The Evolution of Social Protest in Nigeria: The Role of Social Media in the "#OccupyNigeria" Protest.

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ABSTRACT : *Social protest in the forms of general strikes and mass demonstrations have always been employed by activist and union leaders to press home their demands and grievances in protest against social malaise such as high cost of living, poverty, unemployment, corruption and repressive military rule in Nigeria since independence from Britain.. In recent times however, social protests such as "#OccupyNigeria" protest movement have increasingly been shaped by protest movements from outside the country perhaps not in outcomes but in the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook as drivers and platforms of mass mobilization. This paper examines the "#OccupyNigeria" protest movement and the role played by use of social media sites such as Facebook and twitter for coordination and mass mobilization especially among young educated people who are at the forefront of internet use in the country. Through interviews and review of Newspaper reports as a means of data collection, the paper finds that the mass protests which were coordinated by a coalition of civil society organizations and labour unions with the goal of persuading government to reverse the removal of fuel subsidies was characterized by social activism especially on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The phenomenon of the use of social media as a driver of social protest is a new innovation in social protest in the country. The paper concluded that with the increasing use and spread of the internet in the country the platform of social media will increasingly be used to put pressure on government to address more public issues.*

KEY WORDS: *Social protest, #OccupyNigeria, Social media, Political participation, Demonstration*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria as in most of the developing world, citizens are often confronted with myriad threats and challenges on their wellbeing and survival. These include poverty, high rates of unemployment, violence, deprivation of resources, lack of opportunity, marginalization and the denial and suppression of basic rights and freedom. While military dictatorships of the past are today replaced by democratic institutions, marginalized voices were still suppressed; a viable system for these voices to express their grievances is often nonexistent or ineffective. The so-called dividends of democracy have not been realized by those who needed it the most. Under these conditions social protest has become an indispensable alternative for people to voice their opinions, visions of society, grievances and demand in strong terms, for change in their destiny (Shigetomi, 2009).Since Nigeria became an independent nation from its former colonial masters Britain in 1960, it has witnessed a series of protest mainly in the forms of general strikes, boycotts and mass demonstration organized and led by labour unions, youth movements and social activist to press home a variety of demands and grievances. The issues that dominate these protests include demands for better wages, better living conditions, high unemployment, rampant poverty, corruption and freedom from repressive military dictatorship.

In 2012, Nigeria was grip by large scale mass protests organized by labour unions and a coalition of civil society organizations that completely grounded the country. The Federal government had on 1 January, 2012 announced the upward review of the pump price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) from N65 to N141 (more than 100% increment) following the removal of oil subsidy. Following years of neglect of the nation's refineries, government imports refined petroleum products like kerosene, petrol and diesel. In order to keep the prices affordable, the government says it pays a subsidy, being the difference between the cost of importation and the locally regulated prices (Social Action, 2012). This was conformity with the provisions of the 2012-2015 Medium-Term Fiscal Framework and 2012 Fiscal Strategy paper submitted by President Jonathan to the National Assembly, which proposed full deregulation of the oil industry beginning from the 2012 fiscal year. This fiscal policy elicited stiff opposition from the organised labour (spearheaded by the Nigerian Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress), and a coalition of civil society groups, opposition politicians, and professional associations all of which banded together into a Joint Action Front that prosecuted a five-day nationwide protest intended to get the government to reverse the fuel subsidy removal and revert to the N65 pump price of PMS (Agbedo, 2012).

The protest, which lasted from Monday 9 to Friday 13 January, 2012 witnessed the emergence of "#OccupyNigeria". The protest goes beyond the narrow confines of petrol price and metamorphoses into a full-scale cross-examination of the governance process with incisive questions being asked about the workings of the system. In the course of the fuel subsidy removal protests, Nigerians gave vent to their frustrations at the insensitivity of their leaders. Anxieties over the issue of fuel subsidy have unleashed broader popular anger over corruption and social inequality. With the majority of Nigerians living on less than $2 per day, cheap petrol is viewed by many Nigerians as the only tangible benefit they receive from the state, hence the widespread condemnation. To boot, the economy is heavily reliant on revenue from crude oil. A consequence of this is that other apparently disparate issues are tied to the price of fuel as has occurred from previous price hikes. Due to the absence of stable electricity, gasoline generators are a common energy alternative for small businesses and residences. The haste to implement the deregulation was perceived as an outrage by Nigerians who feel the government was out of touch with the pulse of the nation. In a democratic dispensation government is expected to take into perspective the consideration of majority of its citizens. Social indicators show most Nigerians are already frustrated by the hardships they suffer on a daily basis. Consequently the spontaneous nationwide protest that ensured as a result of this new imposition of petrol tax on the masses did not come as a surprise. Across the country from the business capital Lagos to the administrative capital, Abuja, most of the major cities such as Port Harcourt, Kano, Kaduna, Ibadan and Calabar to mention but a few were embroiled in an orgy of rage (Social Action, 2012).

