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THE POLITICS OF FUEL SUBSIDY, POPULIST RESISTANCE AND ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

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Simon Odey Ering^α & Felix U. Akpan^σ

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I. INTRODUCTION

This essay comes from the spirited efforts to come to terms with one of the vexed paradoxes of the Nigerian state: Fuel subsidy. In other words, the attempt of the writers is to further the critical discourse on the ugly side of Nigeria's political life.

To anyone remotely acquainted with Nigerian politics, oil resources occupy the prominent place in power politics. The struggle for power is clearly a struggle to control the oil resource and improve the lots of one's ethnic group through development opportunities. Politics in Nigeria cannot be divorced from oil. National and personal dreams, hope and aspiration are built around oil. It remains the benchmark of Nigeria's socio-economic, education, foreign and defence policies. No doubt the intensity with which the local elites struggle for power is, in part, evidence of our failure to divorce politics from oil and oil from politics. Given this scenario, it should be easy to understand the politics of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. The implication is that oil politics or the politics of oil is a very delicate matter. Available evidence in extant literature shows that Nigeria is the largest in Africa and the sixth largest oil producing country in the world. The country's economic strength is derived largely from its oil and gas wealth, which contribute 99 percent of government revenues and 38.8 per of GDP (2010 , National budget) . Despite these

positive developments, successive Nigerian governments have been unable to use the oil wealth to significantly reduce poverty, provide basic social and economic services her citizens need. This study therefore examines critically the politics of fuel subsidy in Nigeria and its implication for the socio-economic development of the country.

II. THEORETICAL EXPOSITION OF FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL

Several theoretical orientations exist that can be used to intellectualize the politics of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. The leading ones include elites theory, rental state theory and the dependency school. However, the theory of development racism popularized by Ken Saro-Wiwa will be our theoretical scheme for this study.

According to Saro-Wiwa (1995) qt in Akpan (2004) development racism is a situation where a rent seeking state collaborates with extractive industries (multi-national oil companies for instance) to exploit its own people in a resource based economy. Nigeria, Liberia, Sudan (before the split) and Democratic Republic of Congo supplies ample evidence in this regard.

The underlying assumption of the theory is that conflict is inevitable in resource based economy because the rulers in such states usually connived with foreign base extractive industries to exploit their own people. The attempt by the people to resist such exploitation usually leads to conflict. Furthermore, the proceeds from the resources are not utilized for the benefit of the citizenry. This explains the evidential high rate of poverty, unemployment and lack of basic social infrastructure associated with resource based economy of the Third World countries. Applying this theory to Nigeria, there are ample evidence in extant literature to show that despite the huge resources the country has realized from crude oil, Nigeria ranks 156 out of 187 countries on the Global Human Development Index (HDI) in the 2011 Human Development Report released by the United Nation Development Programme. The HDI is a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living for countries worldwide. The HDI further reveals that non-oil producing countries like Tunisia, Gabon, Egypt, Namibia, South Africa and Togo ranked better than Nigeria on all HDI indicators. It is against this background that Nigerians are opposed to any policy

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that would further increased their misery index such as the removal of fuel subsidy.

The general perception in the public sphere is that the removal of fuel subsidy has not significantly improved their lives on all the HDI indicators. Rather each time government removes subsidy their standard of living plummeted. Furthermore, that the policy, which started in 1978 has only benefited successive rulers in Nigeria and their cronies parading as contractors and multinational companies.

III. HISTORY OF FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL IN NIGERIA

The history of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria is rather a long one particularly with the negative effects it has on the polity. Specifically, the story of subsidy removal dates back to 1978 when the then military government of Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo reviewed upward the pump price of fuel which was at 8.4 kobo to 15.37 kobo. The concern was for government to generate enough money to run the administration particularly when it was preparing for the 1979 democratic elections and also to cater for the social needs of Nigerians.

In January 1982, the civilian regime of Alhaji Shehu Shagari also raised the pump price to 20 kobo from 15.37 kobo. Money realized from the fuel increase was used by members of the regime to buy properties in major capitals of European nations (USA, UK, Spain, France and others), as against using same to put in place social services that Nigerians badly needed then. The inept leadership of the then NPN national government and the corruption that bedeviled the administration led to its overthrow.

