

ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA: CAUSES, EFFECTS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

The human person naturally detests any form of marginalization and injustice. The desire for freedom can be said to be innate in every human person. And as such, it is in the nature of the human person to reject or fight any form of injustice or marginalization either wittingly or unwittingly. This explains the reality of activism in human society. Employing the philosophical method of analysis, this study observes that activism arises in human society as a result of disorder, perceived or real maladministration, social inequality and the likes. It goes further to observe that activism in contemporary Nigeria is on the high side following the nonchalant attitudes of our government officials and those within the corridors of power. The study therefore recommends, among others, social justice and social equality as a means to enhance peaceful society and to avoid incessant unrest in Nigeria.

Keywords: Activism, Social Justice, Government, Nigeria, Peace

Introduction

The human person, by nature, keeps on striving for survival, struggling always to make a better tomorrow both for himself and the future generation. As such it becomes a bitter situation when, in the midst of these struggles and trials, sometimes accompanied with failures, he still finds himself in a condition and an atmosphere that is very unnatural to at least aid his comfort and encourage him to do better. It therefore becomes necessary for him to make effort to put an end to such bitter situations. This is informed by his quest for truth, freedom and justice. Patrick Henry made his view clear about freedom when he said "give me liberty or give me death."¹ This study is focused on the necessary and continual quest of human person for truth and justice in order to liberate himself from those who lack justice and are not virtuous. The fact remains that,

A bitter truth stings even when uttered by the tongue of a lovely angel. Sons of men whom the truth stings would prefer the execution of the angel to the acceptance of ownership of the whole

of Herod's kingdom. Such is man! But truth must be told if men's lot is to improve.²

In view of the above, this study focuses on activism in Nigeria. It begins with the basic understanding of activism, historical background of activism, causes and effects of activism in Nigeria and thereafter ends with a concluding reflection.

What is Activism?

Activism is coined from the English word *Active* which originally is of a Latin word *Activus* which means action and as well practical.³ In a general sense, activism entails working to achieve a political, social or economic change, especially as a member of an organisation with particular aim.⁴ Activism also is seen as a rational and acceptable democratic option of protest and appeal.⁵ It is a way of demonstrating to the powers that be that one is not happy with the status quo. Brian explains: "Activism is action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine. The action might be door-to-door canvassing, alternative radio, public meetings, rallies, or fasting. The cause might be women's rights, opposition to a factory, or world peace."⁶ One thing to note here is that activism is not an activity that is not purposeful; it is an action that is targeted towards achieving social change. It "consists of efforts to promote, impede, direct, or intervene in social, political, economic or environmental reform with the desire to make changes in society."⁷

Experience has shown that activism has been very helpful towards bringing to an end the evil of slavery, marginalization of women, protecting workers from exploitation, posing challenge to dictatorship, and many other related issues.⁸ In this regard, an activist is said to be a member of a particular organisation who works assiduously and motivates other members of the group or society to challenge a particular situation and condition through such means as: protests, boycotts and strikes in order to achieve a political, social or economic change. It is good to note here that scholars vary in their opinions on the various types of activism. However, for the purpose of this study, the view of Greg Brooks is highlighted. For him, there are four types of activism, namely, radical activism, idealist activism, opportunistic activism and realist activism. Radical activism has the socio-political motives to subvert the status quo; the idealists always fight for a perfect and ethical world; opportunist activism is often geared towards selfishness – what will benefit them, namely, power, money, increased visibility; and finally, realist activism is said to be pragmatic-oriented – they believe in working within the system to bring the desired social change.⁹ One thing to note is that activism can be in the form of lobbying, boycott, writing of petition, the

use of the social media, litigation, civil disobedience, demonstration, etc. Some forms of activism can be violent and others can be nonviolent. For the purpose of this study, the above can suffice as the basic understanding of activism. The next subtopic will briefly take a look at the historical overview of activism in Nigeria.

