

**Front Politics and Internal Democracy in National Protest Movement: A Study of the January 2012
Mass Action against Fuel Subsidy Removal in Kano, Nigeria**

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Abstract: The paper examined front politics and internal democracy in national protest movement with emphasis on the January, 2012 mass action against fuel subsidy removal in Kano. In doing so, it utilizes survey research techniques - specialize interview, questionnaire, and participant observation, to find out the reason why people participate in the protest, the bases that led to the formation of united fronts, how the front was managed, and also how it impacted on the allied members. The paper found that, anticipated economic hardships that may follow removal of subsidy from Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) as well as poverty were the factors that made people to take to the street to register their grievances. Arising from that, the paper suggest that, for a successful mass based popular action to be staged in a more autonomous and sustainable manner, an independent platform need to first of all be formed.

Keywords: *Front Politics, Fuel Subsidy Removal (FSR), Internal Democracy, Mass Action, and State*

1. Introduction

In most countries of the developing world, developmental policies that are not pro-poor coupled with the hard economic conditions accompanying them as well as the unreceptive attitude of the state towards any counterforce checking its excesses, have necessitated both labour union and their civil society allies to go beyond their narrow sectional issues and come together to promote issues of concern to the broader society. Corroborating this position, Beckman (2010:161) argues that, structural adjustment and neoliberal hub have undermined unions, undercutting rights. Membership is dwindling, and union allies in civil society are weak as well. Jointly, Beckman argued, they provide an ideological alternative to the hegemonic pretension of the neo-liberal positions and hold an alternative vision for 'national development'. In Nigeria, Oil Industry, as observed by Okey (2010: 115), has been a major contributor to Nigeria's economy and that is why over 80 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings come from this sector. In fact, since the discovery of oil in commercial quantity, Nigeria has been experiencing consistent increase in revenue earning except for the periods of oil glut, hence the emergence of oil occupying a place in Nigeria's politics. Corroborating this position, Ering and Akpan (2012: 2), observed that politics in Nigeria cannot be divorced from oil. This means that it remains the benchmark of Nigeria's socio-economic, education, foreign and defence policies.

However, as observed by Obono (2011: 7), while Oil remains the life blood of Nigeria's political economy and has made the country extremely rich over the decades, it has yet to significantly benefit its people. In other words, the crises of the Nigerian state, precipitated by high level of corruption and lack of transparency in the petroleum industry has created series of contestation between the state on one hand and the trade unions, communities and civil societies on the other. This necessitated the labour to form a coalition outside the realm of production to wider socio-economic issues in Nigeria. It is in line with this; therefore, the paper examines front politics within the context of the January 2012 anti subsidy mass action in Kano. The study also analyse the extent to which the aligning members were democratic during the protest?

2. Conceptual Clarifications

For the purpose of conceptual clarity, this paper viewed the following concepts as follows:

Front Politics and Internal Democracy: This study views front politics to mean the coming together of varied social groups such as labour unions, civil society organizations and individuals in pursuit of a common goal. In other words it is the management of differences in pursuit of a common agenda. Also, the paper defines internal democracy in terms of equal participation of members in matters pertaining to decisions and organization of a national protest movement.

Fuel Subsidy: Fuel Subsidy Removal (FSR) is taken to mean a policy of Nigeria's federal government that aimed at removing the percentage of money (subsidy) paid by government to importers of Petroleum Motor Spirit (PMS) in order to reduce its price than they would have otherwise, as against its policy of subsidy payment that helps cushion the effects of economic hardship of the generality of Nigerians through the reduction of the price of PMS.

Theoretical Explanation of Front Formation in a Movement Drive: There always exist assumptions and counter assumptions on what constitute a particular social phenomena. Affirming the preceding assertion, Manuel & Jennifer (2010: 23) posits that, front formation is an important component of organizing a movement because it is the building block to social change. It's further argued that the likelihood for the formation of front, it's when groups and individuals have shared common grievances, which may be social, economic, political, environmental and even religious or cultural. It also means that when individuals and groups join forces they provide a better chance of forging a common united front for the welfare of all. In another perspective, and from Marxist-Leninist point of view, united front is seen to represent the unity of opposites which encompasses various classes in league with each other on the basis of a definite common programme of struggle (Le Duan, 1970:34). According to this perspective, for a front to be formidable and achieve its programme, the leading role of working class must be fully asserted and that worker-peasants alliance is indispensable.