Then came the military junta of General Babangida who also increased the pump price of fuel to 39.50 kobo in March 31st, 1986. This regime was notorious for numerous pump price increases. On April 10th, 1988, the regime increased it to 42 kobo from 39.50 kobo per litre and then again to 60 kobo for private cars on January 1st, 1989. These increases came at the time the regime chose to adopt a home grown Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) as against external borrowing. His decision was greeted with massive protests by Nigerian. The economic downturn coupled with the increases made life really unbearable and Nigerians reacted angrily.

Again, on the 6th of March, 1991, the Babangida administration raised the pump price from 60 kobo to 70 kobo. Not too long the Nigerian nation was subjected to another round of fuel increase, when in November 8, 1993, the pump price was raised to N5.00 and confronted with mass protests across the length and breadth of Nigeria, the price was reduced to N3.25 on November 22, 1993. A year later, on October 2nd, 1994, it was again raised to N15.00 only to be reduced

two days later to N11.00 by the Gen. Abacha's regime. The reduction was as a result of mass protests and coupled with the need to win the support of Nigerians. On December 20, 1998, the pump price was also increased to N25 but again reduced to N20 on January 6th, 1999 just a month later. This was during Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar brief transitional reign as a military ruler. He like others before him did not spare Nigerians the pains of fuel price increase. The decision witnessed sustained protests by Nigerians, the organized labour and the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

It is necessary at this point to place on record that it was only the military junta of Buhari/Idiagbon and Umaru Shehu Yardua that Nigerians were spared the ordeal of price increase. Others before and after them inflicted enormous pains on Nigerians as a result of the increases in fuel prices. This however may be because of the brief tenure of the regime and ill health of Buhari and Yardua respectively, and its focus on fighting corruption and indiscipline in the Nigerian society.

Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo second coming as a civilian president, did not helped matters as he unleashed a rain of terror on Nigerians. In his eight years reign, the nation witnessed several rounds of fuel price increases. The first started on June 1st, 2000, where the petrol price per litre was raised to N30.00 but only to be reduced to N25 one week after due to massive protests by organized labour, civil society organizations and the ordinary Nigerians. Five days later, on June 13, 2000, the pump price was further adjusted to N22.00 per litre.

On January 1st, 2002, Obasanjo regime increased the price from N22.00 to N26.00 and to N40.00 on June 23, 2003 just one year after. In June, 2007, also the same regime raised the price of fuel per litre to N70, but the Yaradua's regime later reviewed it downward to N65 on assumption of office in May 2007. This was how it remained until President Goodluck Jonathan regimes decision at an outright removal of fuel subsidy. Interestingly the then Nigeria Labour Congress, President, Comrade Adams Oshiomole who had led several fights against fuel subsidy removal including fighting Olusegun Obasanjo, and as a sitting governor of Edo State, joined his fellow governors and the Federal Government to argue strongly for the complete removal of fuel subsidy.

The issue was that, while the nation wide consultations and discussion on fuel subsidy removal was still going on, the Petroleum Product Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) on January 1st, 2012, announced the outright removal of fuel subsidy. This decision by the Goodluck Jonathan administration did not go down well with the masses of Nigerians. It resulted in massive strike actions and protests by the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, PENGASAN, Civil Society

Organisations, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and the generality of Nigerians. The mass protests almost transformed into the “Nigerian spring” which would have brought down the regime. The regime quickly entered into a negotiation with the

organized labour and rescinded its decision of an outright removal to a partial removal and reduced the pump price to N97. Table 1 provide a clearer picture of the different pump prices by the different administrations from 1978 to Jan. 2012.

Table 1 : Data on Petroleum Price Increases/Adjustments in Nigeria (1978 – 2012).

S/N	Date	Administration	Price	Percentage Change
1	1978	Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo (as military ruler)	15.37k	
2	1982	Alh. Shehu Shagari	20k	
3	1990	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida	60k	300%
4	1992	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida	70k	17%
5	1992	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida	N3.25k	364%
6	1993	Gen. Ibrahim Babangida	N5.00	54%
7	1994	Chief Ernest Shonekan	N11.00	120%
8	1994/98	Gen. Sani Abacha	N11.00	-
9	2000	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N20.00	82%
10	2000	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N22.00	10%
11	2001	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N26.00	18%
12	2003	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N40.00	54%
13	2004	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N45.00	13%
14	2007	Olusegun Obasanjo (as civilian ruler)	N70.00	56%
15	2007-	Alh. Umaru Shehu Yardua	N65.00	0.07%
16	2012	Dr. Goodluck Jonathan	N141.00	117%

Source : Communique by South-South Elders and leaders, 2012.

