

POLITICS AND TRADE UNIONISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines politics and trade unionism in higher education in Nigeria. It explains the concept of politics as the element of power, authority and control. The paper x-ray the predominance of public interest, actions and the element of institutionalized legitimacy and accountability activities for the common good of members. Trade unionism as an association for good salary formes the object of safe guarding and improving the wages and well conditions of its members as well as to raise members' social status and standards of living in the country. The influence of politics and trade unionism in higher institutions is examined. It observes that unions within the system have often based their demand on adequate findings of the system, institutions autonomy and academic freedom, as well as salary and condition of service. Implications of politics and trade unionism in higher education in Nigeria are highlighted. The paper therefore suggests that appointment of people into governing councils must be based on merit and not on political or ethnic affiliation. There is also the need to fund the system effectively, so that the goals of higher education can be realized. Staff union should also show restraint in their demand and agitation among others.

Keywords: Politics, Trade Unionism and Higher Education

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Introduction

All over the world, higher educational institutions are recognized as centers of excellences where knowledge is not only acquired, but also disseminated to those who require it. They are formal institutions set up by the society to be centers of learning and acquiring of rich ideas. In its strict sense, Benjamin (2011) is of the opinion that higher education refers to Ivory towers, where instruction is given and received without harassment and undue influence from the outside world. Thus, the universal ideal of the higher education is a community of scholars, free to pursue knowledge without undue interference from any quarters (Banjo, 2011). In the same vein, Hannah (2008) postulates that higher education institutions are enterprises that produce and distribute public good, which is knowledge. Salter (2013) agrees that knowledge production is the focus of higher education and that the production of knowledge has always focused on teaching and research. Clarke and Edwards (2010) also recognize the high level of respect and trust bestowed on higher educational system. Higher institutions have since their medieval beginnings, been founded to preserve the positive heritage of any society. They are committed to promoting society's corporate well being and advancement by refining the ability of its members to select reasons and understand. Higher institutions also enquire and seek to explain the development and function of man as part of the natural world by acting as guide and critic in those areas which can be informed by higher educational resources of knowledge and specialized skills.

Therefore, the important role which higher education play in the society cannot be ignored. To this effect, Rotem and Glasman (2007) maintain that "higher education refers to institutions which advance and diffuses consciousness for the entire society. Its output are critical factors for the maintenance and adaptive structures of the society". Specifically, the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria are:

- Contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training;
- Develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society;
- Develop the intellectual capability of individual to understand and appreciate their local and external environments;
- Acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individual to be self-reliant and useful member of the society;
- Promote, encourage scholarship and community service;
- Forge and cement national unity and
- Promote national and international understanding and interaction. (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014, section 45). Section 46 of the same document further asserts that tertiary institutions shall pursue these goals through among others, teaching, research and development; staff development programmes, generation and dissemination of knowledge, to mention a few.

However, in spite of the laudable goals and objectives which tertiary institutions are expected to perform as enunciated above, the various problem and constraints, which confront them, have practically made it impossible for those objectives to be realized. The tertiary educational system in Nigeria has witnessed a lot of turbulent experience. Deterioration of physical infrastructure, a growing culture of arbitrariness and suppression in managing the institutions, demoralization of staff and staff periodic strikes. Efforts of solving and ameliorating these problems have often led to collision between tertiary institutional management and trade union. This paper therefore focuses attention on politics and trade unionism in higher education system in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Politics

The concept of politics has been limitedly (and in many cases negatively) interpreted to simply mean the struggle for power by individual or groups. Thus Aremu (2006) defines politics as a 'dirty game' too unwholesome for the sanitized humanitarianism of education such restricted view and definitions of politics characterized the traditional politicians and political scientists. For example, Dyke (2006) defines politics as 'consisting of struggle among factors pursuing conflicting desires on public issues'. Definitely, politics is more than political party struggle or conflict. Current definitions of politics include three essential ingredient.

- i. The element of power, authority and control;
- ii. The predominance of public interest and actions: and
- iii. The element of institutionalized legitimacy and accountability in the way the activities for the common good are performed.

Abernethy and Coomber (2015) define politics in terms of three interrelated components;

- a. Activities focused on the acquisition and use of power through control of institution of government,
- b. Activities in which public issues are discussed and demands upon government express through political parties, interest groups, mobs of solidarity individuals
- c. Activities of the formal institutions of government which make laws, interprets them, allocate resources and carry them out.

