



Research Paper

Students' Union and Politics in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examined students' Union and Politics in Nigeria. The paper argued that rather than becoming a veritable, vibrant and deoderising force in positively influencing politics in Nigeria, Students' Union has been rendered otiose under the asphyxiating weight of "dirty politics" in Nigeria. Structural functionalism was adopted as an analytical construct and the paper relied on secondary sources of data. The major objective is to examine the impact of Students' Union on Politics in Nigeria. The paper noted that Students' Union in Nigeria is no more effective in impacting positively on politics in Nigeria which has contributed in impeding good governance in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper recommended inter alia, that there should be positive value reorientation not only among students but also Nigerians at large, particularly the political elites and student Union should be seen and act as major stake holder in the political landscape of Nigeria.*

KEY WORDS: *Student Union; Politics; Structural-Functionalism; Political system; Democracy; Environment.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Every political system or indeed any system has parts that are inter-related and interdependent. The parts are bound together in what appears to be an unbreakable synergy. This means that the parts perform different specific roles that sustain the political system. It follows that whatever affects any of the part will invariably affect the entire political system. Aside from the institutions, agencies and the environment in which the political system operates, students' union within the purview of group dynamics performs critical role in the stability and development of the political system. Students' Union, specifically, within the context of competing and conflicting group interests, protects the interests of its members and that of the generality of the citizens in a country. The efficacy of students' union performing these roles is a function of the environment in which it operates. The environment here is not only the physical structures or vegetation, but more importantly, the prevalent values and norms in the society. Within the perspective of behaviouralism, the prevalent values and norms can influence not only the actors of state but also other parts, including Students' Union that make up the political system. It is against this backdrop that the paper takes a critical look at Students' Union and politics in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework-Structural-Functionalism

The social or political system and any other system can be understood from the point of view of the parts that make up the system and more importantly, the functions the parts, units or structures perform in sustaining the system. These parts or structures are interdependent and interrelated to the extent that whatever happens to one part will invariably affect other parts that make up the system. Structural-functional analysis essentially views society as a system made up of a certain arrangement of parts or structures which behave or function in a coordinated and interdependent manner to achieve the objectives intended for them by society, these being the only means by which equilibrium and peace can be maintained within it (Igwe, 2005).

According to Ray, (2003), the basic theoretical proposition is that in all social systems, certain basic functions have to be performed. These functions are performed by the structures which are patterns of action and resultant institutions. A function is a regularly recurring pattern of action and behavior performed for the preservation and advancement of the system (Ray, 2003). On the other hand, dysfunction is an action detrimental to the existence and growth of the system (Robert Merton as cited in Ray, 2003). It should be noted that social or political system and indeed all the structures that make up the system are also influenced by the environment in which they operate.

The environment here would mean specifically, the norms and values prevalent in that environment or society. Thus, the understanding of the efficacy of the structures in performing their functions for the stability, preservation and growth of the system is dependent on the prevalent values and norms which are imbibed and demonstrated by those who occupy the structures or institutions that make up the social or political system. Students' Union in Nigeria is a part or structure of the social or political system of Nigeria and therefore performs or is expected to perform some functions, especially when considered as a pressure group in a democratic dispensation.

Students' Union In Nigeria

Students' Union is a student organization present in many colleges, universities and high schools. In most cases, Students' Union is often accorded its own building on the campus. It is committed to effective representation of the students. Thus, the purpose of Students' Union is to represent students both within the institution and externally; including on local, national and even international issues. It is also dedicated to social and organizational activities in a bid to promote robust and healthy academic environment. It should be noted that some Students' Union are politicized organizations to the extent that they serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians. However, Students' Unions generally have similar aims irrespective of the extent of politicization, usually focusing on providing students with facilities, support and services. The main objective of a Students' Union is to solve students problems that can either be related to academic life or have a general political, economic or societal nature. Infact, a Students' Union is expected to impact positively on its immediate environment by improving their school environment through encouraging social, cultural and other extracurricular event that are happening in the local community.

In Nigeria, Students' Union is a precipitate of the West African Student Union (WASU) which was partly pioneered by some Nigerian students in London. The Solanke and Bankole-Bright led WASU fought for improved welfare for all students in London. Their influence in Nigeria brought about NUNS (National Union of Nigerian Students) which premiered in the University of Ibadan. NUNS now NANS (National Association of Nigerian Students) has its wings spread across all tertiary institutions in Nigeria in the form of SUG's (Student Union Governments). WASU fought the colonial masters for the rights and emancipation of Africans from colonial tutelage. WASU and the Student Union matched on as a platform of change and of informed activism. (Okek, 2010).

