

# Trade unionism and governance in Nigeria: A paradigm shift from labour activism to political opposition

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## Abstract

The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) has, since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, been the platform for the Nigerian people to query government policies, actions and inaction, not only for the Nigerian working class, but the entire Nigerian peoples. Such policies include: privatization and commercialization of public institutions and services, incessant fuel hikes, retrenchments of workers and implementation of prescribed conditions and unfavourable policies of international monopoly finance capitalist institutions, etc. This paper investigates the activities of the Nigeria Labour Congress, as a credible opposition to the ruling party in Nigeria. It examines the conditions that necessitated this additional responsibility on the NLC as well as the nexus between credible opposition and workers' welfarism. The paper argues that the emergence of the Labour Party in the country's political landscape and its relative acceptance is underpinned by the functionality of its platform as the "mouthpiece of the masses."

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## Introduction

All over the world, trade unions had always represented the vanguard of the working class' interests against capitalist exploitations. In the contemporary times however, especially in the developing countries, trade unions have come to assume roles that transcend the traditional role of protection of workers' welfare and class liberation. In Nigeria, trade unions fought against colonial rule and exploitation of the Nigerian State during the colonial period. The activities of trade unions, under the umbrella of the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) during the military dictatorship of the late 1980s and the 1990s hastened the return to democratic rule in the country. One of the peculiarities of the new democratic experiment in the country, which started in 1999, is the absence of a vibrant opposition to the ruling party in the country.

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The other political parties that contested against the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) are either absorbed by the PDP or are too engrossed with intra party squabbles to present a formidable and constructive opposition.

Trade unions as represented by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) in the contemporary times have been the subject of considerable research and commentary, in terms of its nature, role, functionality, and effectiveness in ensuring the welfare of the Nigerian worker and the protection of her rights in industrial disputes with the public and private labour employers (Aiyede, 2004). The apparent puzzle of its longevity and continued survival despite attempts to emasculate and undermine it by succeeding regimes especially the military has often depicted it as the proverbial cat with nine lives. Despite the founded fear of its collapse into oblivion or disintegration into autonomous parts as a result of the mounted challenges confronting not only the organizational structure, but also the mechanism of its operations, the organisation has demonstrated a high degree of elasticity and resourcefulness in domestic industrial relations as well as political sagacity in the Nigerian political landscape. From the colonial period up till the contemporary times, trade unionism in Nigeria has combined industrial agitation and political activism in varying degrees dictated by the political gladiators and the exigencies of the times. Unlike in other parts of Africa, the Nigerian workers are highly organised as a result of the existence of a strong trade union consciousness.

### **Trade unionism in the colonial period**

As early as 1861 when the Lagos colony was formally declared a British colony and the consequent replacement of the trade in slave with the "Legitimate Trade", an urban labour force was created. The new exports of palm produce and imports of manufactured goods and the creation of large-scale public works in the Lagos colony necessitated a corresponding work force. The increase in the labour force in Lagos in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought with it several disputes between the workers and the colonial government which was the largest employer of labour during this period. One of the fallouts of such labour disputes was the Lagos strike of 1897 (Hopkins, 1966:133-155). Skilled European workers, who arrived during this later decades of the nineteenth century to work in the new railways, mines and factories, or as government servants seemed to have brought the idea of trade unions into Africa (Orr, 1966:68). Consequently, the unions were almost exclusively unions of European workers, located either in North or South Africa (Orr, 1966:68). However, it would appear that before World War I, workers' unions had become established in the territories of British West Africa, for example, not later than 1905; the civil servants in the Lagos colony and the southern Nigeria Protectorate had organized into unions (Orr, 1966:65). This seemed to be as a result of the emergence of an urban wage labour force in the colony. Similarly, the Nigerian Civil Service Union, whose first meeting, mentioned similar institutions in Sierra Leone and in the old Lagos Colony and Southern Nigeria Protectorate, which existed from 1905 to 1912, in their minutes of meeting held on 19 August 1912 (Orr, 1966:66). Most significantly, was the United Kingdom's membership of the International Labour Organisation, ILO, and her status in the organisation which necessitated the extension of the ratified conventions of the organisation to her non-metropolitan territories (Anonymous, 1960:26-43). Following the conditions stipulated in the revised Constitution of 1946, the ILO conventions and recommendations were introduced into colonial Nigeria by the metropolitan state that is Britain, (Article 35), which through the colonial offices, had been implementing labour conventions in this colonial territory as early as 1929 (Adeogun, 1967:60). From this period, the formulation of labour policies was influenced by the ILO instrument which was largely for the exploitation of the colonial state of which indigenous labour was to form the bedrock. However, the Nigerian workers organized themselves and employed labour union techniques

which derived from experience European workers. Some three major processes by which the techniques of union organisation were transferred from foreign workers to Africans have been identified as; literary contact, job contact and contact with outsiders (Orr, 1966:69-70).