On the stages of development which the front formation tend to go through, Manuel & Jennifer (2010:27) provided that, fronts in a popular movement grow and change overtime and it mostly passes five different stages. In the first stage, organizations come together in recognition of a problem facing their communities and constituencies. At the second stage, organizations conduct outreach to potential allies and new members. The third stage is the formation of the front. The fourth stage is the operational stage which moves the front from collective thinking to collective action, while the fifth stage is the institutionalization of the united front, and throughout all the stages mentioned, organizers need to be consistent and disciplined in evaluating their efforts and determining next steps and phases. Moreover, of critical importance in front formation in a movement drive is the issue of internal democracy, and since front represent the coming together of varied social groups in pursuit of a common goal, the extent to which such groups are carried along should always be the focus of attention. This theoretical construct on front formation and internal democracy is important because it will help in giving this paper a guide to study the bases of front formation, and the extent to which whether such construction is democratic or not especially within the context of the January 2012 fuel subsidy removal mass action in Kano, Nigeria.

Background to Labour Civil Society Front in Nigeria: Nigeria's pre-independence period combined two important historical epochs - pre-colonial and the colonial periods. During the former, there were the existence of varied social groups who were more or less assertive and the boundary between them and the state is difficult to define, and whose evolution was what provided the foundational bases for the emergence of modern civic organizations Habu (2010:13). While the latter, colonial period, however, was a period which saw the birth of radical and confrontational civic associations due to the exploitative policies, such as taxation, indirect rule, etc, created and imposed by the colonial masters, coupled with their accompanying effects which severely succeeded in widening the gap between Nigeria's colonial government and the society at large, hence the emergence of such groups as the Cocoa Producers Associations (CPA), Nigerian Farmers Union (NFU), Nigerian Railway Union (NRU), National Union of Teachers (NUT), to mention a few, and their resort to coming together, as was the case in 1945, to check the excesses of the colonial state in defence and furtherance of the interest of their members and which ultimately earned Nigeria its independence in 1960.

While colonialism was very hostile and repressive to the growth and development of civil society organizations as elucidated above, the early post independence (1960s to 1970s) Nigerian state demonstrated similar attitude, though under the leadership of Nigerians. At independence in 1960, when nationalists struggle succeeded in sending out British colonial masters, the colonizers were replaced by what Jega (1993:99) called a band of political and economic wrecking crews who cared little about democracy and democratic values... rather merely motivated by their selfish interests of acquiring wealth than laying solid foundation for the emergence and sustenance of popular democracy in the country. According to Jega (1993), they even threatened the survival of the nation as one sovereign entity in their determined struggles to

acquire more power and wealth, or protect what they have already acquired. It is only the struggle of some concerned Nigerians through working class unions and professional associations that forced ruling class to concede some democratic reforms even though state power was used to advanced selfish ends and execute unpopular and undemocratic decisions. This means that it was against such kind of atmosphere, the civil society organizations resorted to work together to check the excesses of the state in order to ensure the entrenchment of democracy, equality and a just society for the benefit of all. Of particular mention, was the worker's alliance with students which led to the abrogation of the Anglo Nigerian Defence pact of 1962 (Habu, 2010:18).

In terms of state-society relations, scholars described the period of 1980s to mid 1990s as unprecedented in the history of post-colonial Nigeria. In the same vein, Osaghae (1996) stress that, it was a period which witnessed a boost in the suffering of people as it brought an end of free education, medical care and even subsidy in agriculture. This means that the period brought an end of the welfarist Nigerian state, and saw the implementation of IMF/Wold Bank doctored Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). While describing the crises of SAP, Adejumo (2000: 227) recounted that, at no time in Nigerian post-colonial history has the level and dimension of socio-economic crises been so profound as under the regime of Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Virtually, all the social sectors were hard hit, either entering a comatose state or decline substantially in performance. It was the harshness of the economic crises that led to the rebirth of struggles for democracy spear headed by the labour unions and their civil society allies ever in post colonial Nigeria.