Data in table 1 show that the Nigerian public have been subjected to a number of fuel increases since 1978, when the General Olusegun Obasanjo regime effected a change upward in the pump price of

gasoline from 8.4 kobo to 15.37 kobo. However, Generals Babangida and Obasanjo are reputed to have made the most increases within each of their eight years in office.

Table 2 : Petrol Prices in selected oil producing countries.

S/N	Countries	Pump Prices in US dollars
1	Algeria	0.41
2	Bahrain	0.27
3	Brunei	0.39
4	Egypt	0.31
5	Irag	0.38
6	Kuwait	0.22
7	Libya	0.17
8	Nigeria	0.87
9	Oman	0.31
10	Qatar	0.22
11	Saudi Arabia	0.16
12	UAE	0.49
13	Venezuela	0.023

Source : Compiled by Germans Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and published by Wikipedia, 2012.

While it will be difficult to really get a comprehensive list of countries and their fuel pump prices a few instances as captured by the German Technical Cooperation are analysed here (see table 2). The table clearly shows that fuel price in Nigeria is more expensive than in other countries similarly placed. The argument here is that Nigerians have no business to pay the price they are subjected to by the corrupt members of the political elite. This is because of the lack of seriousness and endeavour among the ruling elite which had made it difficult to summon the enterprise, political will required to build the future on the template of the

future. Just as the appalling lack of enterprise manifested in the inertness that crippled the building of power stations for the future, this attitude also manifested even more cynically in the deliberate refusal to build refineries or maintain the existing ones.

IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIVES OF NIGERIANS

There are contending arguments on the merits and demerits of fuel subsidy increases or removal. The

protagonists argued that fuel subsidy removal was a step in the right direction and in the interest of Nigerians. They maintained that it will help eliminate incentives for corruption and excess profiteering by an unpatriotic cabal in the petroleum sub sector. It will minimize borrowing and save money for investing into job creation, power and transport infrastructure and others. It will eliminate capital flight and build Nigeria's foreign reserve in order to position the economy for speedy growth and global competitiveness. Fuel subsidy removal Jonathan and his cohorts argue that it will trigger private sector investment in a deregulated downstream petroleum sector and enthrone efficiency and catapult the development of the nation's productive sector such as agriculture and industries. And according to the 2012 – 2012 Medium Term Fiscal Framework (MTFF) and the Fiscal Strategy Paper (FSP) which President Jonathan sent to the national assembly, he stated among other things, that fuel subsidy will free up to about N1.3 trillion, that is, about \$8 billion dollars in savings. This money he added will be deployed into providing safety nets for segment of the society which will help to ameliorate the effects of subsidy removal.

Furthermore, subsidy removal and the money generated would guarantee the success of the (MTFF). Money realized will be used to build more refineries and buy buses that will help cushion the effect of the subsidy removal. The point however is that since the protests were called-off the strategies that were initially rushed have suddenly disappeared.

The antagonists of the fuel subsidy removal present a contrary view. They argued that the total amount that will be generated and the actual sharing has not been revealed by the federal government. In other words what will actually go to the states and local governments and what will be left for the federal government has not been worked out. The effect this will have on the infrastructural development as being put by the president and his economic advisers has not really been clear. Therefore, it was premature to speak of the benefits of the removal of subsidy. Fuel subsidy removal will automatically lead to increases in the pump price of fuel. This was shown by the difference pump prices witnessed across the country when the subsidy removal was announced and these ranged from N141 to N200 naira per litre. In some other states of the country, a litre of petrol was sold for a much as N250 naira. Other marketers created artificial scarcity in order to raise the pump price.

Fuel subsidy removal affected transport fares and motorist doubled transport charges. And since this happened during the Xmas period when many Nigerians and their families had traveled to celebrate the Xmas with their families including extended families, many were stranded. Those who could afford it did so by abandoning their families in their villages. For many Nigerian these were indeed interesting times requiring

interesting approach to life. Although the pump price of petrol has been reduced to N97 naira the costs of transport as well as other products and services are yet to reflect the reduction thereby forcing people to rethink on their life style and mode of transportation as a strategy for surviving the hard times. For instance, people now ride on horse-powered taxis, some choose cow-powered land cruisers and even do motorcycle-powered tourist wagon, all in an attempt to avoid the use of petrol and its cost.

