, and religious and professional associations. The outcomes of these meetings and consultations have been subject of dispute. While some, like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), argue that, indeed, labour unions and civil society groups did agree with the government, on principle, on the need to remove the subsidy on fuel, civil society groups especially rejected that suggestion and maintained that they rejected the proposal out right, even though the government said the removal of subsidy would take effect from April 2012. Dauda Mahammed, the then President of NANS argued that prior to the removal, they had been consulted and had agreed that government should remove the subsidy but that palliatives should also be provided to cushion the effects on the poor (Abang 2012). The other groups vigorously contested this position insisting the student body has long been compromised by the government.³ NANS had long been considered the youth wing of the ruling People's Democratic Party. From the days when protesting Nigerian students almost singlehandedly forced the government to cancel the Anglo-Nigerian Defence pact in 1962 (Dudley 1982; Akintola 2010), the 1978 'Ali Must Go' student riots challenging the government over the increase in school fees and living expenses on the campuses of Nigerian universities, to the various anti-SAP strikes and protests, NANS is widely believed to have lost the radical fibre that it used to be known for. Assessing NANS after twenty-five years, Reuben Abati as well known journalist and social commentator, was most unsparing in his criticism:

What was on display in the 25th anniversary of NANS was opportunism, if not infantilism; perfidy of the highest order and gross irresponsibility. It is either the students' leaders were suffering from amnesia or they were under

a spell. The celebration of NANS at 25 ought to have been prefaced by a return to the circumstances and ideals that produced NANS in 1980 (cited in Akintola 2010:114).

In the dying days of the Obasanjo administration, NANS became the most vocal youth vanguard of the administration endorsing the 'third term' agenda of the ex-president, decorating the ex-president with the title of 'Defender of Democracy' and accepting financial gratifications from him (Akintola 2010:114).

'Occupy Nigeria', Youth and Social Media Mobilization

The proliferation of mobile technology has made it easier for Nigerian youth to freely communicate and also mobilize. The growing impatience with the dire economic situation in the country led to debates and discussions on social media – Twitter, Facebook and BBM – as early as October about the possibility of staging the Nigeria version of the 'Occupy' protests. According to Japhet Omojuwa, one of the youth mobilizers,

The discussion then was that it [Occupy Nigeria] was something that was not possible; that Nigerians were always going to adjust to any situation and will bear whatever the government foist on them; that they weren't going to come out. They were going to adjust to whatever the government throws at them just like the dog will adapt to any situation it finds itself [in].

The mobilization and discussions continued and were heightened by the plan of government to remove the subsidy on fuel. A large section of youth felt the government was just trying to transfer to the people the cost of its inefficiencies and corruption-ravaged system. In the course of the debates, the leader of the Nigerian Youth Council declared a hunger strike and protest against the removal of subsidy on 11 November 2011. The government responded by placing him under intense monitoring. He was subsequently arrested and detained for trying to cause unrest in the polity. It took the intervention of many youth who camped at the office of the State Security Service (SSS), where he was being kept, for him to be released, but not without stern warnings to abort any planned protests. The Nigerian Youth Council's resolve and insistence to proceed with the protests led to the unleashing of the state security on them. They had no choice but to go underground and rely on social media for communication and mobilization for the protest.

Attempts to stage protests on 11 November were met with stiff resistance from the security agencies who cordoned off the roads leading to the National Unity Fountain (the venue of the protest) with armoured tanks, police dogs and snipers. Many youth were scared and ran away leaving only about twenty

of them to continue with the protests. Eventually, even these were chased away with the aid of security dogs. By December the government had begun assembling various phoney youth groups at the Presidential villa to receive their endorsement for the planned subsidy removal.⁴

This sour experience, coupled with the less than satisfactory behaviour of the government, strengthened the resolve of the youth to stage the 'Occupy Nigeria' protests, come what may. But since the government's planned removal of the subsidy was slated to start in April, the protests were also scheduled to start then. The government, however, had other plans. As people travelled to their various hometowns for the yuletide celebrations, it jolted the nation on 1 January 2012 with the announcement that the subsidy on petrol had been removed and the price had been increased from N65 to N141 per litre.