Despite arguments that trade unions were not in the forefront of nationalist struggles, apart from those in Guinea and Kenya, (Coleman, 1964), the history of trade union activism in Nigeria, from the 1919-22 when the Nigeria Civil Service Union led agitation for equal pay for African workers and higher posts for Africans suggests the contrary. The cardinal objective of the establishment of the labour department by the colonial office in Nigeria and within it the Trade Union section was to "promote the development of Trade Unionism in Nigeria along traditional British lines." (NAI, No 4151 Vol.79). However, it would appear that in spite of the advice in this same directive that in ensuring the latter, that "local customs or traditions are not overlooked and should be adapted to fit industrial conditions wherever suitable" (NAI, No 4151 Vol.79), the development of trade unionism took essentially British outlook. From 1912 to 1922, the Nigeria Civil Service Union, (NSCU) was the only major union in Nigeria. It was not until the 1930s, that the Nigerian Union of Teachers and the Railway Workers Union came to challenge this status. The 1938 Trade Union Ordinance robbed off the NSCU of this position. For the NSCU did not fulfill the requirement that all trade unions should register as provided by the ordinance until 1948, losing the premier position in the trade union movement to the Railway Workers Union, the first to register and their president, Michael Imoudu, the first recognized "Nigeria's Labour Leader Number 1." (Okonkwo, 1993:618) This lateness in registration was not unconnected with the little significance that trade union movement attached to the registration as observed by the Governor of Nigeria in his Saving Telegram No 212 of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1947, to the Secretary of State, London ((NAI, No 4151 Vol.84). Though criticized for its "hollow intellectualism and Victorian respectability" (Yesufu, [1962]1984:97- 99), NSCU agitation nonetheless constituted the first of its kind in this British colonial territory and a renaissance of colonial labour policy resistance, "one strand within the broader anti-colonial struggle." (Hughes and Cohen, 1971:16-17) The corollary general strike of 1945 and the colliery workers' strike in 1949 were prelude to the independence struggle and had a nationalist flavour which was welcomed by both political movements and the press. (Okonkwo, 1993:609).

### **Trade unionism in the postcolonial period in Nigeria**

At independence in 1960, the structure and control of trade unions in the country was guided by the 1938 Trade Union Ordinance, (as amended), Labour Code Ordinance No.54 of 1945 (NAI, No 4151, 1944). Also in force was the Trade Disputes Act of 1958, which legalized unions and allowed government intervention but with the consent of the parties involved (Nelson, et al.1972:97-99). This background provided an enabling environment and umbrella under which unions flourished as well as their collective activity. Consequently, the period between 1962 and 1971 witnessed a tremendous growth of union membership and the attendant increase in labour disputes (Sonubi, 1973:223). Indeed, just as labour actions increased, so also was their politicization. Nagel (1981:106-107) argues that "in the 1960-65 periods, 23.7 percent of all action was enacted by labour organizations compared with 53.2 percent during the 1970-75 period." Suggestively, "the percent of labour action that was political climbed from 70.1 during the first period to 85.9 during the second." (Nagel, 1981:106-107).

Immediately after independence in 1960, one of the foreign policy issues that took the contribution of trade unions to abate was the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement. Both the publication and the ratification of the agreement were trailed by severe outbursts of public

outrage all over the country, particularly in the South (Idang, 1970:227). Although the Defence Agreement was viewed by the then Defence Minister, Alhaji Muhammadu Ribadu as a "reaffirmation of the friendly and cordial ties which already exist and are known to exist between Nigeria and the United Kingdom", it was in reality a source of discontent in Nigeria until its abrogation in 1962 (Idang,1970:233). This was traceable to the document content which lacked clear and precise definitions and from the emotions which attended its various interpretations. It was generally held that the Defence Pact was a part of a master plan by Britain both to preserve her political and economic influence in Nigeria and to ensure the NPC's hanged on to the control of the country. It was believed that since the articulate pressures against the NPC-dominated Federal Government existed mainly in the South, that the British armed forces based in Nigeria would be employed by the NPC government to suppress any uprising against the ruling party (Idang, 1970:233).