With the return of civil rule in 1999, the country's democratic space opened and resulted in the rebirth of new labour regime having suffered two instances of dissolution of its national organs and appointment of state administrators to manage its affairs both in 1988 and 1994 under the duo of Babangida and Abacha regimes respectively, recounting this position, Muntaka (2011: 15) emphasize that, with the emergence of Adams Oshiomole after the national delegate conference of January 1999, the NLC came up with a programme called "New Beginning" with the sole aim of reviving labour movement to incorporate other segment of the civil society. It is within this spirit, labour sought to re-engage the civil society component of labour movement, so as to further forge a popular front in engaging the neo-liberal policies of the Nigerian state. As a result, Labour Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) was formed. Among the issues that occupies the minds of labour and civil society organizations, as observed in Yau (2012:14), include issues relating to the socio-economic wellbeing of Nigerians such as fuel subsidy removal. From the foregoing, it is clear that labour unions under the umbrella of NLC has been at the forefront of national protest movement providing not only a platform but also leading the process to check the excesses of the Nigerian state for the common good of all. Though, such effort is not without its overbearing costs as both the labour and its allied forces in the civil society have witnessed series of intimidation from the state authorities. In order to understand the background that led to the formation of mass based front during the January 2012, see the next section.

Background to Front Formation during the January 2012 Mass Action: Before presenting the data gathered from questionnaire and interview techniques respectively, it is important being a participant observer to provide the background that led to the front formation in Kano state so as to get a clear picture of the event that took place during the January, 2012 fuel subsidy removal protest in Kano. With the formal announcement made by the Federal Government of Nigeria through Petroleum Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPRA) over the removal of subsidy from fuel which came in to effect January 1st, 2012, and which consequently led to hike in the price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) from N65 to N144, and the subsequent resolution by the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), its affiliates, and pro-democracy civil society organizations around the country to stage the duo of strike and protest actions nationwide on the January 9th, 2012 until FGN reverses its position of removing the subsidy, in Kano, the protest action begun even before the one scheduled nationwide when student union leaders from Bayero University, Kano strategized and mobilizes their fellow comrades across the National Association of Kano State Students (NAKSS) and other higher institutions of learning in the state metropolis to register their disapproval over ill-conceived policy of subsidy removal.

Moreover, the students, on January 5th, 2012, in company of large crowd of youth and some civil groups took to the street in an orderly and peaceful manner chanting anti subsidy slogans from B.U.K old site to Kofar Gadon Kaya up to Silver Jubilee where they occupy the city centre and named it after the famous Egyptian

“Tahrir Square”. The students outing was well planned and coordinated with committees formed to handle mobilization, strategy, social media, etc, and has received the attention of international media such as Aljazeera to the extent that they held the city to a standstill, and spent the whole day at the Square up to 3am midnight when security operatives under Kano state government’s order brutalized them and destroyed their cars. Consequently, under the leadership of Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU), B.U.K chapter, the students and civil society groups in the state came out the following day in solidarity and marched to the Police Commissioner’s Office at Bompai Quarters to register their dissatisfaction with what happened to their students and demand immediate repair of the vehicle. It was after the meeting with Kano state Police Commissioner, the groups (ASUU, Students, CSOs and individuals) were told to attend a preparation meeting at NLC Secretariat, Katsina road, Kano, by 4pm, purposely to join other forces to form a united front and strategize ahead of the then upcoming nationwide strike and protest actions so that Kano’s outing will be done in an orderly and peaceful manner.

Moreover, and based on the data gathered, 100% of the 90 respondents administered with questionnaire believe that in addition to people’s shared grievances resulting from their past experiences of untold hardship with hikes in fuel pump price coupled with government’s anti-poor policies such as removal of subsidy from fuel pump price, the need to forge a united and formidable front under one umbrella was what provided a common ground for individuals and organizations to buy in to the idea of forging together under NLC Kano chapter, hence their resort to united front that will serve as an avenue for them to express their grievances against the Federal Government of Nigeria and its leadership. Similarly, and while agreeing with the above, 100% of the 12 respondents interviewed using specialized interview technique asserted further that, in spite of the different constituencies which the allied social groups represent, their lack of confidence on government to deliver on its so called palliative measures was also a contributing factor that necessitate the formation of the front under the leadership of Kano State chapter of the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC).