The April date for the removal of subsidy was obviously a dummy sold to the people by the government. Suddenly, transport fares rose by as much as 300 per cent and most people were trapped in their villages because they could not raise the new transport fares to return to the cities after the announcement. The action angered labour, CSOs and youth groups. If they had been willing to give the government some benefit of the doubt, this action, they claimed, had once more proved to them that the government, like others before it, cannot be trusted to honour its words and must be made to realize it cannot take its citizens for granted. As one of the mobilizers of the protest puts it:⁵

this was an opportunity for a generation to say ... we're not going to take every nonsense that the government throws at us ... a movement ... that will really set a new order of engagement between the governors and the governed; to make them know that they can't just wake up and do things anyhow.⁷

On 1 January, immediately after the announcement by the government, the youth started conversations on social media on the next steps to take. The Blackberry phone, produced by Research in Motion (a Canadian firm) was one of the most popularly used phones in Nigeria and was more popular with the youth who especially like its instant messaging BBM facility. Having been forced to go underground by the government, and with their Facebook and Twitter accounts being actively monitored by security agencies, BBM became the only secure means with which they could communicate seamlessly without the security agencies breathing down their necks. The anger of the youth was palpable and they resolved to begin the protest the next day.

Despite the yuletide celebrations, they stormed the streets the following day. The protests started in Abuja on 2 January, in Lagos on 3 January, in Kano on 4 January, and consequently spread to other locations in the country. The protests were sporadic. The youth blocked major streets, chanted anti-government

songs, and demanded the reversal of the fuel price back to N65. They also carried various placards denouncing the economic policies of the government and calling on the president to sack the Finance Minister, whom they saw as an agent of the World Bank. The turn-out was unprecedented, and saw even the middle-class coming out in large numbers to protest against the government. The protests soon became like a national movement, except in the South-South and South-East regions where protests never held for obvious reasons.⁷



Figure 1

Both the CSOs and labour movements were unprepared for the protests. There was no single agreed response or platform of CSOs. The civil society sector in Nigeria is diverse in its composition. Formal CSOs, registered as non-governmental organizations, are of different sizes and interests, with differing access to resources and focus. But they were all united in their opposition to the government. Before the protest, they had been working differently and were planning to confront the government individually in case government went ahead with the policy. But once the street protests began – championed by the youth – they moved swiftly to take control, or as one of them modestly describes it, 'to structure that anger and to formalize demands that will create a way out of the crisis'.⁸

The CSOs and youth groups, organized under the 'Occupy Nigeria' banner, all came together and set up various headquarters in different parts

of the country – in Abuja, at the office of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), in Lagos, at the office of the Save Nigeria Group (SNG), in Kaduna and Kano, at the CDD office – to coordinate the protests and enable them to speak with one voice. The protests were hugely successful. As Hussein Abdu puts it:

I have never seen such a protest in the history of this country. I have been involved in several protests but have never seen that ... the size as recorded by our monitoring team in the situation room was taking place simultaneously in about 78 locations or cities across the country.

It is important to point out, as stated earlier, that the issue of subsidizing imported petrol (PMS) in Nigeria is a very sensitive one and any plan by the government to remove the subsidy has always been vigorously resisted. In fact, labour unions, CSOs and student bodies have gained their legitimacy over time as a result of always resisting government attempts to remove the subsidy on petrol. As Guyer and Denzer (2013:54) assert, 'since the boom in Nigerian oil production of the 1970s, the Nigerian people and certain of their organisations, such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), have expected and demanded that one part of their share in the "national cake" should be an affordable price of petrol and kerosene at the pump'. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) have built their reputations on strike actions to protest and prevent the government from removing the subsidy on petrol (for instance, see Nwoko 2009; Okafor 2009; Okafor 2010; Ering and Akpan 2012).



Figure 2

For all the efforts of the youth however, the protests were not as effective as envisaged since people still went to work, businesses were opened and there was free and uninterrupted movement of people and goods. Although, the protests were gathering momentum, businesses and work activities continued as usual in the country with the effect that many youth and people who were also dissatisfied with the government and wanted to take part in the protests could not because they had to go to work or to their various businesses. Historically, the traditional trade unions – the NLC and TUC – were more successful at forcing the government to negotiate with them because of their capacity to declare strike actions that shut down the economy and prevent movement of people. It was only a week later (on 9 January) that the NLC and TUC commenced the ‘mother of all strikes’ after securing the approval of their National Executive Councils (NEC).⁹ The strike action effectively paralysed all economic and social activities in the country including the total shutdown of the nation’s airspace. Many CSOs and youth groups were not happy that the NLC and TUC did not join the protests until a week after the movement had gathered momentum. To them, the duo just came to ‘hijack the protest’. But such accusations show limited awareness of trade unions’ internal processes. ‘You do not just declare a strike. You must seek authorisation from your NEC and also issue notice to the government.’¹⁰ In fact, the President of the TUC claimed that the CSOs and youth groups thought they could go it alone, but it was when they discovered they could not grind the country to a halt that they came asking them to declare a national strike. In Esele’s words:

They felt they could go it alone ... but they found out that activities were still moving. So they came to us and we told them that we cannot join them like that. We have our organs ... even the government knows the organs and so we cannot be seen to be violating our own constitution. Besides, I could lose my position if I bypass my NEC and go on the radio and announce a strike.¹¹

Despite their differences, all parties – youth, CSOs and organized labour – decided to stand strong and fight together. The Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) – founded around 2005 during one of the series of strikes to protests against the deregulation policy of the government – was resuscitated to give direction to the protests and strike and meet with the government, if necessary. No youth or youth group was represented in this alliance in their own capacity, but were only recognized as part of civil society. But once the strike was declared, the protests moved into an interesting phase as the youth took over the protests in major Nigerian towns with the CSOs only providing the platform.

The demands of the parties to the alliance parties seemed, at least initially, to be the same. While CSOs and youth groups started the protests with a

charge of 'revert back to N65 or nothing', in the course of the protests, the conversation changed. It moved beyond 'reverting back to N65' to 'cutting down on the cost of governance and fighting corruption'. Organized labour, also decided to modify their demands. As the NLC secretary couched it:

This time around we decided that we are not going to talk about prices but we want to focus on the leakages, looting, and corruption within the oil industry, which has distorted the process of pricing.¹²

They also decided not to negotiate with the government until a reversal of the increase was effected. But after many pressures were brought to bear on them, especially by members of the National Assembly, they decided to meet with the government, while still not renouncing any of their demands (*ibid.*).

There is no doubt the protest discourse was driven by popular youth culture. With the strike ensuring that the entire country was shut down, all focus shifted to the protest venues across the country. In Lagos, Nigeria's most populated city and commercial nerve centre, for instance, crowds, consisting mainly of youth, estimated at about three million attended each of the protest rallies. The rallies also succeeded in attracting popular musicians, actors and entertainers in Nigeria. Music and humour became the major media of protests as very popular young artists took turns on the stages at protests venues to sing, dance and make jokes – all targeting the government.

So sophisticated was the Lagos protests that the government began to suggest that the protests were sponsored by opposition politicians. President Jonathan repeated the allegation in September 2012:

[During] the demonstration in Lagos, people were given bottled water that people in my village don't have access to. People were given expensive food that the ordinary people in Lagos cannot eat. So even going to eat free alone attracts people. They go and hire the best musicians to come and play and the best comedian to come and entertain. Is that demonstration? Are you telling me that that is a demonstration from ordinary masses in Nigeria who want to communicate something to government? I believe that that protest in Lagos was manipulated by a class in Lagos and was not from the ordinary people.

The organizers of the protests dispute this claim. While admitting to committing some resources towards the organization of the protests, they were adamant that no politician was behind the protests. But even some CSO groups, especially in Abuja, believed the Lagos protest was highly sophisticated and may appear as if it was sponsored, particularly by the Nollywood movie industry.

The Lagos dimension is a bit different ... the Nollywood community was effectively blackmailed by the protests group and because of the mass outing, they thought they were also losing their fans. Secondly, they were angry the

president actually promised them some resources during his campaigns and that didn't come at that particular time and they were very angry. [Also], the leadership of the motion theatre group were effectively mobilized by the activist community in Lagos.¹³

The Save Nigeria Group – the arrow head of the Lagos protests – denied this allegation, and the insinuation that it blackmailed actors and musicians into performing at the protests. Its spokesman claimed that they only spent about N7.5 million (US \$50,000) on the entire protests, and the bulk of the money was spent on printing materials, hiring public address systems and renting electricity generators.¹⁴ Tunde Bakare, convener of the Save Nigeria Group and a vice-presidential aspirant of the Congress for Progressive Change in the 2011 general elections, corroborated that figure and denied that any musician, actor or comedian that either entertained or performed at the events were paid. 'They came out of their own volition. Nigerians – particularly the youth – just trooped out because they were fed up.' He continued:

we never cooked a single meal and we did not buy snacks at all throughout the period. The only time we provided food was when we came back here every evening to do a review and it was not a sumptuous meal ... it was just to appreciate those who were in the engine room knocking out the issues and deciding what we will focus on the next day.¹⁵