At home and in Britain, public outcry and opposition to the pact took the form of "open letters in the newspapers; written protest to the Prime Minister, Regional Premiers, the British Colonial Secretary, and other Nigerian leaders; leaflet distributions and mass demonstrations; newspaper editorials; and public lectures and debates." (Idang,1970:229). But more decisive were the actions of the protesting groups and individuals of which labour organizations featured prominently, in particularly the two factions of the Nigerian Trade Union Congress and other ideological groups. It exposed for the first time the Nigerian Trade Unions to the use of contentious political action in reversing unfavourable government foreign policy in the post colonial period.

More significantly, the consciousness of the highly organized trade union shielded the Nigerian state, economy and working class from the exploitative vestiges of the colonial capitalist structure inherited by the elite class trained to man the civil service and local petit bourgeoisie and comprador capitalist class which organized as trading companies, oil monopoly firms and subsidiaries of foreign corporations, involved in Mining, Manufacturing and Processing, Transport, Trading, Building and Construction. Indeed, the early 1960s witnessed the organisation of trade union movement into two powerful federations; the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (NTUC) and the United Labour Congress, (ULC) (Essack, 1971:613). This division might well be on ideological grounds as it is argued that by 1964, there were approximately 300,000 trade union members organized into about 300 unions. Unions were organized into four super-ordinate central labour body organizations; the United Labour Congress (ULC), the Nigerian Workers Council (NWC), the Nigerian Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and the Labour Unity Front (LUF) (Melson, 1971:163).

It would appear that the two federations earlier mentioned, the NTUC and ULC were only the dominant factions and were cross-cutting the other central labour bodies and imposing their dominant ideologies. While the NTUC had sway over the LUF, with the anti-federalist, Marxist, and pro Nkrumah ideology, agitating for the formation of a labour party (Melson, 1967:57), the ULC and NWC on the other hand were generally apolitical and not explicitly Marxist (Melson, 1971:163) In the Regions where agricultural produce such as cocoa, palm oil and the likes were harnessed, the peasants also organized, all directed their demands at the governments, and the local bourgeoisie controlled by the indigenous capitalists.

In 1964, the strike wave against the interest of the imperialists climaxed with the joint strike action by the dominant unions. The thirteen days strike was led by the most vibrant and militant of trade union leaders in Nigeria during this period which included Michael Imoudu. Apart from organized industrial actions, there were also pockets of peasant revolts by farmers in some regions of the country. The most prominent of these was the one of 1965 when the

Yoruba farmers in the Western Region attacked Kulak chiefs and cocoa buyers with the help of migrant workers (Essack, 1971:613). The nationwide strike of June 1-15, 1964 apart from exposing the Nigerian workers to an unprecedented political prominence, presented a future embryonic representation of the future Nigerian state. It would be recalled that the federal elections of December 1964 were five months away and Nigerian politicians became aware of the labour movement and keenly contested for their votes in the aftermath of the strike. The timing and exigency of the strike contributed to this development and this was of great implications; Firstly, unlike the political parties which were based on tribalism and sectarianism during this period, lacking focus and ideologies, the trade unions were the exact representations of a genuine and non-sectarian struggle built on class and ideology. Secondly, the strike was considered an important catalyst that led to the collapse of the parliamentary system of government in Nigerian history. Thirdly, it clearly delineated and foretold the intrinsically important role which organized labour was to play in the future Nigerian political landscape, as a platform for powerful alignment and a possibly potent radical political force. And lastly, the intractability of the growing class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat demonstrated the weakness of the civilian government to forestall the use of the Nigerian economy as the arena for muscle flexing as well as the inevitability of the emergence of the military in the domestic politics of the country. Over a million Nigerian workers were involved in the two weeks strike that abated only after the government promised higher wages and better working conditions. In the aftermath of the strike, the government tried three Nigerian unionists and a visiting British professor, Dr. Victor L. Allen, a student of African trade unions. The three men were sentenced to one-year prison terms on charges of "subversion" in connection with the general strike.

However, the adventure of the military into the governance of Nigeria did not abate the wave of radical trade unionism as the period after the Nigerian Civil War witnessed. By 1969, the Gowon administration enacted the obnoxious decree 53 which imposed an outright ban on strikes as well as froze wages (Essack, 1971:613). This decree legitimized the employment of state instrument of coercion in crushing strikes. The immediate reaction of the Nigerian workers was the formation of an alliance to present a formidable opposition to this retrogressive and repressive policy of the Nigerian military government. Consequently, the United Committee of Central Labour Organisations, UCCLLO was formed and was headed by Imoudu.