It is obvious that Students' Union in Nigeria was not only committed to the welfare of students but also that of the entire citizens of Nigeria. Consequently, the union enjoyed support from radical intellectuals and academia. The union leaders were purely idealist and fire brands. Under the leadership of Segun Okeowo, NUNS became involved in national politics for proper funding of education for Nigerian Students (Okeke, 2010). Nigerian students under NUNS suffered all manners of maltreatment yet remained adamant insisting they are fighting the forces of feudalism, parochialism and tyranny in our political system (Okeke, 2010).

To corroborate the above fact about NUNS, Tanimu Umar (2018:1) noted that Student Unionism in Nigeria was known to be a force to be reckoned with. In the sweet old days students through their unions were known to stand firm in criticizing the injustices of our leaders, thereby, effecting major changes. There were instances when the authorities clashed with students when diplomatic precautions failed to work; the 1978 ABU students riot quickly comes to mind. During the uprising, many students' lives were lost while agitating for the ouster of their education Minister, colonel Ahmadu Ali who incidentally now heads the so called ruling party, PDP. The "Ali Must Go" riot like many in those days was a landmark achievement by student unionism in Nigeria; it has opened up the eyes of our leaders to the fact that students know their rights and can fight oppression no matter the intimidation.

From the foregoing, it is unequivocal that Students' Union in Nigeria was a bastion against the repressive, oppressive, dictatorial and tyrannical tendencies of not only the colonial masters but also the actors of the post-colonial state in Nigeria. It is therefore appropriate to affirm that Students' Unions in Nigeria have acted the role of watch dog in checking the excesses of the colonial and post-colonial authorities. Students' Union were then more or less a pressure group whose activities were focused in bringing about better education, good leadership, self rule and positive change for the people among other things (Goodluck, 2013). It follows that whatever these unions considered unfavourable and unconstitutional, they stood firm and unthreatened in opposing such and because their course is just, unbiased and honest, they have almost always succeeded in achieving their target objectives (Goodluck, 2013).

Furthermore, Students' Unions in Nigeria have vehemently opposed the official high handedness, despotic and nonchalant attitude of authorities in the various tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The seemingly incessant protests, riots and demonstrations over epileptic power and water supply, arbitrary hike of school fees and the lack or inadequacy of learning aids in our campuses attests to the fact that Students' Unions in Nigeria have become the voice of the "Wretched of the earth" and a force to be reckoned with. It should be regrettably

noted that in most cases, these protests, riots and demonstrations have led to the closure of the institutions and the concomitant distortion of academic calendar and the late graduation of Nigerian students.

In addition, apart from the epochal "Ali MustGo" riot in 1978, Nigerian students under the aegis of Students' Union spoke with one voice and protested against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the riot in the institutions of learning in Nigeria. Most of the students were either maimed or killed in those protests. May their souls rest in peace. "Aluta Continua, Victoria Acerta". The struggle must continue. However, given the realities in the polity of Nigeria and the state of students' unionism in Nigeria can we beat our chest and say boldly that Nigerian students are still in the struggle? To answer this question, an introspective analysis of politics in Nigeria and its impact on students' union will be imperative. But before then, the democratic implication of Students' Union, will be analyzed.

Democratic Implications Of Students' Union In Nigeria

Democracy is a system of government that enables the people to participate either directly or indirectly through their representatives in the process of decision making. Participation, therefore becomes a key value of democracy. Other important values or tenets of democracy include accountability, transparency, social justice, rule of law and vibrant opposition. These democratic values or tenets are to ensure that the "general will" of the people prevails. The general will of the people reflects the popular opinion or choice of the people which in most cases is a product of free, fair and credible elections. The essence of free, fair and credible elections and other democratic values is not only to have credible leaders who reflect the popular choice of the people but also to ensure that the leaders are responsive and responsible to the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

In a plural society, like Nigeria, where you have different competing and contending groups, democracy ensures that the groups are carried along by giving them a sense of belonging. Thus, a democratic government becomes a clearing house for the pressure groups as it harmonizes the ever conflicting interests in society, ensures that scarce resources are fairly and equitably distributed, promotes the welfare of the citizens and protect lives and property. Pressure groups are natural in every society. According to Ray (2003), pressure group is any organized group which attempts to influence decisions without seeking to exercise the formal powers of government. Pressure group also articulate and in some cases aggregate interest. It is expected that the interests through the 'conversion box' of a democratic government manifest as policies and programmes of the government.