Cracks and Breakdown of the Coalition

Cracks started appearing among the coalition parties when organized labour felt the CSOs had politicized the protests and strikes and were pursuing other agendas. Organized labour was referring to the protests in Lagos and Kano, which Esele admitted had been taken over by groups with different agendas. The Lagos rallies were the cynosure of all eyes. Initially, the demand was for the government to revert back to the old fuel price of N65 per litre, but as the protests continued and the government remained intransigent, the message from the rallies began gravitating from 'N65 or nothing' and 'kill corruption, not Nigerians' to 'Jonathan must go', or as Tunde Bakare himself puts it 'if he [Jonathan] cannot render services to the people, then it is time to pack up and go and let those who can do it do it'.¹⁶



Figure 3

The protests in Kano, the political bastion of the CPC Presidential Candidate, Muhammad Buhari, also moved towards a clamour for regime change. The strike/protests were taking place some months after the 2011 general elections, which Buhari had lost to Jonathan. The declaration of Jonathan as the winner of the elections led to series of violence in Kano and other states in Northern Nigeria. Many people were killed and houses of those perceived to be Jonathan's supporters were burnt. The battle cry of most Kano protesters quickly changed from 'N65 or nothing' to '*Ko Ya Janye Sai Ya Sauka*', which literally means 'even if he withdraws the price increase, we would continue to protest until he resigns'.¹⁷ The popular jubilee square in Kano was quickly renamed 'Tahir Square' in an apparent bid to invoke the spirit of the Egyptian revolution, and true to their words, the protesters in Kano continued after the suspension of the strike action.

This was the point of departure between the coalition parties. While the CSOs and youth groups were calling for regime change, the trade unions felt their agitation was non-political and the CSOs and youth had no right to call for regime change. This, according to Esele, was unacceptable to organized labour.

One thing the labour unions do not joke with is that we are a democratic institution. We will never break down a democratically elected government. When we see our protest is getting to that tipping point, we pull back ... we want to change the policy and not the policy maker. It is only the electorate that can do that and so when Ojota [and Kano] were talking about Goodluck must go, we said if Goodluck goes, that ends democracy.¹⁸

Besides, organized labour claimed the level of violence and deaths – about fifty-five confirmed – were unusually high and unwarranted, and blamed the CSOs for orchestrating the violence with their harsh rhetoric which was akin to calling for revolution. According to Esele,

Where we started having problems was when people were destroying government's property and houses. We had to call another NEC meeting to tell them that we needed to be careful about this. We have so many scars from military dictatorship ... no matter how bad the government is, we don't want to involve the military and we don't want to create an avenue for the military to come back (*ibid.*).

It was at this point the labour union decided to negotiate with the government and put a quick end to the protests before it got out of hand. Even before then, the government had been putting severe pressures on the labour leaders to see reason with it and jettison its CSO and youth partners, whom the government was convinced were being used by opposition politicians to bring down the government. However, the labour unions decided to go along with its coalition partners into the negotiating room. However, after several days of negotiation, and sensing that the CSO representatives were not willing to shift ground, the labour leaders went alone to meet with the President on the night of 15 January and negotiated to call off the strike if the government reduced the price of petrol to N97 per litre. The 15 January meeting with the President lasted into the small hours of the morning, and as the CSOs and youth groups were out in the streets protesting, the NLC and TUC presidents held a press conference where they announced the suspension of the strike. The unilateral suspension by labour immediately led to recriminations between the coalition parties. CSOs and youth groups generally alleged that organized labour sold out or were intimidated by the government to call-off the strike. The labour unions on their part accused the CSOs of naivety on the issues of social protests and the arts of negotiation.

The CSOs and youth groups refused to listen to the labour unions and vowed to continue with the protests until their objectives were achieved. However, the withdrawal of labour led to the collapse of the protests. Although most civil society groups issued press statements calling on Nigerians to continue with the protests, and although the protests in Kano continued for a day longer, the government effectively flooded the streets and hot-spots with troops and police and brought about an end to the 'Nigerian Spring' that never was.