Management of the January 2012 Popular Front: Based on the data collected using questionnaire, 61% of the 90 respondents believed that, to some extent, allied groups and individuals were carried along in the planning and organization of the protest, while 39% argued that only a select few groups and individuals were considered relevant in the discussion of issues pertaining the protest. This means that, while there was not any election which took place to determine the leadership of the mass action to any of the allied forces, more than half of the 90 questionnaire respondents believe issues were openly deliberated and decisions reached. Similarly, the 12 respondents interviewed corroborated the above assertion by adding that, the protest was coordinated because committees such as the Joint Action, Entertainment, Mobilization and Contact, Media and Publicity, among others, were created to ensure a hitch free protest action, and nomination of individuals and organizations were made to form the membership of those committees, even though such nominations were done by NLC and a select few groups rather than subjecting it to voting for the joint action committee which is the general assembly of the allied groups to decide. It is this kind of committee system that majority of the respondents (61%) saw as what brought democracy in to the movement.

However, as a participant observer, and even though majority of the respondents of this study (102) considered the united front as to some extent democratic as presented above, there were many undemocratic practices and high handedness by few of the allied groups who bestow unto themselves the power to decide on what to be done and how, and most times deliberately alter with the decisions taken during general meetings against the wishes of the majority. Of particular example, was when the allied groups during most of their general meetings decided on the routes to follow and the places to converge, and who to address them, however, some groups, particularly leadership of NLC Kano acted otherwise, and that made participants of the protest particularly students and some civil associations to bitterly complain and on a number of time threatened to withdraw from the popular front. Moreover, such dictatorial attitude happened in almost every day’s outing of the protest with the first day being the day the allied forces decided to go to silver jubilee, named “Tahrir Square”, but were diverted to race course by the NLC and some of its affiliates in the state. In the subsequent days, groups such as NLC, ASUU, COESU became under pressure by students and some civil groups such as Centre for Information Technology and development (CITAD), United Actions for Democracy (UAD), Advocacy Nigeria (AN), etc, who were dissatisfied with how NLC dominate everything pertaining to

the protest, in attempt to re-occupy “Tahrir Square” but were short changed and diverted to places such as Kofar Naisa and Filin Dantata along Katsina road, in Kano.

3. Results

Data Presentation and Analyses: A total of seven (7) questions were administered on the 90 respondents interviewed using questionnaire, while a separate set of seven (7) questions were administered on twelve (12) respondents using specialized interview technique. Below is the presentation and analyses of the data collected as well as discussion of findings of the study.

Table 1: Respondent’s Participation during the January, 2012 Protest against Fuel Subsidy Removal in Kano

Participation	No. of respondents	%
Yes	66	73
No	24	27
Total	90	100%

Source (Questionnaire 2014)

The table shows that, out of the 90 respondents interviewed using questionnaire, 73% participated in the January, 2012 mass action while 27% did not. This indicates that majority of the respondents have participated in the protest action and have the tendency of making the study to have an authentic account of the mass outing in Kano.

Table 2: Reasons for People’s Participation in the Protest

Reason for Participation	No. of Respondents	%
Anticipated economic hardship	55	61
Poverty	26	29
Political opposition	4	4
Corruption	5	6
Total	90	100%

Source (Questionnaire 2014)