The aftermath of this crisis expanded more the interest of the military government in the activity of labour. Several commissions were created to investigate such issues as the establishment of a minimum wage, working conditions, salary increases, and grievance procedures (Nagel, 1981:106). It was within this government course of action which aimed at a greater incorporation of the labour movement that the Nigerian Labour Congress, NLC was formed in December, 1975.

### **The Nigerian Labour Congress and Contemporary Politics in Nigeria**

The Nigerian Labour Congress, an amalgam of the four existing central labour unions (NTUC, LUF, ULC and NWC) was an attempt to rid the labour movement in Nigeria of the external influences which to some extent was the reason for the ideological dichotomy and the cold war unionism of this period. Indeed, after the revocation of the registration of the four central labour movements, the Nigerian military government appointed an Administrator to oversee trade union affairs while all international labour organisations apart from the ILO and the Organisation for African Trade Union Unity, were banned from operating in the country

(Otobo,1981:66). Similarly, a new policy on labour was put in place with these among others as its provisions:

(a) guided democracy based on limited government intervention in trade union matters; (b) the creation of a new image and sense of direction for Nigerian trade unions; (c) eradication of ideological and external influences from Nigerian trade unions; (d) restructuring of Nigerian trade unions into industrial unions; (e) financial self- sufficiency to be based on the check-off system of collection of union dues, and (f) the promotion of trade union education as a means of improving the quality of trade union leadership (Otobo,1981:66).

However, it would appear that the government policy of incorporation of labour included the undercutting of the newly formed organisation and the victimization of its official. Hence, apart from instituting a judicial tribunal to investigate the activities, finances and administration of the four central bodies that formed the NLC, Wahab Goodluck, the president of the NLC was also arraigned with two others before a Lagos magistrate court on charges of "transacting activities of a banned political party" (Otobo,1981:66). The high point of this covering of the NLC was the government's annulment of the elections conducted by the NLC and the imposition of a ban on the organisation itself. (Otobo,1981:66). The Mr. Justice Adebisi Tribunal, which conducted the probe, submitted its final report in 1977. Consequently, implementing the white paper, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria issued a life ban on eleven top trade union leaders from trade unionism while the assets of the four central labour bodies were seized (Federal Ministry of Information Release, 1977).

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February, 1978, a new fashioned NLC with Alhaji Hassan Sunmonu as the president was inaugurated by the government after several attempts to infiltrate the union's echelon with outsiders to represent the interest of the government. A riot act was read to the organisation on what the Federal Military Government considered as NLC future role in Nigeria. This included:

...the relationship between the Federal Military Government and the NLC should be one of partnership in progress, without prejudice to the over-riding responsibility of the government to preserve the security and peace of the nation. The Congress (NLC) should adopt a rational and conciliatory approach in industrial disputes. Conflicts should not be resolved either by artificially imposed conditions or by free play of economic forces, and union leaders are warned against restrained use of economic power, and exhibitions of intransigence, violence and blackmail in the conduct of trade disputes ...( Otobo,1981:70).

The perceived influence of the government on the NLC was demonstrated a couple of months after the inauguration. Indeed, the division in the hierarchy of the NLC leaders on whether to support the student protest concerning the ill-conceived and poorly implemented educational policy in 1978 was suggestive of the infiltration of the union's camp by the government. The non-involvement of the NLC could also be seen as a safeguard to its very existence in the light of government's attitude towards the organisation.

## **Nigeria Labour Congress and Political Opposition**

The period preceding the election of 1979 witnessed some hike in the cost of living as a result of government's shabby agricultural, economic and industrial policies. The disenchantment which it created among the Nigerian workers and Nigerians generally led the NLC to issue a

twenty one days ultimatum to the Federal Government to react to their demands which in particular included the restoration of car loans, review of rent and transport allowances and fixing of a national minimum wage (Otobo, 1981:70) Organized labour was very concerned that labour was not getting a fair share of the nation's oil prosperity. This came on the heels of the flamboyant life style and the profligacy of the politicians who turned into importers of essential commodities overnight. Indeed, import licenses were granted only to party affiliates and were used as avenues for meting electioneering costs or debts and the accumulation of wealth against the subsequent elections. This reaction of the Nigerian Labour Congress could be interpreted as the first explicit demonstration of independence of the newly formed labour congress from the whims and caprices of the Federal Military Government. Or more still, the rejection of the old order and the ascendancy of the middle echelons of the bureaucrats who comprised the bulk of the union membership as suggested in the issues the union members picked upon conveniently, reflecting their major concerns and interests. Similarly, it would also "seem to have been an attempt to expose the irrationality behind the government's indifference to the workers' plight while it reduced "politics" to the award of contracts, licences and the handing out of political patronage, some of which involved staggering sums of money."(Otobo, 1981:70) Indeed, the vacuum created by the absence of a strong opposition during this military dispensation was filled by the newly found vigour of the NLC as represented by the ascendancy of the new middle class bureaucrats.