Finally, it can be said that the mobilization and the staging of the 'Occupy Nigeria' protests caught the government unawares. When the President announced the increase in prices of fuel on 1 January, he must have been

thinking of the labour unions and their strike ritual and may have been preparing to negotiate with them as was always the case. However, the youth – whom a senior government official refers to as ‘the collective children of anger’ (Abati 2012) – in particular, had realized the strategic importance of their demographic advantage and the mobilization capacity of social media and had sought to radically renegotiate the social contract and patterns of authority. The attraction of ‘Occupy Wall Street’ and the ‘Arab Spring’, however, blinded the youth and CSOs to the realities of deep social cleavages that may make any popular uprising difficult in the Nigeria context. As it is, the government fully exploited these cleavages and, perhaps also used some form of ‘settlement’ to safely douse the raging fire lighted by these ‘collective children of anger’. Being relatively inexperienced in the game of ‘social protests’, the youth and CSOs adopted a hard-line position. But the moment labour – which although mouthing popular rhetoric were more interested in fixing the price of petrol than ensuring accountability or a corrupt-free downstream sector – pulled out of the protests, they naturally collapsed even when the youth and CSOs threatened to continue with the protests.

Youth Agency in a Neo-patrimonial Setting

As we have seen from the discussion above where youth have mobilized to challenge state decisions they perceived as being detrimental to their welfare using social media as an effective tool of mobilization, our task is to show how these efforts demonstrate real youth agency and a determination to renegotiate patterns of authority within a highly neo-patrimonial context like Nigeria where youth/student groups, labour and even opposition politicians have often acted as mere subalterns to dominant political groups, even when they claim to be independent actors. Implicit in the assumption of the renegotiation of patterns of authority is the belief that a current pattern of authority exists that constrains specific social formations – youth in this instance – from reaching their full potential. It is also implicitly assumed that there is a continued shift in patterns of authority such that marginalized or disadvantaged groups strive to ‘renegotiate their place and space within the milieu’ (Iwilade 2013:11).

The strike/protests and the way they were ended demonstrate the centrality of neo-patrimonial networks in Nigerian politics (Joseph 1987; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Maier 2000; Adebaniwa and Obadare 2013; Erdmann 2013) where political actors have turned the state, in Harneit-Sievers words, into ‘a pseudo central arena, where struggles for shares of the “national cake” dominate all other considerations and actions’ (Harneit-Sievers 2002: 139). In such struggles, the government, thanks to the constant flow of ‘unearned’ rents, is able to greatly

increase its powers, which it uses to destabilize other sections of the society so as to keep them from challenging their hold on state power and resources.

However, there is a sense in which the classic model of neo-patrimonialism in Africa excludes or ignores client agency. The model harps unnecessarily on about the brutal contestation for power in the postcolony and fails to account for the shifting nature of actors and the creative ways in which these clients are able to shape the system, as much as they are being shaped by it. As the youth-led subsidy protests show, neo-patrimonial accounts sometimes exclude the voices of those who challenge its patron–client relations in increasingly sophisticated and effective ways. The Niger Delta insurgency can also be understood in this way. Over the years, the region has experienced gross neglect, exploitation and environmental degradation as a result of oil exploitation and exploration activities. Peaceful agitations and protests were violently suppressed by the military. With so many redundant youth, a violent rebellion against the state began. The tactics the insurgents used included hostage-taking, kidnapping, pipeline vandalization and open and deadly combat with the Nigerian Army Joint Task Force (JTF), deployed to restore peace and order in the region (Obi 2006). Needless to say, the insurgency was effective. It significantly reduced Nigeria's oil exports, created fears in the international oil market leading to higher oil prices, and made the country unstable and on the brink of war (Watts 2007).

By 2007, at the height of the violence, oil production had declined from 2.4 million barrels per day to 1.4 million barrels per day. With the revenues of the country and the source of funding for patrimonial networks threatened by youth violence, the government was forced to offer the militants amnesty in June 2009. Militant commanders like Government Ekpemupolo, Ateke Tom and Boyloaf were paid millions of dollars for accepting the amnesty and also got billions of Naira contracts for protecting the pipelines they were once destroying. The amnesty programme also made provision for the establishment of vocational training camps to train the militants in pipeline welding, carpentry, marine engineering, boat making etc. The programme also made provision for the payment of a monthly stipend of N65,000 (US \$406) to thousands of youth who were registered. This was in a context where the national minimum wage was just N18,000 (US \$112). The amnesty achieved its aims as the violence subsided significantly and oil production picked up and grew to about 2.6 million barrels per day.