These policies and programmes were formulated and designed to ensure that the interests are aggregated in order to maintain, stabilize and develop the political system. The point here is that pressure groups are part of the democratic process as they act as 'watch dogs'. Pressure groups can lobby for favourable laws, policies and programmes of government and they can also oppose or protest against draconian or obnoxious laws, policies and programmes of government. Students' Union in Nigeria are pressure groups and are part of the democratic process. The demise or inaction of Students' Union in Nigeria would mean creating a dangerous lacuna in the democratic process, especially as it concerns the educational system in Nigeria.

As a precondition for democracy, there is the need for a pre-existing sense of community in a nation. The elites must be willing to play competitive roles and serve the public rather than conducting themselves as drones of privileged individuals who seek only to take advantages of their elites status. (Nnoli, 2011:19). IDEA (2000) quoted the opinion of an Activist in Port Harcourt when he said that "Democracy is about local people being in charge of their lives, being able to take charge of their resources and making power flow from them and not the other way round". In addition, Wonah (2010) argued that it is not enough to have democratic institutions, but more importantly is the internalization and demonstration of democratic culture. Thus, a country may have democratic institutions but if democratic culture is not imbibed and demonstrated by the people, democracy becomes a mirage and Students' Union as a pressure group will be rendered superfluous.

Politics And Students' Union In Nigeria

The democratization process is a function of politics in a polity. The more developed politics becomes in terms of performing the basic functions via the state, the more democratized the state and the political system become. Politics through the state performs such basic functions as fair and equitable distribution of scarce resources, harmonization of the ever conflicting interests of man, protection of lives and property and the promotion of the welfare of the citizens. At the root of these basic functions is the fair and equitable distribution of scarce resources. Thus, politics is basically about how scarce resources are distributed. To corroborate this fact, David Easton in (Nwaorgu, 2004) defined politics as the authoritative allocation of values. On the other hand, Harold Lasswell defined politics as who gets what, when and how.

Politics finds expression through the state. For the liberal-democratic theory, the state is treated as a product of the will of society, an instrument of conflict resolution and of securing the common interest. It authorizes society to constitute a government by free choice, and demands that the government should be responsible to the people, and should work with the continuous consent of the people (Guaba, 1981). It is

therefore evident that the state is a symbol of authority. The state not only commands the respect and obedience of the citizens, it also in turn performs some basic functions that can reinforce the respect and obedience of its citizens.

In his view, Pierson (1996) noted that the state embodies and expresses the (sovereign) will of the people. The state through its government formulates and implements public politics and programmes that are people oriented. Thus, the state exists for the interest of the people and those who occupy state institutions must act in conformity with the general will of the people. This means that politics through the state should recognize and uphold the general will of the people as rooted in democracy.

However, the Marxist theory attributes any imperfection of government to the state itself. According to the Marxist, so long as society is divided into dominant and dependent classes, any government is bound to serve as an instrument of the dominant class. Thus, the Marxist theory regards the state itself as an instrument of class exploitation, marginalization, oppression, suppression and subjugation. This appears to be the case with politics and by extension the state in Nigeria. The heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society conforms with the dynamics of group theory whereby the different ethnic groups fiercely compete for the state's scarce resources. The competition for the state's scarce resources must be regulated by cohesive politics (ie politics of understanding, tolerance and accommodation among the different ethnic groups) and strong institutions of the state.

Regrettably, the divide-and-rule strategy of the colonial masters and the "marriage of inconvenience" orchestrated by the seemingly forceful amalgamation in 1914 exacerbated the fissiparous tendencies among the ethnic groups and infused ethnic politics into the body politics of Nigeria. On the other hand, the primitive accumulation mentality of the actors of Nigerian state lured them to see the state and its apparatuses as means of amassing wealth. As a result, ascendancy to power has become a do-or-die affair and politics has become a zero-sum game (Ake, 1996). The implication is that corruption, exploitation, marginalization, oppression, suppression and subjugation have become the order of the day.

As a corollary, to the above negative implication, any opposition to the selfish, parochial and obnoxious laws, policies and programmes of the state is decisively crushed by the actors of Nigerian state through the instrumentality of the coercive apparatuses of the state. For instance, the maiming and killing of defenceless students by armed security operatives during the "Ali Must Go" riot, anti-SAP riot and the killing of Peter Ofurum by security operative at University of Port Harcourt during a demonstration by the students against the arbitrary and insensitive policy of the school authorities are pointers to the rascality of the state and politics in Nigeria. Rascal state and politics need radical, focused, unwavering, democratic and fire brand student unionism.