The resolution of the trade dispute was stalled by the elections and assumption of political power by the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, 1979. However, between 10<sup>th</sup> of January when the second ultimatum was issued by the NLC and the strike of May 1981, certain developments confirmed the new context of political face off, that arose between Labour and the politicians that took over from the military junta, thus confirming what Marx said that "the modern bourgeois society that has sprout from the ruins of the feudal society has not done away with class antagonism, it has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones."(Marx and Angels,1986:36). In particular was the polarization of the working class by government in the name of categorization of workers into junior and senior workers, thereby creating bad blood among the Nigerian workers. There was the inter-party crisis which developed as political parties sought to make political capital out of the deadlocks in the talks between the ruling party and the NLC. As expected, there was also an infused division in the ranks of organized labour by the assertive politicians, who heightened the inherent cracks in labour union body, the struggle between "communists" and "democrats" within the NLC.

Nevertheless, the resultant strike of 11, May 1981, was however settled on May 12 after labour leaders and government officials led by Vice-President Alex Ekwueme negotiated and agreed on substantial increase in minimum pensions and a minimum wage to be decided on by the National Assembly. The strike may have been a dubious victory for labour . For one thing, it brought into the open the struggle for power between "Marxists" and "Democrats" and led to the formation by the latter in August of a new national labour organization, the Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. This development was encouraged by the federal government. In all, the strike demonstrated the limits to what Lenin called "trade union consciousness". Also, the "economism" of Nigerian trade unions is reflected in part, in the kinds of issues and general understanding on all sides that such conflict was temporary (Otobo, 1981:80).

The success of the strike was significant in many respects. It exposed the "direct connection between "business activities", government socio-economic policies and the miserable existence of a large proportion of the population: thus, the mass retrenchment of workers in various industries was directly traceable to specific government policies and the not

inconsiderable financial mismanagement and official corruption that also seem to have permeated the private sector" (Otobo, 1981:81). The responsibility of standing in opposition to anti people policies enunciated by the party in government was taken over by the organized labour, in the absence of a genuine and credible opposition party at this period. Similarly, the material concessions, especially the 60 per cent increase in pension rates, extracted gave workers the prospect of what collective power holds and the extent to which organized labour can attain in vibrant political opposition in years to come.

In 1983, the democratic culture was not allowed to flourish as a result of the military incursion into politics once again. The military coup of General Muhammadu Buhari again demolished all existing democratic structures and institutions in particular political party structures and by implication effective political opposition. Indeed, democratization in Nigeria received little push from the political class during this period. The several military interventions in the country most of the times were fought by the collective actions of pressure groups which included labour union. In particular, organized labour stood in this gap for the benefit of Nigerians. In the course of consolidating and legitimizing its regime, the Buhari regime suffered the loss of support of Nigerians, in particular, organized labour including the student unions and the press. This loss of support came on the heels of the obnoxious Decree 4, which was anti-press and anti-freedom of information. Secondly, the down-sizing of the workers, especially in the civil service gave labour union members more cause to be suspicious of the military government and anxious over the future of the Nigerian workers under the regime. Indeed, the removal of several educational incentives, especially the reintroduction of school fees and the removal of meal subsidy at the university level meant hard times for the Nigerian students.

However, a major *casus bellum* between the regime and these pressure groups was the sentencing of two members of the Guardian newspaper to one year in prison each for writing a story on the country's diplomatic postings and the award of a 50,000 Naira fine against the Newspaper all for breaching the obnoxious Decree 4 (See *The Guardian*, April 5, 1984:22). These became political issues and attracted resistance and protests from labour, students and civil society. The 20-month-old government of Buhari was abruptly overthrown on August 27, 1985 in a bloodless coup led by Ibrahim Babangida, the Army Chief of Staff. The coup followed rumours of friction within the Supreme Military Council and of coup plots among the ranks and file. The change of government was welcomed by the Nigerian public as demonstrated by the joy that greeted the coup only comparable to that which greeted the demise of General Sanni Abacha. In particular, groups such as journalists, students, and trade union members were relieved of the tension over escalating political repression and deteriorating economic conditions that marked the 20-month-old Buhari and his second-in-command, Tunde Idiagbon, regime. The latter was the Chief of Staff, Supreme Headquarters. Both men were believed to have monopolized and misused power.

