

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT OF NIGERIA (FGN)-ACADEMIC STAFF UNION OF UNIVERSITIES (ASUU) IMBROGLIO: INTERROGATING THE ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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PROTOCOLS

In adopting the protocols already established, I wish to specifically thank Dr. Kabiru Mohammed, Provost, Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa for being thoughtful to do a lecture to commemorate the birth day of Dr. Salisu Ogbo Usman, our vibrant boss. The choice of the topic, FGN-ASUU Imbroglia: Interrogating the issues and the way forward is auspicious and sober reflecting considering drawbacks and laissez-faire attitudes exhibited by concerned parties and stakeholders.

Introduction

Let me start by identifying with the celebrant, Dr. Salisu Ogbo Usman for attaining the golden age of 50 years today. I salute your beloved wife for her patience and resilience in the struggle to attain this milestone. It has not been a smooth sail. It is being a journey through rough edges. I will also like to recognize Shamsudeen (Prof) and his other siblings for being worthy children on whom you have absolute confidence and pride. I profusely appreciate your progenitors, Mallam and Mallama Usman of Angwa – Ogebe.

It gladdens my heart that I am asked to share my thoughts on the subject that has been ever green in the hearts of Nigerians. The subject of ASUU's demands needs to be interrogated especially in the circumstance of the prevailing decadence in the university campuses and the concomitant appalling wages of the Lecturers.

THE SLAVE AND THE SLAVE MASTER: A METAPHOR OF ASUU-FGN SQUID GAME

In the early 15th century, approximately five hundred years ago, close to five hundred able bodied Africans were taken into the Caribbean as slaves to work in the sugarcane plantation farms. These slaves were captured forcefully and sold by their fellow Africans to the Europeans. While in slavery they were chained, denied wearing of cloths, humiliated, denounced and annihilated. They worked laboriously in the plantation farms with their mouths padlocked. This trade was the most inhuman and inconsiderate aspect of European history. As far as the Europeans were concerned Africans had no value and relevance despite their enormous productivity in the plantation farms. As slaves they could do nothing. They possessed nothing. They were the property of their European masters. When you juxtapose the scenario of the lives of the slaves in the 15th century and that of ASUU Members in the 21st century, there is a clear semblance and correlation.

The metaphor of slave and slave master can be inferred in the condominium relationship between FGN-ASUU. To become a Professor in any Nigerian university, the individual will have to commence a tortuous journey from the minimum requirement of Assistant Lecturer with a PhD degree through the ranks to professorship. The trainings endowed them with extensive intellect for the overall development of Nigeria. The intellectual endowment of a professor makes him suitable for the kind of services required by the Nigerian leaders (slave masters). They are therefore required to provide intellectual skills that will impact on the nation's economy with concomitant low wage as it were during the slave era. Just like the slave masters were attracted by the able-bodied Africans drawn into their plantation farms with poor wages and filthy environment, so is the situation with the Nigerian University Teachers who are daily exploited, undermined, devalued and have to struggle for living wages and revitalized infrastructure to exercise their intellectual prowess. The African slaves that were transported to the Caribbean, America and West Indies were the manpower that set the pace for British and American industrialization.

Recall Kunta Kinte, the courageous, resilient, skilled, educated and clever Mandinka-Gambian born warrior who was enslaved and taken to America and never relinquished his dream of returning to homeland and never stopped challenging the slaves masters for their cruelty and fought for his freedom. It is in the same way that the Nigerian University Teachers' Union are challenging their masters by agitating for improved welfare, an offensive that led their masters to stop their meager slave wages. Just like the famous Lord Chief Justice Mansfield's judgment of 1772 that declared slave and slavery illegal and void and all slaves engaged in the English plantation farms set free,

so shall the Nigerian University Teachers be set free from bondage and enslavement of their intellectual property. I wish to thank Rt.Hon. Femi Gbajabamila, The Speaker of the House of Representatives whose intervention in brokering the feud between ASUU and her Slave Masters is akin to the famous Lord Mansfield Judgment of 1772.

