

REINVIGORATING NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A Festschrift for

RT. REVD. PROF. DAPO ASAJU



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CHAPTER 47

PUBLIC PROTEST AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA AND BOLIVIA: A STUDY ON GOODLUCK JONATHAN AND EVO MORALES REGIMES

Ukamaka Augusta IWUAMADI

Introduction

Social demonstration in the forms of general strikes and mass protest have always been employed by activist and union leaders to drive home their demands and grievances against social malaise. In most of the developing world, citizens are often faced with multifaceted threats and challenges on their wellbeing and survival. These include poverty, high rates of unemployment, violence, deprivation of resources, lack of opportunity, marginalization and the denial and suppression of basic rights and freedom. While military dictatorships of the past are today replaced by democratic institutions, marginalized voices were still suppressed; a viable system for these voices to express their grievances is often nonexistent or ineffective (Hari, 2014).

Historically, protests have often inspired positive social change and improved protection of human rights, and they have continued to help define and protect civic space in all parts of the world. Public protests encourage the development of an engaged and informed citizenry and strengthen representative democracy by enabling direct participation in public affairs. These movements equally enable individuals and groups to express dissent and grievances, to share views and opinions, to expose flaws in governance and to publicly demand that the authorities and other powerful entities rectify problems and are accountable for their actions. This is especially important in cases where the interests of the masses are otherwise poorly represented or marginalized (Human Right, Article 19, 2016). Under these conditions social protest has become an indispensable alternative for people to voice their opinions, visions of society, grievances and demand in strong terms for the actualization of sustainable development in the society which is yet to be achieved in many Third World Countries (Shigetomi, 2009).

However, at the dawn of the 21st century, public demonstrations were at its peak; some of which experienced complete success like that of Bolivia while some witnessed near success like that of #OccupyNigeria. For instance, the first social movement in Bolivia erupted when the indigenous people of Bolivia protested against the banning of the cocoa production which happens to be the symbol of the Bolivia's culture by the Bolivian government as a means to reform its dwindling economy under the structural adjustment

policies in the 1980s. The indigenous people felt that the political system did not appear to represent their interest; this made them resort to mass protest between 1991 and 2003. The outcome of this indigenous social movement led to the reformation of some sectors of the political system and the swearing in of Evo Morales the leader of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) as the President of Bolivia in 2005 (Mckay, 2017). It would also be interesting to note that it was also the same protest that led to his exile in 2019 when his bid to be re-elected as the president failed. The same fate can't be said of its counterpart Nigeria who also witnessed a public demonstration when the Federal Government announced in January 1, 2012 the upward review of the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) from N65 to N141 (more than 100% increment) following the removal of oil subsidy. This fiscal policy elicited stiff opposition from the organised labour (spearheaded by the Nigerian Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress), and a coalition of civil society groups, opposition politicians, and professional associations all of which banded together into a Joint Action Front that prosecuted a five-day nationwide protest intended to get the government to reverse the fuel subsidy removal and revert to the N65 pump price of PMS (Agbedo, 2012). This #OccupyNigeria, which would have proven a near success, was eventually politicized.

Many studies in literature focuses on the role of social media in mass protest as well as negative impact of such protest in the third world economy but have failed to analyze the positive impact of public protest in democratic societies most especially Bolivia. Against this background, this paper seeks to examine the major factors which have impeded Nigeria from witnessing a successful mass protest as its fellow sovereign State, Bolivia.

Theoretical Underpinning

Collective Action framework has proven to be one of the most popular theoretical approaches for studying social movements for over twenty years. The proponent of this theoretical approach is Mancur Olson in 1965. According to this view, collective action is to a large extent determined by the subscription to a certain explicit discourse that provides a background to understanding the world out there, organizes experience, and guides action (Snow and Benford, 1992). Therefore, collective action framework is perceived as conscious strategic effort by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves which motivate collective action (Snow and Benford, cited in MacAdam et al. 1996: 6). This theoretical approach is not strange to the study of Latin American Public protests. Some authors who have applied this kind of approach include Bayard de Volo (2004), Bruhn (1999), Domínguez (2007), Hammond (2004) and Noonan (1995). Collective Action Framework is a discourse with the unique power to turn grievances and grudges into justifiable reasons to mobilize (Tarrow, 1994) and to also turn things conceived as norm into social or political problems.

In other words, Collective Action Approach explains how issues become morally imperative in spite of associated risks and low probabilities of success (Snow et al., 1986: 466). A clear example is the recent protest in Bolivia agitating for the removal of their

president Evo Morales who sort to go for a fourth Term in office in October 2019. However, the fourth term victory of Evo Morales was fraught with allegations of fraud, which eventually sparked violence and protests that led to the resignation of Morales. It could be recalled also that it was the same public protest that led to the swearing of Evo Morales to power in 2005.

Public Protest in the Context of Neo-liberal Reforms in Nigeria and Bolivia

Extant literatures between 2006 and 2019 such as Burke, and Berrada (2013), Adigun (2018), Hari (2014) on public protest found out that a significant percentage of world protests, especially in the Third World countries in the past decade have been against neoliberal reforms, including the privatization of public enterprises, full-scale deregulation of public utilities and the implementation of various forms of austerity measures. According to Rao (2010:3-4) the protesters in the Third World countries against neo-liberal reforms “seemed desirous of a state that was robust enough to be able to stand up to, and refuse, the dictates of powerful international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, whose structural adjustment prescriptions had stripped away the minimalist safety nets of overwhelmed but aspiring welfare states”.