However, the regime of Ibrahim Babangida witnessed some austere measures that seriously affected the Nigerian people. In particular, the administration's implementation of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank designed blue print on economic recovery, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) These programs amount to detailed instructions on what countries have to do to bring their economies under control based on a strategy called neoliberalism. The strategy was geared toward promoting free markets, including retrenchment of workers and across-the-board reduction in their salaries from November 1985 to September 1986. This policy was initially unpopular with the Nigeria Labour Congress as it saw the policy as nothing but "Gloom for the Workers" (Bulletin No. 1 of Nigeria Labour Congress, 1985). The labour body's response was a 21-day ultimatum given to

the federal government on the salary cut issue. However, the trade union body became sympathetic to the economic measures of the regime, and consequently called off the ultimatum (*The Punch*, November 21, 1985:1). Despite reneging severally on the hand over date to a civilian government, the Babangida Administration was not under any serious pressure to "step aside" as it had in the aftermath of the annulment of the June 12 election that saw chief MKO Abiola emerging as the preferred candidate to his opponent Alhaji Bashir Tofa. In that election, which was acclaimed to be the freest and fairest in the history of elections in Nigeria, chief Abiola was alleged to have garnered 58 percent of the entire votes. The annulment of that election by Babangida sparked several days of unrest in various parts of the country. In particular, the Nigeria Labour Congress and the petroleum workers' union lent their support to the waves of protests. Consequently, paralysis of economic activities in the country and several weeks of tension caused by protests and unrests forced Babangida to resign the presidency on August 26, 1993 (*Guardian* Friday 27, August, 1993:1). The calls and threat from the NLC president Mr. Paschal Bafyau, that the Administration should hand over to the Senate president, Dr. Iyorchia Ayo as a show of its commitment to democracy (*Guardian* Thursday 31 August 1993:11), was met by another threat from the Information Secretary, Mr. Uche Chukwumereije that NLC might be restructured in line with international labour standards (*Guardian*, Tuesday 31 August, 1993:8, *Guardian*, Monday 23 August, 1993:1). By implication, membership of labour union would be voluntary. The administration however, handed over to an Interim National Government led by an industrialist chief Ernest Shonekan (*Guardian* Friday 27, August, 1993:1).

In a move to tackle the deteriorating economic situation, the caretaker administration among other measures adopted, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November attempted to increase the local pump price of fuel as the International Monetary Fund condition for the reduction of government fuel subsidies in what the administration considered as "appropriate pricing" of petroleum products (*Guardian*, Tuesday 9 November, 1993:1). This raised discontentment against the beleaguered transitional government. In demonstration of public discontentment, a high court in Lagos ordered a reverse to the old rate, while the Nigerian Labour Congress after issuing a 72 hour ultimatum (*Guardian* Saturday 13 November 1993:1) commenced a general strike that could perhaps be best described as a two-edged sword; for while it led to the collapse of that government, it ushered in the most dictatorial and corrupt military regimes in the history of Nigeria, the seventh military administration since the country's independence from Britain in 1960, the Abacha regime. Consequently pressured by the protest of labour and pressures from within the hawks in the administration, Chief Ernest Shonekan resigned his position as the head of the Interim National Government of Nigeria, 83 days after he was sworn in (*Guardian*, Thursday 18 November, 1993:1).

Labour activism continued during the Abacha regime. The arrest and incarceration of the alleged winner of the June 12 aborted elections, chief MKO Abiola on charges of treason again received the sympathy of majority of Nigerians including labour and civil society. Chief Abiola had declared himself president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on the strength of his alleged victory in the aborted presidential election. The continuous incarceration of Abiola despite the court bail granted him by an appeal court in November sparked off waves of protests. The national petroleum workers union kicked off the strikes which paralyzed the entire petroleum sector as well as lower the export quota of the country's oil export. This was followed by strikes in other sectors of the economy such as the Banking sector, Education and so on. In a display of authoritarian force, the Abacha regime refused negotiation with the labour unions; instead, it unleashed the powers of the state instrument of coercion in crushing the protests, mobilizing the army around oil refineries, arresting and detaining labour leaders and pro-democracy activists, shutting down media houses and rolling out draconian decrees to

insulate itself from legal actions. In particular, the government of Sanni Abacha, sacked the NLC, the National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas workers (NUPENG) and the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association (PENGASSAN) at the height of the deadlocked peace talks and appointed a Sole Administrator to run their affairs (*Daily Times* Thursday 15 September, 1994:7). All these increased the level of political uncertainty and tension in the country during this period and the call for a return to civilian rule.