Distinguished audience, permit me to do a rundown of labour agitation in Nigeria as far back as the early 20th century. Serious industrial dispute was recorded in 1912 arising from conflict of interest as regards wages and improved working condition. In 1929, there was the famous Aba women riot. It was a general protest by women against alien and inhuman taxation as introduced by the colonial masters. In 1938, there was the railway workers' agitation against the poor working condition and increase in wage. In 1941, the civil service union of Nigeria protested against high cost of living and demanded for war bonus. In 1945, there was a general strike of the civil servants of Nigeria as a result of unwillingness of the colonial regime to honor its obligation and agreement which was made in 1941.

The 1947 general strike by the employees of the United African Company (UAC) was as a result of the shooting by armed colonial forces against defenseless workers of UAC. The poor working condition of the Coal Miners at the Coal Mine in Enugu trumped up Miners' protest in 1949 with devastating causality arising from reprisal shootings. Not minding the Enugu blood bath of 1949, the Coal Miners in 1950 continued their agitation as their working conditions and wages kept deteriorating and not improved.

The 1959 Coal Miners' strike was carefully organized but was punctuated by the colonial regime with the offer of ten pounds to any worker who refused to join the strike. In 1964, there was yet another strike as a result of the non-obligation of the revised salary structure as negotiated between the United Labour Union and the Colonial regime. This strike was well planned as streets in Lagos were held hostage. In the event, labour leaders were arrested and tortured in their various cells of detention. The ugly development of 1964 led to the formation of National Association of University Teachers in 1965.

ASUU AND INCESSANT STRIKE IN PERSPECTIVE

The National Association of University Teachers was formed in 1965 as a response to the general labour strike against the Federal Government over revised salary structure. By 1978, the National Association of University Teachers was re-christened Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). This association caters only for Federal and State Universities Lecturers. ASUU assumed a formidable and active trade union that struggled vehemently for the survival of university system in Nigeria.

The agitations of the union for better conditions of service to its members and the autonomy of the university system have being its cardinal focus. Between 1988 and 1992, ASUU was proscribed twice as a result of protest over poor working condition and the autonomy of the universities. In 1994 and 1996 during the regime of Gen. Sani Abacha, ASUU embarked on strike for more than one year over the dilapidating university system and poor remuneration for its workers and the dismissal of its members. In 1999, the Union embarked on another strike that lasted five months. In 2001, the Union also went on strike for three months. In 2002, the union embarked on strike that lasted for two weeks. In 2003, the union went on six months strike. In 2005, ASUU embarked on two weeks strike. In 2006, the union proceeded on three days warning strike. In 2007, ASUU went on an industrial action for three months. In 2008, the union embarked on a one week 'warning strike' to press home their demands, including reinstatement of forty-nine lecturers dismissed from the University of Ilorin in 1998.

In 2009, the union also went on indefinite strike for four months for a revised salary and better working condition. In 2010, the universities in the south east states of Nigeria went on five months strike to press home their demands for adequate funding and better working condition and the implementation of the ASUU-FGN Agreement of 2009. The noncompliance of the Federal Government to the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding including the issue of removal of oil subsidy led to industrial action that lasted fifty-nine days. Again on 30th August, 2012, ASUU went on a 'warning' strike. On the 1st of July, 2013, the union went on five months strike that really devastated the nation.

Often times, when ASUU embarks on strike action, other sister unions on the campuses like SSANU, NASU and NAATS will also join the action. In 2017, the union embarked on a one month strike action. In 2018, the union declared a three month strike action. In 2019, the union embarked on strike action that lasted for three months. In 2020, the

union also embarked on strike that lasted for nine months. In 2022, the union also embarked on strike action that lasted for eight months.