What was noteworthy about the fuel subsidy protest dubbed "#OccupyNigeria protest" is the role played by the social media. While the protest was characterized by mass demonstrations, rallies, strike and sit-in, it was also facilitated and driven by social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter and blackberry messenger. These platforms played a significant role in organizing, expanding awareness among the general public and perhaps more importantly stimulating and facilitating discussions on issues that goes beyond fuel subsidy removal to include broader issues of corruption and accountability in the governance of the country. Interestingly, another additional dimension is the use of mobile telephony in this socio-political activism. Most people use their mobile phones which usage is rapidly expanding in Nigeria and indeed the third world to access the internet.

As a result of these evolution in strategy of social protest in Nigeria following successes in use of social media in the "Arab spring" that resulted in regime change in some of the most authoritarian regimes, many in the status quo express "moral panic of the social media" raising concerns that the regime may block, censor or regulate the use of the social media platform for such activism. These concerns are not restricted to Nigeria and the developing world but include the developed world. Institute of Security Studies (2012: 2) states that,

> The UK government experienced jitters over social media following violent riots that rocked the country in mid-2011, prompting Prime Minister David Cameron to propose blocking the use of social media during future occurrences of riots and civil unrest. The proposal was widely criticized in the UK as threatening the right to freedom of speech and expression.

Against this background, this paper examines the impact of the social media use in "#OccupyNigeria Protest" and its potentials and implication for social activism aimed at socio-political change in Nigeria in general. The paper also assesses challenges facing meaningful social media driven socio-political transformation and political participation.

II.   BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL PROTEST IN NIGERIA

The tradition of social protest in Nigeria is rooted in the pro-independent movement of the colonial era. It is these movements that have later metamorphose into early political parties and its leaders transformed in the new post independence political elites. According to Mochizuki (2009: 208),

> The youth movements of the African colonies emerged and grew within the era of nationalism. Starting from the early resistance and protest movements directed against colonial authorities, nationalist thought and activity developed throughout the twentieth century and up to the independence era... They focused on mobilizing racial awareness and national consciousness, especially in the cities. The youth were the most vibrant agents in colonial politics. In many West African countries, youth action led the independence movement. Such movements included students and intellectuals, both of which categories advocated social change and development.

Organized labour in Nigeria has historically been in the vanguard of social protest against unfavourable government policies (Tar, 2009). The reaction of the Nigerian state to these protests, especially during the days of military dictatorship is characterized by violent repression (HRW, 1995) and police brutality often leading to deaths of protesters, imprisonment of protest leaders, labour leaders and proscription of labour movements and youth groups such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). Aborishade (2012: 4) a civil rights activist explain the strategies used by the Nigerian state in repression of social protest. He states,

> Policing of protests by the state in Nigeria is done largely by relying on physical and non-physical violent control strategy. The former strategy involves using direct physical force on protesters, including the employment of poisonous tear-gas, harassment, arrest, detention, torture and all kinds of inhuman treatment. The non-physical strategy involves the use of draconian laws, rules and regulations which hinder the free exercise of universally recognized fundamental rights of assembly and action.

In the 1990's social protest was also given impetus by social activist and civil society organizations who led mass protest against military dictatorship. Indeed during the military dictatorships of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha social and human rights activist like the late Gani Fawehinmi, Beko Ransome-Kuti and Femi Falana under the auspices of civil society organizations such as Campaign for Democracy (CD) lead mass protest and endured all forms of deprivations and imprisonment during this era. Others like the Afrobeat superstar Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti use protest music about social ills, corruption and military oppression to keep protest and resistance in people's conscience. The #OccupyNigeria protest movement and its use of social media is yet another innovation in social protest in Nigeria.

III   CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION
For a proper conceptualization of this paper, it is imperative to clarify the following concepts.