Nigerian state has adopted hook, line and sinker the World Bank/IMF-induced neo-liberal policies, their 'conditionalities', and “solutions”. The boldfaced, unrestrained adoption of these policies soon led to series of socio-economic and political crises with heavy tolls on citizens welfare, public and political accountability, and social stability (Rao, 2010). The #OccupyNigeria movement emerged as a reaction to the dare-devil institutional corruption and severe economic problems following years of the State's implementation of neo-liberal reforms. The pressure of austerity-economic policies induced reduction in public spending in public utilities, the social, the welfare, the education systems and the removal of subsidies on petroleum products provides added impetus to the dramatic response of the movement (Adigun, 2018). As at the end of 2011 (after the presidential election) and before the protests, a Gallup poll reports that about 60% do not have enough money to feed their families (Crabtree, 2012). In the same report, 40% claim they lack access to adequate shelter (Ibid). These gory figures show that Nigerians are among the poorest people in sub-Saharan Africa despite having some of the largest deposits of natural resources (Africa's Pulse, 2012).

By 2012, the Nigerian public had become so dissatisfied with the economic and political order which led to an outburst known as #OccupyNigeria movement. The protest went beyond the narrow confines of petrol price and metamorphosed into a full-scale cross-examination of the governance process with incisive questions being asked about the workings of the system. In the course of the fuel subsidy removal protests, Nigerians gave vent to their frustrations at the insensitivity of their leaders. Anxieties over the issue of fuel subsidy have unleashed broader popular anger over corruption and social

inequality. With the majority of Nigerians living on less than \$2 per day, cheap petrol is viewed by many Nigerians as the only tangible benefit they receive from the state, hence the widespread condemnation (Hari, 2014). Furthermore, the economy is heavily reliant on revenue from crude oil. A consequence of this is that other apparently disparate issues are tied to the price of fuel as has occurred from previous price hikes. Due to the absence of stable electricity, gasoline generators are a common energy alternative for small businesses and residences. The haste to implement the deregulation was perceived as an outrage by Nigerians who feel the government was out of touch with the pulse of the nation. In a democratic dispensation government is expected to take into perspective the consideration of majority of its citizens. Social indicators show most Nigerians are already frustrated by the hardships they suffer on a daily basis. Consequently the spontaneous nationwide protest that ensued as a result of this new imposition of petrol tax on the masses did not come as a surprise. Across the country from the business capital Lagos to the administrative capital, Abuja, most of the major cities such as Port Harcourt, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan and Calabar to mention but a few were embroiled in an orgy of rage (Social Action, 2012).

In Bolivia, public protests have increased in frequency and intensity in recent years. The newest wave of protests to rock the country is widely believed to mark the exhaustion of the neoliberal economic model that had been in force in Bolivia since 1985 (Bonifaz 2004; Crabtree 2005; Kohl and Farthing 2006; Postero 2007; Suárez 2003). Although strikes, roadblocks, and street demonstrations have long been a part of Bolivian politics, popular resistance efforts have been increasingly characterized by the formation of a new cross-class, cross-ethnic, cross-regional, cross-generational, and cross-sectoral collective identity defined in opposition to neo-liberalism (Suárez 2003). Given Bolivia's lengthy experience as a social laboratory for economic reformers, the country serves as an excellent case study in the politics of protest. The high level of societal protest found in Bolivia is significant in light of the body of literature that casts the nation as a neoliberal success case (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Morales and Sachs 1990; Pastor 1992). Bolivia's latest protest cycle, which began with the water war of Cochabamba in 2000 and culminated in the gas war of La Paz in 2003 and the re-election of their president Evo Morales for fourth term in 2019, specifically targeted the country's economic development model and its exclusionary governing practices.

Political Outcomes of Public Protests in Nigeria and Bolivia

Exiting literatures on the January 2012 #OccupyNigeria claimed that the protests had changed the way Nigerians think about corruption especially in the oil sector. They are equally of the opinion that the protests had equally challenged the neoliberal policies imposed under the Jonathan's Administration (Adigun, 2018). According to Kola Ibrahim, secretary, Joint Action Forum (JAF), Osun state, he opined that the movement has awoken the consciousness of Nigerians that they can revolts in unison. He also asserted that Nigerian citizens began questioning aspects of the neoliberal policies that they had not before, and became aware of the power of mobilization to challenge the

use his “indigeneity” strategically which made his party, Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) came into power in a context of 'ruralization of the Bolivian Politics' (Zuazo, 2008).

Conclusion

In the developing world, especially Nigeria and Bolivia as this study reveals, citizens are often faced with multifaceted threats and challenges on their wellbeing and survival. These include poverty, high rates of unemployment, violence, deprivation of resources, lack of opportunity, marginalization and the denial and suppression of basic rights and freedom. These often results into public unrest, upheaval and strike actions of all forms. The regimes of Goodluck Jonathan in Nigeria and Evo Morales in Bolivia as well witness all the forms of protests due to the underlining challenges affecting the public peace and progress. These in turn affects the growth of civilization and sustainable development in such states. The resources in terms of population and natural resources have become a menace against the growth of the state instead of a blessing.

There is therefore the urgent need for both Nigeria and Bolivia to address the root cause of public protest in a scientific manner providing answers to the yearning of the public through public good provisions. Also, the countries need a charismatic leader who exhibit highly centralized authority structures to inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands, and influence outcomes. This will reduce the extent of poverty and in turn increase the greatest happiness of the greatest number of the people.

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