Activism in Nigeria: A Historical Review

Nigeria as a nation came into existence as a result of the decision of the British colonial master to amalgamate the northern and southern protectorates of the region. Before the amalgamation, there was no entity known as Nigeria. The various ethnic and cultural groups that now make up Nigeria existed as autonomous political entities. The major ethnic groups in Nigeria are the *Igbo* in the east, *Hausa-fulani* in the north and *Yoruba* in the west. The more prominent among the minorities are the *Tiv*, *Edo*, *Efik*, *Ibibio* and *Ijaw*. Regional administration was adopted in 1960, the regions were namely, Eastern, Western and Northern Region. In 1963 a fourth region the mid-west was created to become the political base of the Edo people.¹⁰ Furthermore the country has in the past suffered a number of changes in her type of administration and government having suffered military coups severally and finally a full handover to a democratic government in the recent times.

Just like any other political entity, Nigeria is not without any challenge. Experience has shown that there existed and still exist some activist groups in Nigeria. Some people feel marginalized, oppressed, deprived of social amenities, and the likes. These and the related issues bring about activism in Nigeria. The following paragraphs shall focus on the causes of activism in both colonial and postcolonial Nigeria:

1. Direct Taxation and Negligence of Women in the British Government: The issue of direct taxation during the British rule was first imposed on men folk but as time went on, the efforts to get women pay tax as well sprinted up a very serious problem. The women folk stood hard against the development also with the pains of their negligence in government organised themselves and an estimation of 10,000 women cutting across the southern region took to the street protesting against such a menace on this memorable day, December 2nd ,1929. The event is today described as the Aba women 's riot.¹¹

2. The British Rule in Nigeria: The level of exploitation meted on Nigerians by the British colonial masters was not friendly at all. This experience encouraged our early nationalists to seek for independence even when it was a terrible risk.

3. The killing and The Marginalization of the Igbo people: The issue of the negligence of the Igbo race has no doubt caused a lot of issues both in the past and in the present. Instances of the unjust acts include the *Araba riot on May 29, 1966* that took place in the city of Kaduna of which southerners were beaten and killed. Also, there was another riot in Katsina and southerners were brutally killed too.¹² All these menaces later led into the Biafra war which was all about the secession struggle of Igbo people in order to gain freedom because as Ezeani puts it: "throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms where negotiations failed. We were no exception we have fought in defence of that cause."¹³

4. Annulment of June 12 elections: The story of June 12, 1993 remains a history that will forever hunt our dear country. For once the masses united and willingly voted for *M.K.O Abiola* in a bid to better the future of Nigeria. But the men of "bad will" never allowed it to be a reality. With elections having been annulled, mass protests were seen around the nation and for once in history Nigerians were unequivocally united in the quest of freedom. Many died for the struggle and finally Abiola himself died and our democracy up till date keeps crying for justice.¹⁴ Thanks to the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari who recently declared June 12 a Democracy Day in Nigeria.

5. The ravage of the Ogoni land: Ogoni people from Niger Delta known for their great interest in agriculture, fishing, livestock herding, salt and palm oil cultivation have been victims of human rights violations for many years. Ranging from 1956, four years before Nigerian Independence when Royal Dutch oil a viable oil field in the Niger Delta was found and began oil production in 1958. From then till now cases of oil spillage and destruction of their land have been growing. From 1976 to 1991 there were reportedly 2,976 oil spills of about 2.1 million barrels of oil in Ogoni land, accounting for about 40% of the total oil spills of the Royal Dutch/Shell Company worldwide. Beyond these UNEP also estimated that it could take up to 30 years to rehabilitate Ogoniland to its full potential and that the first five years of rehabilitation would require funding of about US\$1 billion. This ugly situation led to the formation of *MOSOP* in 1990. Under the leadership of activist and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) stood for its people's

right hosting blockages and as well taking peaceful legal actions but unfortunately, the great and courageous leader of the group had to pay the golden price with his life.¹⁵

6. The Abduction of Chibok school girls: This marked the hallmark of insecurity in Nigeria. Young girls in school were adopted and taken away with their destination unknown. This never went down well with the masses and as such a massive protest was organised for the government to hasten investigations into the matter. A group was formed to facilitate the fight, namely, *Bring Back Our Girls*.