The reasons for the frequent strike action embarked upon by ASUU have being fair wages, university autonomy, adequate funding, provision of adequate learning environment, equipment, implementation of the provisions of the 2014 Pension Reform Act, introduction of University Transparency Accountability Solution (UTAS) as against the imposed IPPIS. For the purpose of this lecture, I shall be discussing some of the lingering issues of ASUU that have become albatross in the country.

ASUU: THE LINGERING ISSUES

The above, chronicles the several times ASUU had embarked on strike action. It is a demonstration of the lackadaisical approaches by the parties involved in sanitizing the nation's education sector. It is therefore pertinent to identify the major lingering issues that have continually engendered strike action in our university system.

- **Funding for Revitalization of Public Universities:** It is a public knowledge that public universities in Nigeria have become an eye sore. The state of infrastructure decadence is astronomical. Lecture halls and hostels are in terrible state of disrepair. Laboratories are mere empty halls of expired chemicals and reagents. Anatomy laboratories of the medical students are no longer capable of preserving Cadaver for the training of medical students. What you have in most public medical colleges for training of medical students are dried skeletons of human remains not enough to produce basic medical graduates.

ASUU decried this decadence and the federal government saw the need to salvage the system from imminent collapse. In this guise, the government entered into an understanding with the union to ameliorate the situation in 2009. It sets up the NEEDS Assessment Committee that came up with the report that federal government would require the sum of 1.3 Trillion Naira to fix the public universities as documented in the 2013 Memorandum of Understanding. The 1.3 trillion naira was to be released in annual tranches of N200 billion in 2013 and N220 billion each year for the period 2014 to 2018. The government only showed commitment to the MoU by releasing only N200 billion in 2014, N20 billion in 2019 and N30 billion in 2021. This development shows that the government has repudiated the MoU of 2013.

- **Earned Academic Allowance:** It is an allowance that is peculiar to Academic. It borders on teaching and research services, postgraduate teaching, theses supervision, excess work load, honoraria for External Examination, post graduate grant, external assessment for Associate Professors / Professors, call duty, hazard, responsibility, teaching practice, industrial supervision, and field trip. This was contained in 2009 Agreement and 2013 renegotiated agreement. Government promised to release the accumulated sum of N40 billion and further mainstream it in the annual budget. This was not captured in any budget as promised.
- **Visitation Panels:** The University Miscellaneous Act prescribed mechanism to effectively check corruption in our university system. It is the responsibility of the federal government to set up visitation panels once in every five years to check the activities of Councils, Vice Chancellors and other Management Staff. The Federal Government has refused to obligate this responsibility and watched over some Vice Chancellors wreck the universities with abandonment. ASUU – Federal Government Agreement was signed to curb this menace of corruption as perpetuated and being perpetuated by some Vice Chancellors and University Councils.

The Federal Government has failed in this direction of setting up visitation panels to our universities to curb incessant sleaze within the system as perceived by the Federal Government. For example, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, University of Abuja and many other Universities have had visitation panels to their institutions some ten and nine years ago(2010 and 2011 respectively). The reports and white paper of these almost twenty years ago visitation panels have not being implemented. In the last one and a half years, the Federal Government set up visitation panels to the former President Goodluck Jonathan established universities including Federal University Lokoja. As we speak, the reports of the visitation panels have not being released. So, how does Federal Government wants to check the activities of the Vice Chancellors and their Councils?

- **Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) and University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS):** This is the outcome of the introduction of Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) to the university payment platform. IPPIS is responsible for payment of salaries and wages directly to government employee's bank account with appropriate deductions and remittances of 3rd party payments. This payment platform has

being discovered by ASUU to be fraudulent and inconsistent with the intent of government, which is to curb financial leakages.

Remember Ahmed Idris, former Accountant –General of the Federation and the custodian of IPPIS who was arraigned by EFCC over N109 billion fraud charges. The union also sees this payment platform as not consistent with the university autonomy and academic freedom provision as contained in chapter 5.0 sections a, b & iii of the 2009 Agreement and 2013 renegotiated Agreement including the 2020 Memorandum of Action. ASUU was not comfortable with this payment platform and through consultations with government and consistent agitation; the union developed its own payment platform, UTAS, taking into cognizance anti-fraud mechanism. UTAS was subjected to several integrity tests by Nigeria Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) and at each occasion, the payment platform was reported to have failed integrity test including the IPPIS.