However, more than five years later, and as billions of dollars are being spent to placate the repentant militants in the name of amnesty, oil theft and illegal refining have increased and even worsened. There is a sense in which the persistence of this problem can be seen as a product of the amnesty itself. Oil theft predated the amnesty programme, however the programme appears to

have shifted the locus of 'insurgency' from violent attacks against the military and oil industry personnel to the deliberate sabotage of oil infrastructure for explicit material purposes. Stripped of the rhetoric of resistance, oil thieves have become an even greater threat to oil infrastructure than they were in the pre-amnesty period.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the January 2012 subsidy protests in Nigeria, the issue of youth agency and the roles of social media in mobilizing protests. It has argued that the twin events of the Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring movements opened the eyes of the Nigerian youth to the continually shifting patterns of authority and their ability to critically alter the balance of power and renegotiate their place within a system that constrains them to the margins of society. Although the presence of abundant petro-dollars coupled with the neo-patrimonial nature of Nigerian politics have tended to portray a picture of youth and other groups acting merely as subalterns to the dominant power groups in the country, youth groups have continued to demonstrate real agency and have constantly found creative ways to renegotiate the power structure in the society. This does not however mean they are unaffected by the neo-patrimonial system in place. While some have decided to challenge the system frontally through large-scale protests and an uncompromising call for accountability and inclusion, others have turned the neo-patrimonial system into a resource and have been using it to further their accumulative tendencies. What is absent from the narrative is the classic neo-patrimonialist reference to culture, ethnicity and tribe that is often used to explain social mobilization in postcolonial Africa.

Finally, the outcome of the protests in Nigeria shows that the youth still have a long way to go in their quest to 'establish some sort of equal power relations with paternalistic forces in society' (Iwilade 2013:13). Even though the youth clearly dominated the protests and shaped their discourse, they were effectively side-lined and were not represented in the negotiations that led to the suspension of the strike. This shows the stubborn and enduring character of neo-patrimonial networks. The ease with which the ownership of the protests was taken away from the youth by the trade unions and some CSOs also points to the absence of real youth leadership. That appears to be a feature of social media activism. From Egypt, to Tunisia and Nigeria, the youth have mostly mobilized for and initiated protests and revolutions only for them to be snatched from them by other entrenched groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, organized labour in Nigeria and the Islamists in Tunisia.

Notwithstanding these setbacks, it is obvious that the appropriation of social media has enhanced their ability to challenge dominant power groups while also making it difficult for the power groups to clamp down on or prevent the use of social media to challenge their authority. Therein lies the chance for African youth who have long been consigned to the margins of their various societies. By refining their strategies and improving their organizational and leadership skills, the youth have the potential to substantially alter the balance of power in their favour in the African postcolony.

Notes

1. This article is the product of a research project certified and partly sponsored by the African Studies Centre, University of Oxford. The author interviewed a total of thirty-six respondents in Lagos and Abuja between 15 March and 15 April 2013.
2. CASE (1993).
3. Interview with Auwal Musa 28 March 2013.
4. Some of those interviewed claimed that in December 2011, they were personally invited by some faceless youth groups to the State House, but only verbally and through phones. No emails were sent and the meetings had no agenda. During the period, several of such youth groups were shown on National TV claiming to support the subsidy removal programme of the government. As Rotimi Olawale said 'I don't go to such meetings, where you invite me, capture my face and show it on national TV that I have supported what I don't understand.'
5. Sam Itodo, interview in Abuja, 23 March 2013.
6. Interview with Japhet Omojuwa in Abuja, 24 March 2013.
7. These regions overwhelmingly voted for Goodluck Jonathan and are his strongest support bases. The president is also from the South-South region.
8. Interview with Jibrin Ibrahim, 4 April 2013.
9. *The Nation*, 2012.
10. Chris Uyt, interview in Abuja 3 April 2013.
11. Interview with TUC President, Peter Esele, 3 April 2012.
12. Chris Uyt, interview in Abuja 3 April 2013.
13. Hussein Abdu, interview, Abuja 3 April 2013.
14. Yinka Odumakin, 9 April 2013.
15. Tunde Bakare, interview, Lagos 9 April 2013.
16. Interview in Lagos, 9 April 2013.
17. Email communication with Y.Z. Yau.
18. Interview, Peter Esele, 3 April 2012.

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