The table shows that 61% of the questionnaire respondents considered people’s anticipation of economic hardship as the factor which prompted the generality of the populace in Kano to participate in the January, 2012 mass action, 29% said poverty, 4% argued that it was political opposition – meaning the protest was staged by followers of the main opposition political party, the ANPP, in the state with the sole aim of hiding under the banner of federal government’s policy of fuel subsidy removal to undermine political leadership in the state, while the other 6% respondents asserts that it was because of the endemic corruption in the oil industry and governance system of the country that made people to protest against government’s attempt to remove subsidy in fuel. Based on the above, it means that the protest action was a product of people’s dissatisfaction with the untold hardship they have been experiencing with hikes in the prices of fuel coupled with the endemic corruption going on in the oil sector and governance process of the country. Similarly, 100% of the 12 respondents interviewed using specialized interview added that, it was because of the bitter experiences people had in the past that they decided to rally around Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) and took to the street to express their disapproval of government’s intention to remove subsidy from oil. This also means that shared experiences of untold economic hardships, corruption in governance, as well as the anticipated economic hardship that may follow from the removal of fuel subsidy, were what constitute the factors that necessitate people to take to the street in Kano.

In the same vein, and from participant observer’s point of view, it is also important to note that the mass outing was also necessitated by government’s inability to provide economic empowerment opportunities for the teeming unemployed youth in the state in order to earn a living, coupled with lack trust on government to implement its palliative measures to cushion the hardship that may follow. In other words, people have lost confidence in government because of its failure to provide enabling environment for the youth to earn a

living. Also, an unprecedented amount of solidarity from the general public in terms of supplying the mass action participants with foods and bags of pure water, etc, has further motivated them to take to the street to register their disapproval with government’s intention to remove subsidy from fuel.

Table 3: The Strategies Used In Mobilizing Resources

Strategies Used	No. of Respondents	%
Organizational donations	44	49
Individual donations	46	51
External donors	0	0
Others	0	0
Total	90	100%

Source (Questionnaire 2014)

Out of the 90 respondents administered with questionnaires, 49% said organizations voluntarily contributed materials and mobilized people, 51% said it was the individual voluntary donations and personal sacrifice both in terms of mobilizing people and materials, that made January, 2012 mass outing against fuel subsidy removal unique , while none of the respondents agreed with funding from external donors. This means that January, 2012 mass action was internally funded by the individuals and allied groups who participated without recourse to support from external donor institutions. Similarly, 100% of the 12 respondents interviewed using specialized interview added further that, while there were donations from organizations and individuals alike, other medium such as social and broadcasting media also help in the mobilization process having noted that several announcements and interactive discussions were made in radio houses such as Freedom Radio and Rahama Radio respectively, by the leadership of the Joint Action Committee of the protest, giving people direction and detailing them with the agenda of each day’s outing. They also added that, there was a committee on social media which mobilized people using facebook and twitter sites. This means that in addition to the voluntary organizational and individual donations, usage of other medium such as social and broadcasting media also form part of the strategy used in the mobilization process. Similarly, as a participant observer, it is also good to note that mobilizing people became somewhat easy because people were already mobilized having realized the hardship that may follow subsidy removal from fuel. The above mediums were used to further re-mobilize the general public.

Discussion of Findings of the Study: In view of the information gathered from the findings of this study as presented in the section of presentation and analyses of data, the study shows that factors such as people’s bitter experiences in the past caused by hikes in the price of fuel, as well as poverty and high rate of corruption in the country, are what made most people to participate in the January, 2012 mass action in Kano. Furthermore, on the bases that led to the formation of the front, the research findings prove that it is because already people were aggrieved, and are only looking for medium to express their dissatisfactions coupled with the realization of the importance of forging together under one umbrella, were what provides bases for the front formation during the protest. While commenting on the importance of front in a movement derives, Manuel & Jennifer (2010: 23) posited that, front formation is an important component of organizing a movement because it is the building block to social change. With front formed, organizations can move from being disconnected social change agents, to becoming “social movement organizations” connected through a shared vision and in commitment to change.

Moreover, the research findings also noted that the front used several strategies such as voluntary organizational and individual donations to gather resources both material and personnel, other strategies used include social and broadcasting media in terms of mobilizing and giving direction to individuals and organizations participating in the protest. While commenting on whether the protest received funding from external donors, one of the respondents asserts that:

No any external funding, all funds were internally mobilized, what we witnessed was not just resource mobilization in terms of naira but a commitment of people in terms of sacrifice because nobody was paid anything, people trek and travel from long distance kilometres. Its personnel and organizational sacrifice that

led to the success of the protest action, and people share food items and water freely, with some volunteering their vehicles to convey people, and these are internal resources that are organic to the people (Interview 2014).