Akpakwu (2012) defines politics as the struggle over value, power, interest, scarce resources in which the aim of the conflicting interest groups are to undo each other to gain the value, power, resources, over their rivals, Odimegwu (2008) defines politics as the variety of struggle that surround any decision of the state, government or organizations and tendency to wield influence and acquire or retain power over the people. Adagba (2010) defines politics as being concerned with who get what, when and how. This view is useful in understanding the relations that take place as how when durable objectives are to be achieved. It also indicated that a struggle is involved in the making of decision as to who achieves what objective and how they do so.

Benjamin (2014) defines politics as social sub-system where decision about how private members and groups will be allocated to the limited objects that are valued in the society and are generally accepted as authoritative. The value allocated by the system may be material ranging from educational resources (textbooks) to defence contracts. They may be symbolic conferring status and difference upon favoured groups and persons. Thus elements or politics are found in almost all social systems and organizations (including education) because each social system carry out the function of authoritative allocation of values (material and symbolic) which have in one way or another been predetermined at the broader political levels.

Trade Unionism

The concept of trade unions has attracted variety of definitions from scholars. All these definitions however centre on workers and their welfare. For instance, Fajana in Nchuchuwe and Ajolor (2008) defines trade union as "an association of wage or salary earners formed with the object of safe guarding and improving the wage and employment conditions of its members and to raise members' social status and

standards of living in the country. Aremu (2006) also defines trade union as a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives.

Furthermore, the Nigerian Labour Law Section 1 sub section 1, Trade union Act No 31 of 2013 buttresses this point further and defines trade union as 'any combination of workers or employers whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and conditions of employment of workers the combination in questions would not, apart from this acts be an unlawful combination by reason of its purpose or any of it purpose be it in restraint of trade and whether its purpose do not include provision of benefits for its members.

However, an in-depth consideration of trade unions shows that their broad objective is not only to unite Nigerian workers but the people and protect citizens from all forms of exploitation and discrimination as contained in the NLC mission statement of 2006 (NLC. 2007). It is in this content that workers welfare when finally achieved leads to a better and the general good of any society in the long run, since workers are part of the society they come from.

According to Hyman (2007), trade unions are convey or belts of the workers' desire to put an end to wage salary and radically transform the society. The radical school of thought therefore sees trade unions in terms of their revolutionary role of transforming the capitalist society. From the above, it would therefore, seem that a trade union is an association of people at work, of workers, and in some cases employers as well and its main function is the regulation of relation about employment (Akpala, 2012). In the western world, a trade union, from the workers side is traditionally taken to be an association or manual and or non-manual work people below the management grade. However, in all societies today, professional and managerial people are joining trade unions formed for the purposes of safeguarding and improving the working conditions of their members and to raise their status and promote their vocational interest (Sunmonu, 2008).

Politics and Trade Unionism in Education:

Human resource is vital in the attainment of any organizational goals. Human beings must utilize the materials and time available in the workplace to achieve the set goals of any organization. Endowed as he is with an impressive array of natural capabilities, man is unique among living beings. Human beings have the natural instinct to associate with one another. This is the fundamental basis of politics and trade unionism. The Nigeria constitution outlines certain basic rights that all citizens should enjoy. One of these basic rights is the freedom of association. The labour union is an organization usually consisting of workers of the same trade, formed to promote collective bargaining with employers over wages, working hours, fringe benefits, job security and other working conditions.

Historically, trade unionism started early in industrial revolutions, many people left farming as an occupation and began to work for employers, usually in poor conditions and for very low wages. The labour movement arose an outgrowth of the disparity between the power of employers and the powerlessness of an individual employee. Initially, the employers were antagonistic of labour unionism; unions were illegal for many years in most countries. There were severe penalties for attempting to organize unions, up to and including execution. Despite this repulsion, unions were formed and began to acquire political power, eventually resulting in a body of labour

law which not only legalized organizing efforts, but codified the relationship between employers and those employees organized into unions, it was considered an issue of fairness that workers be allowed to pool their resourced as special legal entity in a similar way to the pooling of capital resources by the employers in the form of corporations. Today, most democratic countries have many labour unions and a government-imposed ban on unionism is generally considered a human right abuse. In the Nigerian experience, labour unionism has a checkered history of resistance, proliferation, sectorization, centralization and decentralization (Maduemzi, 2015).

The Nigerian education sector, have many labour unions depending on the level of education involved. At the tertiary level, we have the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Academic Staff Union of Polytechnic (ASUP), Colleges of Education Academic Staff Union (COEASU), Association of University Technologist of Nigeria (ASUTON), Senior Staff Association of Nigeria University (SSANU), Non-Academic Staff Union (NASU) and the Polytechnic Senior Staff Association (POSSA). All these unions are officially recognized by the proprietors and management of all educational institutions and they engage in collective bargaining with them on staff matters. However, in recent times, there seems to be some legal constraints to unionism in tertiary institutions (Oludoy, 2006).