Increases in transportation always have ripple effects on other social issues. The prices of food stuff also went up. The logic here was that food sellers use transportation to bring in food items and cars and vehicles have to struggle to get fuel at very exorbitant prices. The result was that the food sellers had to factor in the increment in order to make marginal gain. School fees and charges were not spared, as school fees have increased. Most parents were left with no choice than to withdraw their children and wards from schools.

House rents across the country have increased dramatically and the argument is that fuel price increase had affected the prices of cement astronomically. Before the fuel subsidy removal there were indications that cement price may crash following the take-off of Dangote, Lafarge Cement Company in Ogun State. But the withdrawal of subsidy on January 1st, 2012, catapulted the price of cement to over N2000 naira per bag thus affecting the prices of house rent. According to Iroegbu-Chikezie (2012) a cement dealer he argued that he had to raise the price of the product because he was made to pay double the cost of transporting cement to his shop. Fuel subsidy removal also affected the cost of haulage of basic building materials such as iron rods, roofing sheets, flouring materials and others.

Agboola (2012) maintained that the Organised Private Sector (OPS) were not happy with the removal of fuel subsidy. It described the policy as a deliberate move by the federal government to worsen the decaying industrial sector. The organised Private Sector (OPS), he argued may be forced to pay more for providing generating plants at its factories. Similarly, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) will be generally affected since most the them use petrol for their relatively smaller power generating plants. The group, according to its Director General, Nigerian Employers Consultative Association (NECA) Mr. Segun Oshinowo, members were neither invited nor represented in its institutional capacity at the meeting held with government and business operators. The concern is that government should have fixed or put in place a number of measures and infrastructures before going ahead to remove fuel subsidy. That is, the problem of power should have been fixed so that Nigerians would have to contend only with the fueling of their cars instead of also looking for ways to power offices, industrial generations plants and other things. New

refineries should have been build and the older ones put into functioning so that the availability of the product locally will impact on the economy and play a role in bringing down the price of the pump price.

Table 3 shows that fuel prices per litre and the minimum wage for both OPEC and non OPEC countries. A comparative analysis of the pump price shows that Nigeria has the highest fuel pump price and the lowest minimum wage. Moreover, the basis for Nigeria's political elite to compare the pump price of fuel to other countries was not there. The reason is not far

fetched, in most of the countries listed there is stability of basic utilities like stable power, availability of portable water, good roads and other factors. More so, and as seen on table 3, the minimum wage of N18,000 and even at this, a number of states are yet to implement it. The minimum wage of a country to a large extent defines the purchasing power of individuals. In the case of Nigeria, available statistics show there are among the lowest paid in the world.

Table 3 : OPEC and non OPEC countries and their fuel prices per litre and minimum wage.

S/N	Countries	Fuel price per litre	Minimum wage N
1	Venezuela	3.61	95,639
2	Kuwait	34.54	161,461
3	Saudi-Arabia	25.12	99,237
4	Iran	102.05	86,585
5	Qatar	34.54	101,250
6	UAE	70.18	103,112
7	Algeria	63.55	55,937
8	Libya	26.69	23,813
9	Irag	59.66	25,813
10	Nigeria	141.00	18,000

Non OPEC

S/N	Countries	Fuel price per litre	Minimum wage N
1	USA	157.00	197,296
2	UK	334.41	295,644
3	Oman	48.67	91,583

Source : *The Nation*, 2012. Monday January 6, pp.40.

Besides, scholars like Soremekun 2012 and Olukayode (2012) have argued that the issue of fuel subsidy essentially originated from governments in ability to process the crude oil within the country. Oil subsidy simply means import-inspired deregulation in an oil-producing country. It is a clear indication of governments failure and bankruptcy, in terms of running the industry.

There is also the psychological effect of fuel subsidy increases and removal. Scholars have maintained that it could lead to cases of depression and suicide. The CBN official statistics show that over 70 per cent of Nigerians live below the poverty line (CBN, 2011). Poverty line refers to the value of income or consumption necessary for a minimum standard of nutrition and other necessities of live (Todaro 2005). It is normally computed as those living below one US dollar per day. The implication here is that fuel subsidy removal will further cause emotional trauma and torture on the psyche of those who are struggling to feed and to some extent may commit suicide. This fact is corroborated by the report of International Labour Organisation (ILO) a UN agency which maintains that 900 million workers are living below \$2 a day, worldwide.