The above can simply be said to be a tip of the record of activism in Nigeria. There are many instances of activism especially in our contemporary society. Many human rights activists abound today. However, the major concern of this paper is not a detailed exposition of the history of activism in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that Nigeria has had her own share of the experience of activism. For sure, activism has some positive and negative effects. This will be the focus of the next subtopic.

Effects of Activism in Nigeria

Negative Effects:

1. **Break out of war:** Ever since in history, the strive for freedom rarely came on a platter of gold. Oftentimes, it leads to violence and war.
2. **Loss of lives and Properties:** With the outbreak of war, the consequences are quite brutal, ranging from high rate of poverty, to displacement of loved ones and worst of all the loss of lives and properties.
- 3 **Unhappy society:** The cumulative effect of all the pains and unrest is nothing but an unhappy society ravaged with fear and anger and it can last for quite a long time as in the case of Nigeria. Dissent Groups such as IPOB, OPC, AYF, etc. are all offshoots of unhappy people.

Positive Effects:

1. **Freedom:** Freedom, in essence, is the ultimate goal of Activism. After a long fight, freedom is gained. Our dear nation Nigeria became independent due to the courageous move by our nationalists not minding the risk.
2. **Provision of needed amenities:** In this aspect, this social struggle as well leads to the provision of social amenities. The Nigerian Labour Congress' continuous strive saw to the improvement in the workers minimum wage; also, the Niger

Delta struggle brought about the amnesty program they enjoy as a result of the fight for social justice (Activism).

3. Peaceful society: The end result of freedom and as well being provided with the necessary needs leads to a serene and calm society free from violence and threats to peace. Actually, such a situation is yet to arrive Nigeria completely due to the errors in government but a brief instance of such situations is sighted in *Niger Delta*, after the government led by the late president Musa Yaradua, granted amnesty to the youths the incessant killings in the region reduced drastically and life comparatively became better.

Concluding Reflection

So far, we have been able to highlight in this study the importance of activism. This study brings to the notice of Nigerians that a lot of things are far too bad. The voice of justice is heard yearning, in Ogoni land, Nimbo, Benue, southern Kaduna, Northeast, to name but a few. The fact remains that unless justice is done the centre can never hold; the past was only a tip of the iceberg, we don't know what tomorrow has in stock but surely if Nigerian government under Buhari does not pacify the marginalized, if the herdsmen are not prosecuted according to the law, and the Niger-Deltans appropriately rewarded for the mess in their land, then our dear nation should be ready for the day when men will stop sleeping with their eyes closed but with weapons in their hands. History has taught us everything but we fail to read the signs of history.

Therefore, this study recommends that:

1. Nigerian Government should work for the interest of all Nigerians irrespective of religious, ethnic or political affiliations
2. The Nigerian Security Council should reflect federal character unlike the present case in Nigeria.
3. The Nigerian government should consider the plight of their workers and listen to their call for increase in the minimum wage.
4. Sponsors of Boko Haram/Fulani herdsmen crisis should be prosecuted publicly irrespective of religious, ethnic or political affinity
5. Politicians should be able to accept opposing views without acrimony.

For sure, activism is a veritable tool to right the wrongs in Nigeria. In this regard, activists are also encouraged to carry out their activities within the ambience of the law. They should shun any form of lawlessness in the name of activism. On the other hand, social justice and social equality as a means to enhance peaceful society and to avoid incessant unrest in Nigeria should be encouraged by all

especially those within the corridors of power. In sum, let proper application of right reason be our watchword even as we fight and struggle for social justice.

Endnotes

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