INCESSANT ASUU STRIKE AND THE DANGER IT POTENDS FOR NIGERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM

In the last 23 years, ASUU has embarked on strike action 16 times. It can be safely said that since the return to democracy in 1999, public universities have been shut down for four years. It takes a normal Bachelor degree programme four years to complete. The implication of these frequent strike action by ASUU and other unions in the university has not contributed anything good to the educational growth of the country.

The role of universities in human capital development, research and information and communication technology and innovation cannot be undermined. Education is critical in national development and so, it requires huge investment to produce highly skilled personnel in all sectors of our national life. If that sector is neglected by government and the people, and ASUU's incessant industrial action is not checked, the nation's education sector may be heading towards comatose and by implication national catastrophe. I therefore make bold to highlight some imminent danger that awaits Nigeria in the event that the government and ASUU continue in this squid game:

- **Distortion in Academic Calendar:** Distortion of academic calendar serves as disincentive to studious students. It means loss of study and research time by students and staff thereby contributing enormously to low quality graduates from our universities. Abandonment of studies negatively affects learning capabilities. Distortion in academic calendar Prolongs study period and hampers academic activities in government owned universities. Programs that should run for four years now take students to run for between six and seven years,

while the normal six and seven years programs now run for nine and ten years. This has given rise to depression and mental illness among our students. Common, this is criminal!! This is the reason that some privileged Nigerians send their children to private universities within and outside the country.

- **Inconsistent Learning Process:** Incessant closure of our universities has contributed to irregular learning mode and process. Memories of staff and students are normally lost if learning is not continually activated. In the last 23 years, our public universities have had inconsistent learning process and mode with students finding it difficult to cope with studies abandoned over a period of time. The resultant effect of inconsistent learning process includes: examination malpractice, certificate forgery, gangsterism, prostitution, cultism and other social vices. All of these have grave consequence on the moral rejuvenation and socio-political and economic development of Nigerians and Nigeria.
- **Demotivation:** Incessant strike action discourages students from continuing their studies. It also discourages even struggling parents who toiled tooth and nail to send their children to universities with an idea of a time bound completion period. Frequent strike action engenders decline in quality university education in our public universities. At resumption from strike, lectures are rushed, continuous assessments and tests are done abruptly, examinations are written with speed, and results are computed and presented at short period. All of this process cumulatively affect students and lecturers performance rate.
- **Increased Financial Cost:** The cost implication of continuous strike action by ASUU is the huge costs burden on the students, parents and administration of the universities. For example, all fees paid while the university was in session would have been exhausted for servicing infrastructure like provision of water, electricity and sanitation. This is because while the union is on strike, the universities are not shut down. It is only lectures that are suspended all other services are being rendered unabated. Administration of the university is a continuum; its activities are never suspended even in the circumstance of union strike. The university, abinitio, is on a tripod of Teaching, Research and Community Development. On the side of the students and parents, it is enormous burden of responsibility. Renewal of accommodation rents for those off campus residents, and payments of all outstanding fees incidental to the facilities in rent are a burden too much for the students and parents to bear especially in the circumstance of the precariousness of the nation's economy.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is enough blame to go around, but this paper has not set out to address responsibilities, but to chart pathways to END ASUU STRIKE FOREVER! It is apparent that university education in Nigeria is heading towards doldrums as a result of financial predicament. I wish therefore, to proffer a way forward from this bleak future of our education system.

- Financial Down Turn. Financing university education in Nigeria is being matched with other competing sectors of the economy. The concurrence status of education and its financing modes as contained in the constitution of Nigeria, 1999 as amended are being threatened by the nation's financial precariousness. In the same vain, if Nigeria is to improve upon her economy with determination and sincerity of purpose, the current ASUU's demands and funding requirements are germane and should be appraised by government given the various financing options to ensure sustainability in the public universities.