Labour union plays crucial roles in the institution for their members and they greatly influence both the quality of education system. In recent time, beside the role of helping to negotiate some improved welfare and conditions of services for teachers, which in turn impact positively on the quality teaching, the unions had influenced government to improve the funding of education. This in turn has improved quality through better capacity to procure quality educational resources for use in the institutions. It could be recalled that the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) championed the call on the Federal Government of Nigeria to establish the Education Tax Fund (ETF) which had helped improve the education funding (Iyayi, 2012).

The Influence of Politics and Trade Unionism in Higher Institutions in Nigeria

There are prominent unions that are recognized within the tertiary institutions in Nigeria as mentioned above; the major objective of these unions is to protect the welfare of their members. Iyayi (2012) says these union are trade union combination of workers of employers, whether temporary or permanent, the purpose of which is to regulate the terms and condition of the employment of workers. In specific terms, Iyayi further outline the principles that guide those unions as follows:

- Integrity, transparency and accountability:
- Professionalism, objectivity and hard work:
- Courage, sacrifice and total commitment:
- Internal democracy, teamwork and group solidarity:
- Patriotism, anti-imperialism and working class solidarity

In carrying out these principles, those unions will have loggerheads with both the government and institutional authorities. At the level of the government, the union has always based its agitation on three major issues. These are:

1. Funding of the system
2. Institutional autonomy and
3. Condition of services.

The issue of funding has been a source of crisis in the Nigerian educational system. Various organizations, parents, labour union etc have at various times pointed the attention of government to the poor funding of the system. For instance, Ibukun (2014) reported that between 1987 and 1997, average expenditure on education by the Federal government as a percentage of the annual budget was 5.1% when related to the GDP. Federal government expenditure on education average 1.1% in addition Arikewuyo (2014) reported that since the advent of democracy in 1999, funding of education dropped from 11.12% to 1.81% in 1013 UNESCO (2010) reported that unlike Nigeria which spend an average of 1.1% of its GDP/GNP on education other countries like Ghana spend 3.6%, Kenya 6.2% and Zimbabwe 9.5%.

The effect of poor funding is evidenced in the brain drain, a phenomenon which has depleted tertiary institutions in Nigeria seriously. The country has lost most of its experienced academic staff to even smaller African countries such as Ghana, Rwanda, Kenya, South-Africa, to mention a few. According to Okogie (2014), the level of funding has been going down ASUU, for instance, has gone on strike for several times during the periods of 1992, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2003 to press home its demand for increased funding for the system. Perhaps the government fails to understand the fact that success of any school depends upon the resources available to it, money is important in this respect because by it, all other vital elements in the school can be obtained such as school buildings, purchase of equipment, payment of teachers salaries and allowances and running expenses (Aghenta, 2014). The issue of tertiary institution and academic freedom has also been a vexed matter between government and unions especially. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014) has recognized that:

- The internal organization of each institution (of higher learning) shall be its own responsibility;
- The traditional are of academic freedom for the institutions are to:
 - Select their students except where the law prescribes otherwise:
 - Appoint their staff
 - Teach, select area of research and
 - Determine the content of courses.

However, government has always hidden under the following clause which says “government shall continue to respect their freedom as long as these areas are in consonance with national goals”. The question is, what constitutes “consonance with national goals”? Besides, what is institutional autonomy? Anya (2012) defines it as “the ability conferred on institutional arrangements of the state on each tertiary institutions to manage its affairs and consists usually of the corporate freedom of institution to exercise its prerogatives in the area of appointment of its staff and its governing authorities, pursuit of institutional goals as defined for itself under the rules of the laws of the land; pursuit of institutional goals as defined for itself under the rules of the laws of the land; insulation of the institution in the management of its routine affairs from political, administrative, religious and other authorities. Indeed, institution autonomy implies that each tertiary institution must be governed according to the law that establishes it. Every institution has its law, edict or even decree which spells out the functions of the various organs such as Council, Senate, Congregation, Faculty, Department, Institute etc. however successive governments have often impinged on this autonomy, usually hiding under the cover of national interest (Ajayi, 2009).