The following year saw Abacha's regime continuous hold on power by silencing political opposition, including crushing protesters, suppression of labour and press freedom, trials and execution of perceived political opponents, including the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, the renowned environmentalist and political activist alongside other eight people from Ogoniland in the Niger Delta region of the country on November 10, 1995 (*Guardian* Saturday 11 November, 1995:1). This action not only triggered off international protest and isolation of the country but also led to the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth. Abacha's policies and continuous shifting of the date for a return to democratic rule continued to generate concern within and without Nigeria. His trial and detention of alleged coup plotters heightened the concern for human right. Similarly, his self succession bid and the continuous detention of Abiola created a "now open and now hidden" agitation mostly from the Yoruba nation and pro-democracy groups. However, the sudden demise of both Abacha and Abiola cooled the heated polity as the period witnessed the return of exiled politicians and pro-democracy activists such as Wole Soyinka.

The administration of General Abdulsalam Abubakar offered a new hope in the democratic horizon as there were clear signs of his willingness to return the country to democratic rule. Indeed, the return to civil rule was a priority of his administration. With pressure from the international community and organized labour, pro-democracy groups and civil society, even if the regime had any "hidden agenda" it was sure to receive strict resistance and trouble from these groups.

Obasanjo's emergence as General Abubakar's successor came on the heels of the appeasement of the Yoruba nation seen as the disadvantaged in the June 12 struggle. Indeed, the choice of Obasanjo as the preferred of the two Yoruba presidential contestants, the other being Chief Olu Falae was attributed to the acclaim he won by becoming Nigeria's first military leader to voluntarily surrender power to a civilian administration in 1979. Also it was believed at the time that he had the support of the military oligarchy as one who could protect the interest of the military, himself being a retired General. All these reasons coupled with the sympathy he had garnered from his imprisonment under Abacha aided his victory at the 1999 polls and his "second missionary journey" to Aso Rock seat of the Nigerian Government. However, hardly had he assumed office than he began his "Saturday surprises", unfolding policies which were considered imperialistic and anti people. Most of these policies were clearly blue prints from the Bretton Wood institutions, IMF and the World Bank, the most obnoxious was the increment in the fuel pump price.

The series of mass protest and labour unrest that accompanied the countless increases during the Obasanjo administration was unprecedented. It is believed that the number of increases during this period surpassed all other administrations put together. NLC in 2001 had threatened a protest if the government reneged on its promise to implement the 25% increase in wage structure which was to take effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2002, (*Sunday Tribune* Sunday 2 December, 2001:6), however, this was averted. Indeed, the petroleum products price increases introduced in 2003 were the most excruciating. In October 2003 the administration had begun the deregulation in the petroleum sector. Indeed, Obasanjo removed the fuel subsidy which

had reduced the cost price of petroleum products in Nigeria; consequently, this burden was shifted to the Nigerian consumers in the form of increase in the pump price. Two months later, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2003 the Nigerian Labour Congress led by its leader Comrade Adams Oshiomhole, described as shocking another proposed increase on petroleum products by Obasanjo Administration. The ₦ 1.50 tax on a litre proposal was contained in the 2004 appropriation bill submitted to the National Assembly for consideration (*Daily Sun* Monday, December 22, 2008:15) The NLC raised objections to this bill particularly in three key areas. These included road maintenance tax on petroleum products, monetization and the overall deficit (*The Comet* Vol.5 No 604, Tuesday 23 December 2003:1). Consequently the NLC threatened a showdown with the government over the latter's action which it described as a smack of high degree of insensitivity to the plight of Nigerians (*Daily Sun* Monday, December 22, 2008:15).

The case of Nigeria offers a typical model of an organized conception of collective action and attests to the usefulness of the labour unionism in place of a failed party opposition in a democratic state especially in a non-Western state. The disorder and dysfunctionality of the Nigerian state system has bred practices hitherto not imagine in a democratic setting. Yet, it should be perceived only as one of the oddities of the Nigerian democratic experience. This study demonstrates that the existence of democratic safety valves do not always guarantee order especially within an acquired democratic culture ambience. However, it is instructive to note that while organized labour has gained the loyalty of the generality of Nigerians at least to the extent of being a credible platform for the expression of their political and economic aspirations, as demonstrated by the various calls for labour to intervene in ensuring that anti-people policies are checked (Utomi, *Daily Independent*, Monday March 23, 2009:A12) It is also demonstrated in the election victories of the labour party in two states in Nigeria, and the incorporation of the process into the Nigerian political process, that same process produced a civil war and periodic massive mobilizations that left on its trail destruction and oftentimes intractable social dislocations. There is no gain saying therefore that functional, vibrant and effective political party opposition remain the best option in the 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic practice. In Nigeria, while much collective action was enacted by organized labour and civil society, the political parties juxtaposed to the party in power should mobilize a formidable front to resist unpopular and anti-people policies, only then would they receive the loyalty and confidence of the electorate.