Most developing nations who in the last ten years were spending between 1 and 2 percent of their budgets on education now spend between 4, 5 and 6 percent. While those that spent less than 10 percent of their annual budgets in the last ten years are now spending between 15, 20 and 25 percent of their budget on education. Nigeria must be able to adopt the funding methods of these developing nations to save her public universities.

Indeed in the last seven years of Buhari's administration, the government has spent a total of 4.68 trillion naira on education. This is not up to UNESCO recommendation of up to 15-20 percent of annual budget to public education. A breakdown of allocation to education in the last seven years of Buhari's Administration shows:

In 2016, the Nigerian budget for education was 7.9%. In 2017, it was 6.1%. In 2018, it was 7.1%. In 2019, it was 8.4%. In 2020, it was 6.5%. In 2021, it was 5.6%. In 2022 it is 5.4%. This is a clear indication that Nigeria education sector is struggling to survive. It is true that the reality of today's public finance challenge is universal. It is also true that there are competing needs that government must address. It is also true that allocation of efficiency of government resources has integrity question in Nigeria. In whichever way the thought goes, it is incumbent that certain essential sector like education must be given a priority.

- The time has come for government to seek appropriate means of recruitment of academics. The public universities are grossly bereft of qualified academics with requisite doctoral certificates. Many programs have been established over the years without corresponding manpower. The current practice of embargo on employment of academic staff in our universities should be stopped. University system is a peculiar institution that desires continuous exchange of ideas, research collaboration and peer review mechanism. It is not a civil service structure that is guided by public service rules that are imperialistic in thought and capitalistic in action. Universities should be allowed the autonomy of recruiting its staff as the needs arise. The current system where universities make do with what is available in terms of manpower requirements, for teaching and research is not tenable in a healthy climate.

Most Nigerian universities today cannot boast of foreign scholars on their employment profiles. Nigerian universities are constrained to local contents only as it were. So, the concept of universality of scholarship and global visibility of Nigerian universities will continue to be an illusion if the present status quo is maintained. Do we not worry that out of the 30,000 universities in the world today 1,799 were qualified for 2023 global ranking by the Times Higher Education (THE), a recognized global ranking platform. University of Lagos came 478 in the ranking metrics. That is the only university in Nigeria that satisfied the calibrated ranking metrics of Teaching, Research, Knowledge transfer and international outlook. The top five are Oxford, Harvard, Cambridge, Stanford and MIT.

- Government should take a second look at the payment platform called IPPIS. As integrated as the platform appears, there seems to be gaps in terms of capturing the peculiarities of university teachers. While government has acceded to the obvious flaws inherent in the IPPIS payment platform, there should be concerted efforts to assimilate the grey areas as enunciated in the ASUU developed UTAS. After all, government herself recognized that all the payment platforms including IPPIS failed NITDA's integrity test, but acknowledged ASUU's UTAS as taking the lead in terms of credibility, acceptability and integrity. Government should be bold to harness all the available payment platforms and adopt a workable platform that will be in the interest of Nigeria.
- Revitalization Fund. Government had intended to revitalize public universities through her NEEDS Assessment Committee's report of 2013 which quantified the total sum of 1.3 Trillion naira required. Out of this amount, government

could only release 200 billion naira in 2013, 20 billion naira in 2019 and 30 billion naira in 2021. Now that Nigeria is insolvent, releasing the balance will amount to beating a dead horse.

Here we are confronted with the reality of the country's insolvency and the survival of public universities. This development requires the intervention of the Government, Parents and University Councils. It will amount to a complete mirage and utopia for ASUU to insist that government should not introduce tuition fee. There is no free lunch in education, not even in Free Town. The current trend where school charges oscillate between 20,000 to 50,000 naira depending on the university is not realistic. As we speak, students still pay the sum of 90 naira as accommodation charge. While across the street a room of accommodation is between 50,000 and 60,000 naira.