The third contentious issue between the government and union is that of continuation of services of workers. This area covers such areas as salary and allowances, retirement and pension appointment, discipline and promotion of staff, etc. Poor condition of services of staff are often reflected in such union slogans such as “my boss is a comedian, the wages he pays are a joke, my take home pay cannot take me home:”. It has asserted that what academics are paid in Nigeria represents 0.0005 of the pay of their colleagues in Botswana (Onyeornu, 2006). Often times, government in Nigeria retorted to certain hard-line postures in order to counter union’s strikes actions. These include banning and unbanning of the unions, seizure of salaries under the guise of no work no pay, ejection of members from government quarters, detention etc.

Other staff unions within the tertiary institution system have often focused more on welfare and salary of members, rather than on the issue of funding and autonomy. Till date, only ASUU is perhaps the only union that has signed comprehensive agreements with government on the vexed issues of funding autonomy and conditions of services. Onyeornu and Bankole (2011) observe that much of the conflicts involving the government and non-academic staff unions emanate from the collective agreement reached between the government and ASUU which the union often regards an exclusionary. These have led to the popular parity conflicts in the universities that sometime involve physical assaults.

Implications of Politics and Trade Unionism in Higher Institutions in Nigeria

All the institutional level, the relationship between tertiary institutional authorities and staff unions especially the academic body has also not been all rosy. Vice Chancellors, provost and Rectors in most Nigerian higher institutions have often had allocation of funds to high handedness on the part of the administration. Funding of various tertiary institutional project, award of contract, payment of outstanding allowances and salaries, purchase of facilities, library and laboratory materials, etc have sometime due to politics caused disharmony (Olorode, 2011).

Arbitrariness and high handedness on the part of tertiary institutional authorities and Vice Chancellors, provost and rectors have also often caused a lot conflicts which have political tone. For instance, at University of Abuja because of politics the Vice Chancellor professor Isa Mohammed unilaterally sacked thirty five lecturers, dissolved senate, created programmes and altered the academic structure of the university. He ran the university like Chieftdom and with unbelievable brutality (Egbokhare, 2010). In addition, Isa Mohammed was intolerant to the existence of alternative views and trade unions. The man would ultimately declare that he was the “Law” (Mustapha, 2015). He was said to have displayed extreme autocratic tendencies contrary to the expectation of a man of his social and academic status.

In 1996, due to politics also at the Ogun State University, (now Olabisi Onabanjo University), Ago-Iwoye, over one hundred academic staff were unilaterally sacked by the Vice Chancellor for their refusal to ‘sign back’ during a nationwide strike called by the national body of ASUU. Thus due to this fact that some Vice chancellors, provost and rectors became too sensitive to criticism (Bellor, 2008). These management staff did not necessarily see themselves as accountable to anyone in the tertiary institution, they effectively transformed into feudal lords within an environment designed to promote tolerance and freedom. All these acts of arbitrariness dictatorship have put unions on collision with the management of many tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

The role of politics and trade unions in many organizations cannot be ignored. Trade unions are important stakeholders in the system. Unionism within the Nigeria tertiary institutional system is no longer news. Indeed the system has witnessed a lot of conflicts. Partly because of the divergent role perceptions of governing and the unions. According to Egbokhare (2011), one of the primary causes of conflict between unions and government is the conflict of perception of the mission of the tertiary institutions. Trade union sees its role as the defending and protecting the interest of the country as a whole. It serves as a critical watchdog for the society striving to contain the excesses of the ruling class. The state government sees the institutions as organs of the state's bureaucracy, parastatals of a king which should be loyal to the national interest as defined and interpreted by the state.

However, it can be deduced that both the government and trade unions obviously have good intentions for the institutions system. Their conflicting views could therefore be harmonized for effectiveness and efficiency in the overall management of institutions in Nigeria.

Suggestions

- i. It is therefore imperative for the institutional system to be re-oriented in consonance with acceptable democratic and international standards. In this regard, there must be a total overhauling of the system such that institutions in Nigeria would be run properly without politics. To that extent, government must ensure that only credible people are appointed into institutions governing councils and senates.
- ii. The appointment of vice chancellor, provost and rectors must also follow laid-down procedures. Visitors who sit in their offices and appoint vice chancellor, provost and rectors based on friendship or political affiliation are making a mockery of the training of future leaders.
- iii. Staff unions must show relevant in their agitations. It is understandable that issues of funding, academic freedom and autonomy as well as condition of services are quite genuine to survival of the system providing infrastructure, building lecture rooms, laboratories, library, even employment and retention of qualified academic staff are also essential.
- iv. Finally, government must show understanding in dealing with trade unions whenever they make their demands. As trade unions, they cannot be passive to the welfare of their members. The idea of unjust sacking and dismissal of people, seizure of salary in the guise of no-work-no-pay rule, ejection from official quarters and proscription of unions should be discarded for meaningful collective bargaining.

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