## Conclusion

Unlike other countries where political parties have formed real oppositions to the ruling party, especially on critical issues that affect the ordinary citizens of such countries, the case of Nigeria is an aberration. In countries like Zimbabwe, for example, the opposition parties to the ruling ZANU-PF, such as the Zimbabwean Unity Movement (ZUM), and Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) at different times opposed strongly and ideologically too some of the policies of the Mugabe led ZANU-PF government. In particular and perhaps the most significant of the oppositions to state policies by opposition parties in that country is the hard stance of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on both the economic and land reform policies of the Mugabe led government in Zimbabwe. Amongst the numerous policies of the Mugabe led ZANU-PF party have been the economic collapse and the trampling of democratic rights of the citizens (*Daily Independent*, Monday March 23, 2009:A11). In this situation, MDC has mobilized everything within its capacity legitimate or illegitimate, to resist the policies, even at the risk of facing state sponsored assassinations, cooked up charges against its leadership and brutality of state instrument of coercion against its members. The oppositions' alliances in Zimbabwe, despite the repressive measures of the Mugabe

government have remained focused and undeterred. A prolonged struggle requires two sides willing to promote and defend with their last breath, their clearly defined interests as also demonstrated by the struggle of the African National Congress against apartheid in South Africa. However, the same cannot be said about political party opposition in Nigeria. Indeed, the absence of the above elements set the Nigerian political opposition apart from many others in Africa. This lack of capacity for resistance has not only portrayed them as not credible and genuine before the Nigerian people, but has also made the party in power itself to take the opposition less seriously.

Even in the era of the military, compared with the armed resistance that accompanied such oppositions in some countries in Africa, there is scant evidence of such a phenomenon in Nigeria. Opposition political parties during the democratization struggle did not engage in or incited resistance of any nature against the military juntas, nor were form or tactics ever considered by the parties, except for a little toying with the idea during the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) struggle against the Abacha government in the aftermath of the June 12 elections of 1993. NADECO itself was not a political party at the time although it metamorphosed into one, the Alliance for Democracy (AD). This missing element may suggest a lack of capacity, a lack of will, or a resignation in the face of over-whelming odds.

However, this is not to suggest the dearth of formalized political opposition in Nigeria, but, contrary to believes elsewhere, it is not monolithic. Similarly, it is also not well-organized or consolidated around a common ideology, process, or set of objectives (Hoffman, 1995-1996:153). This may account for its un-steadfastness and fickleness as it usually yields to the dangling carrots of the party in power when the chips are down. Though it certainly agrees on one thing, the change of the status quo, it however lacks the mechanism and will power to effect the change.

Consequently, the labour movement in Nigeria emerged in opposition to the excesses that characterized Nigerian politics from independence until the contemporary times. These include anti-people policies, high handedness of the government especially the military, corruption and insensitivity of the political elite. Indeed, the movement articulated the aspirations of the broad masses of society, raised the political consciousness of the Nigerian people, both working class and the peasants and mobilized public sentiments against the abuses of the ruling elite, whether military or civilian. Labour rallied the public around nationalist causes, and bawled out at the ever-increasing gap that existed between the affluence of politicians and the poverty of the majority of Nigerians. It raised fundamental questions regarding access to education, health, and other welfare services. Similarly, it challenged authoritarian tendencies, as demonstrated by the call to create a National Government in which official opposition was abolished and by the preventive detention act of the 1960s, and general repression by the military in the 1980s (Aiyede, 2004:225). In particular in 1963, the then Prime Minister Alhaji Tafawa Balewa sought a one party state by calling for a National Government in that cabinet system of government which would have abolished official opposition in the federal legislature. The labour movement mobilized other groups in society to oppose that move (Aiyede, 2004:225,232).

Indeed, it was that singular labour activism that saved the young country at that time from heading towards the lines of other countries that have been doomed by the effect of one-party state. The Nigerian case study demonstrates the changing role of organized labour from trade union activism to political opposition. Political repression, anti people policies and general frustration in the face of near absence of ideologically tailored and genuine party opposition only facilitated the emergence of organized labour as a credible voice of the masses and a

platform for political resistance and agitation. It is also clear that the Nigerian polity shaped the frequency and form of this collective action. Again this shift in the dominant forms of trade union activism resulted from politically produced alterations in Nigerian organizational and institutional composition.

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