Unfortunately, the asphyxiating rascal state and politics in Nigeria have incapacitated democratic institutions in Nigeria, particularly Students' Union. Student Union as a watch dog has been strongly tethered to a tree to the effect that it has become a tooth less bull dog. More damaging and vexatious is that the primitive accumulation mentality and corrupt practices of actors of Nigerian state have permeated the fabrics of Students' Union. The effect is that Students' Union in Nigeria is now corrupt and partisan, thereby jettisoning democratic values and principles.

The above fact was affirmed by Daily Trust December, 2005, as cited by Tanimu Umar, (2018) when it stated that

the situation has in recent years taken a dramatic and very melancholous turn around. Nowadays, student unionism is but a lame duck, and to worsen the situation, the National Association of Nigerian students (NANS) has been transformed into a sycophantic cabal. NANS, and virtually the entire Student Union Government (SUGs) of our institutions of higher learning, have turned themselves, amazing, into beggars and praise singers of the unpopular Nigerian government. No event vividly illustrates this fact than the recent pronouncement by the National President of NANS, Kenneth Orkuma Hembe that Nigerian students have endorsed President Olusegun Obasanjo for a third term in office (Daily Trust December 8, 2005).

Apart from being sycophantic and deceptive, most student union leaders are corrupt. It happens that almost all the student unions in this country were forced out of office earlier than they should due to corrupt practices (Goodluk, 2013). A situation where most student union (particularly SUGs) leaders before they leave office, buy cars, plots of land attests to the fact that most student union leaders see their offices as veritable means of enriching themselves. Rather than being committed and alive to the spirit of Aluta, most students union leaders are seen driving student union bus aimlessly and eating free food from registered food vendors on campus. Unfortunately, it appears that this is their understanding of what student union is all about. During electioneering campaign into offices of student union, most of the students demand that their fellow students who are candidates for the election pay them 'marching ground, or buy them drinks before they can be given the opportunity to address the students. This is not only anti-democratic and reactionary, but also a reflection of what is happening in the wider political system of Nigeria.

Aside from ethnicity, undue influence mainly through cultism and money, most student union elections are marred by electoral fraud and irregularities. This obviously hinders the freedom of the students to choose who become their leaders. It follows that most student union leaders do not reflect the popular or choice of the students. The effect is that student union leadership is no longer vibrant, committed, and responsive and responsible to the felt needs of the students. It has also failed to be a bulwark against the oppressive, obnoxious and draconian actions, laws and politics of Nigerian state. Thus, rather than impacting positively on politics as a change agent, Students' Union in Nigeria has acquiesced in the face of economic, social and political oddities and absurdities in Nigeria.

Infact the "dirty politics" in Nigeria seems to have eaten up' vibrant and committed Student Union in Nigeria. The inability of student union to speak with one voice and protest against the senseless killing, deteriorating economic conditions, the voting against local government autonomy by some state houses of Assembly, the deplorable condition of our educational system and the official highhandedness of some school authorities, not only make students to be susceptible to oppressive and exploitative agents, but it is also a clear indication that Students Union is at the verge of extinction in Nigeria.

The Way Forward

Within the context of structural-functionalism, the environment in which the structures perform their functions to sustain the system should be seen as a critical factor. The environment is made of prevalent values and norms. The environment influences the efficacy of the structures in performing their functions. The Nigerian environment is hostile to the structures, thereby hindering the effectiveness of the structure and indeed the dysfunction of the entire system. This can lead to system failure. There is therefore the need for value reorientation among Nigerians, particularly the political elites and Nigerian students. The change must begin with you campaign of the government should be intensive and extensive and should be made a core value of National life. The state and its institutions should not be seen as means of amassing wealth. Public offices should be made less attractive and corrupt leaders at whatever level must be punished accordingly. Democratic institutions should not only be strengthened but also democratic culture should be imbibed and demonstrated by all Nigerians in all facets of human endeavour. Student union must wake up from slumber and rise to the clarion call for the emancipation of not only the Nigerian students but also the generality of Nigerians from anti-democratic and reactionary forces. The struggle must continue. *Aluta Continua, Victoria Acerta.*

II. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Student union is part of the social and political systems in Nigeria. As a part of the system, it is expected to play significant role in sustaining the system. Unfortunately, student union in Nigeria has been unduly influenced by the prevalent negative values in Nigeria. The 'dirty politics' as it finds expression in anti-democratic and reactionary forces has regrettably desecrated and incapacitated student union in Nigeria. The effect is that instead of positively influencing politics for good governance, student union has become voiceless and almost insignificant in the calculus of the political landscape of Nigeria.

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