Similarly, the removal of subsidy and its attendant consequences discussed above could result in broken homes and increase cases of divorce. When people cannot fend for themselves and their families, there is the likelihood that husbands and wives would separate. This may consequently lead to discomfort, anger and even death.

There is also the serious dimension that the removal of fuel subsidy may result to. It could lead to rebellion against government and anarchy. This was exemplified by the massive protests that took place across Nigeria, after Jan, 1st, 2012 announcement by Petroleum Product Pricing Regulatory Authority (PPPRA). The fear was that it was evolving into the "Nigerian Spring" to borrow from the "Arab Spring" that is the massive social protests that engulfed the Arab nations of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Qatar and Syria to mention but these few.

The fact remains that, the removal of fuel subside have had a number of negative socio-economic consequences on the Nigerian populace. Even when the federal government has promised and taken a number of rushed and unsustainable remedial measures (palliative) to cushion the effects of the fuel subsidy

removal on Nigerians, there are not far reaching enough. The effects of the palliatives are not being felt; the argument is that these so called palliatives should have been put in place before the removal of the subsidy.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study have necessitated the need to make the following recommendations.

Government must fast track the turnaround maintenance of the four refineries and encourages the building of new ones. This will help reduce the dependence on importation of refined products and protect the economy from the volatility of global oil prices. Government could partner with the major oil companies (Shell BP, Chevron, Exxon-Mobil, Total, other major marketers and investors) to build refineries in Nigeria.

- i. Allied to (1) above, government should provide legislative template for investors and create a conducive environment for investors both within and outside to come and invest in the country. In other words, the power sector and its problems and other utilities must be properly addressed and fixed. Government should accelerate the implementation of power sector reform programmes to reduce reliance on petroleum products as principal source of energy in the economy
- ii. Government must put in place an effective regulatory framework to protect the citizens from exploitation by petroleum marketers. Therefore, the Petroleum Product Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) must be urgently reorganized. Subsidy as a social security is the rights of Nigerian particularly the under privileged. . The ordinary Nigerian must be protected and money aimed at ameliorating the lives of the poor must be protected and debated.
- iii. The governance structure should be more cost-effective and corruption must be more effectively tackled. Government must sustain the momentum of dialogue and enlightenment to stabilize the polity and ensure accountability and transparency in the use of the savings from the policy decision for the benefit of the people. There is a seeming agreement among Nigerians that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) is corrupt and needs a complete reorganization and persons found to be guilty be appropriately punished.
- iv. There is need for the president to restructure the polity by reducing the size of ministers and aides. The way the government is structured presently is over bloated and very expensive to maintain particularly against the present economic realities, it will be difficult to sustain. The allowances of members of the cabinet including the national assembly members should be drastically reduced and their activities checked.

- v. The national assembly could be radically structured into a unicameral legislative (having one house of National Assembly) from the present bi-cameral legislature (house of Reps and Senate). Nigeria cannot afford the cost of running an overbloated legislature with all its paraphernalia, and therefore the need to fashion out a home grown system without necessarily copying the American presidential system.
- vi. Decision making must be participatory. Government must sufficiently involve the citizenry in the process of decision and policy making particularly on issues and policies that affect their lives. This could be through town hall meetings with all segments of society and making the necessary contacts with members of the grassroot and civil society organizations. To do this, government could employ the services of NGOs and National Orientation agencies across the country.
- vii. Finally, social services must be put in place and seen to be working. Such social services are, power supply, portable water supply, roads, health services, housing and enabling policies put in place to ensure adequate food supply for local consumptions and for export. Government must also tackle the problem of security of lives of people in the country. Peace and progress of any society is not just the absent of a shooting war and political insurgents but is a function of the availability and functioning of such social services for the benefit of the people.

VI. CONCLUSION

The politics of fuel subsidy removal has showed that Nigeria is a country of paradox. How can citizens of an oil producing country pay more for fuel which is found in abundance in the country. The study has also shown that successive Nigerian governments collaborate with natural resource extraction companies to exploit their own people. This explains why despite the contribution of oil to the Nigeria's economy, over 60% of citizenry live in abject poverty occasioned by high unemployment rates, poor infrastructural facilities and widespread insecurity. These are the evidential causes of protest and strike actions that usually accompanied fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria.

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