However, as an observer, it is important to note that soon after NLC Kano was admitted into the front, everything became elitist. Even the so called participation and consultation which the respondents kept hammering on, not all the groups were given the chance because it was made purely an elitist affair, with a select few dominating meetings and discussions. This is to say that, there were accusations, complains and hot exchanges between the participating groups and the leadership of the front on one hand, and within the groups on the other, and most particularly students and some civil society organizations, who started the protest even before its commencement nationwide, over the way and manner through which decisions taken at the general meetings were tempered by a select few groups who constitute the joint action committee of the whole protest. In fact, students from Bayero University, Kano and other higher institutions of learning across the state metropolis felt sidelined during the protest to the extent that they had to revolt before they were accorded with the needed recognition they deserved. Notwithstanding, such kind of practices severely undermined the so called internal democracy which the respondents kept hammering on. However, because participants are fighting a course they strongly believed in, hence their decision to continue with the protest. Aside from disagreements between the allied forces and the leadership of the front, there were also threats of impeachment particularly by the Senate of National Association of Kano State Students (NAKSS) to its then National President over a photograph circulating via social media which saw him and some of his executive members at Government House, Kano collecting brown envelop, while we were at Tahrir square protesting. Kano Students felt embarrassed, hence the impeachment threats which later prove abortive because of the influence he has over some of the NAKSS Senators.

There were also other instances where some respected members of the joint action committee were said to have attended meetings at the Kano State Government House with no details of what happened not to even talk of who authorize them to attend such meetings. It is also important to note that, the purpose of democracy is to ensure sustainability, and unfortunately for the front when NLC national body withdrew itself, it put the entire protest in to a state of unpredictableness. Based on this and more, it became difficult for one to say that the mass based front was democratic because such kind of undemocratic practices have undermined the integrity of the process. On the impact of the front on the allied members, the study found that, it has helped immensely in facilitating communications and contacts between and among the varied professional groups, civil associations, coalitions and networks that formed the movement, it also led not only to lasting working relationship among the varied groups but also formation and reawakening of several networks and coalitions such as United Front for Good Governance, etc. In concluding the discussion of this section, it is clear for one to assert that the management of the January, 2012 mass action in Kano was nothing other than an elitist affair where some groups, who were not earlier part of the initial mass outing, crafted an idea of forming a grand coalition and assumed mantle of its leadership and decided to do what they so wishes.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, and in an attempt to offer solution to the challenges and problems encountered during the January, 2012 fuel subsidy removal mass action in Kano, as well as propose some action steps that can guide future occurrences of similar outing, the study provide recommendations as follows:

- There has to be an independent platform that will serve as an umbrella body for all individuals and civil groups including labour and professional associations rather than carrying out such mass movement under the Nigeria Labour Congress. The secretariat of the committee should also be determined to enable it function free from the influence of any aligning individuals or groups.
- In order to address the problem of exclusion of allied groups in matters that affect the organization and planning of the front, a general committee on planning and coordination should be inaugurated and such committee should comprise of all individuals and varied allied groups. Also, Sub committees should also be formed around areas such as mobilization and publicity, enlightenment, social media, fundraising, first aid, legal aid, crowd control, security and intelligence as well as research and documentation. These sub committees should each be saddled with the responsibility of proposing plan of action that will guide the front within the context of their respective areas, and

should be accountable to the general committee on planning and coordination being the general assembly of all allied members.

- All matters that pertains the popular front and or the sub committees should be deliberated and agreed upon before the general committee on planning and coordination.
- Resource and mobilization committee should device a strategy that will further motivate all the aligning members both individual and organizational to contribute to the process in their own way.
- The united front should during any protest be convening daily evaluative meeting to assess each day's outing of the popular action in order to build a more formidable front.
- In order to continuously win the heart of the society, the general assembly of the front should be able to keep the general public informed of any development concerning the popular movement, and the decision of the planning committee on the various routes to follow.

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