- ASUU should have a re-think and re-evaluate her stance on the issue of tuition fee. Parents must show understanding that Nigeria is broke and can no longer fund education. As long as tuition fee is free in public universities, the problem of revitalization of infrastructure will persist. Universities should re-invigorate their research capacities and address their research focus on problem solving and patency of research products. University administration should open new vistas of alternative source of funding. TETFund allocation to universities should be increased by 100 percent. The sole idea of TETFund is to fund tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the agency has become a cash cow for political leaders and their cronies, thereby abdicating the philosophy and objectives of its establishment.
- The magnitude of financial sleaze in public institutions including public universities is considerably alarming and must be stopped. There are litanies of financial recklessness, revenue leakages, procurement frauds, contracts scams and other miscellaneous corrupt practices in public universities. The system must purge itself of corrupt elements and sanitize the expenditure profile of the universities to save resources for the system. University Councils should understand their roles of sourcing for funds for the universities but not to see their membership of Governing Council as avenue to wreck the system. University Anti-Corruption Transparency Unit should be responsive in the discharge of their duties to curb waste in administration, missed priority and lack of allocative efficiency.

- There is need for ASUU to change tactics. ASUU should inject some dynamism and new ideas in her approaches to issues of the state of the universities and their welfare. For the past 45 years, ASUU has adopted the same strategy of agitation for welfare of its members and the state of the universities and the nation. This strategy has not worked. You cannot be doing the same thing for several years and expect to get different result. It is time to change strategy and realign with the reality of our time. There is a global economic pandemic and all segments must adjust to meet with the global reality. The current war between Russia and Ukraine is having a devastating toll on the world economy. We have not seen the end. It is only the dead have seen the end of conflict.
- Government has to learn to keep to bargains and meet up with their obligations. Agreements entered with ASUU must be kept. In International Law, there is the principle of ***Pacta Sunct Servanda*** (Agreement must be kept) in which case, all international agreements are binding or enforceable. Nigeria is a signatory to this international labour law which allows for collective bargaining and respect to all agreements reached. The strength of a nation lies on her integrity. A nation that lacks integrity will lack trust in international relationship. Nigeria must learn to honour her side of bargains.
- ASUU must reexamine her membership and purge itself of untoward elements. It should engage in peer review mechanism. At the end of every semester lecturers must be assessed on lecture attendance, teaching pedagogy and workloads. Are lecturers still doing tutorials for their students? Are the examination questions and marking schemes moderated by external examiners as required? ASUU must curb maximally sexual harassment among its members. Members of ASUU must be discouraged from engaging in cultism, plagiarism, illegal extortion, sales of Handouts and publication of texts that are not peer reviewed. If ASUU must maintain its integrity it must approach equity with clean hands.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Sir, much as I enunciated in the body of the paper, let me reiterate that government exists to serve the people. Without the people, government cannot exist. There is need to broaden our horizon beyond the scope that we have been made to understand by government. The state has obligation to provide citizens quality, affordable and equitable education. Article 18 of the 1999 Constitution as amended is unambiguous that government shall eradicate illiteracy and provide free and compulsory and universal primary education, free secondary education, free university education and free adult literacy programme. In the circumstance of the provision above, can we safely say that the government has fulfilled its obligation?

Mr. Chairman Sir, let me conclude with the words of my Teacher, Prof. Jibrin Ibrahim: 'Currently, over 15 million Nigerians of school going age have no access to primary education. Millions of others who are from the poor families have no access to quality education and the result is that today we are in class warfare as the precariat procure weapons and engage in violence, insurgency, mass kidnapping and separatist warfare against the state and the people. ASUU is not the problem. We have a collective guilt of refusal to provide for the children of the masses and they are now coming after us. End the strike, broaden the debate and think of inclusive solutions'.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished Celebrant, members of the audience I appreciate your listening. Thank you.

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