SOCIAL MEDIA : The concept of social media generally refers to internet or web based tools, applications and services that enable users to engage with each another generate content, share and search for information online. What makes these media social is its interactive and collaborative nature, that is, they are built in ways that that empowers internet users to share content and communicate with one another in real time. New technological advancement in recent times has led to the development of various social media platforms. According to Institute of Security Studies (2012:2), these platforms can be classified in six major classes. These are:
- Collaborative projects (e.g Wikipedia).
- Blogs and micro-blogs (e.g Twitter).
- Video content communities (e.g Youtube).
- Social networking sites (e,g Facebook, Google+).
- Virtual games world(e.g World of war craft).
- Picture sharing sites (e.g Flickr, Instagram).

In recent times, there has been widespread adoption and engagement with some of these platforms by people in Africa by extension Nigeria especially via mobile telephony. Facebook for instance, has been broadly adopted as a communicative tool across much of the continent (Bohler-Muller and Merwe, 2011; How Nigerians use, 2013). Indeed it is the most visited website and the most used social media on the continent. That is not to say that access to a mobile phone necessarily translate to mobile internet and social media use but it highlights the growing profile of mobile internet use on the continent for social connectivity and interaction.

#OCCUPYNIGERIA PROTEST : This refers to the protest movement that began on 2nd January, 2012 in Nigeria as a response to the removal of fuel subsidy by the federal government of Nigeria led by President Goodluck Jonathan. Nigerians in most of the country's major cities embarked on mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, general strike and online social activism to express their outrage on the increment of prices of petroleum products. Nigeria ranked among the world's ten largest petroleum exporters. Petroleum exports provide immense profits for multinational oil companies and contribute about 90% of government revenue. Massive corruption and lack of accountability in the sector has however severely increased the cost of subsidy. Politicians and their cronies have grown stupendously rich while majority of the populace continue to wallow in abject poverty (Social Action, 2012). Most Nigerians perceived the subsidy as perhaps one of the only tangible benefits they received from the state hence the outrage and mass disapproval towards its removal. More so, with

each hike in price of petroleum products is an attendant increase in the cost of livelihood. The additional cost of production of goods and services is borne by consumers leading to further inflation.

Even though there were no mass demonstrations in some parts of the country because of existing security challenges, law enforcement presence and intimidation the protest had the tacit approval of most of the citizenry. In the words of a social activist, "the country was soaked in a protest mood" (Aborisade, 2012).

In some parts of the country and among online activist protesters adopted the slogan of "#OccupyNigeria" to align with the global Occupy movement emphasizing its position on the exclusive, exploitative, insensitive and anti-masses policies of government and business internationally. By drawing inspiration from the Occupy wall street protest it tapped the widespread sense of being the downtrodden that have been ignored, the 99% who form the basis of society (Calhoun, 2013) that have been disregarded by government who chose to ignore the deep social inequality in the Nigerian society. The unprecedented use of social media platforms such as Twitter, blackberry messenger and Facebook by protesters has become a prominent feature of this protest.

IV   METHODOLOGY

The method of collection of information for this paper is qualitative. Data was collected mainly through interviews, and review of newspaper reports. Qualitative research is a perspective which focuses on the way in which people collectively make sense of their social experience and built meanings around it. It is often the socio-cultural environment that determines how people interpret and create meanings of their social experiences therefore qualitative studies are design to appreciate the wider psychological, social, political and economic milieu in which research questions are situated. Qualitative research may not always conform to the standards of "scientific methodology" such as the use of random sampling procedures which give all the elements of the population an equal chance of being selected in the sampling process (Bloor et al, 2006, Haralambos et al, 2005). The major aim however is to provide a more vital, richer in-depth knowledge and valuable insights. This paper is exploratory due to the novelty of phenomena under investigation. The idea behind qualitative research is to purposively select participants or sample that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research questions (Creswell, 2004) hence, does not necessarily require a random sample or a large number of participants as in quantitative methods. The participants in these interviews and were selected by usage of social networking sites and knowledge/ participation of the fuel subsidy protest.

V. FINDINGS

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE "#OCCUPYNIGERIA" PROTEST : The use and popularity of social media among Nigerians is affirmed by the findings of this study. Facebook appears to be the most popular website visited by Nigerians. Participants also report extensive use of Twitter, blackberry messenger, YouTube and other social media platforms. The rapid spread and penetration of mobile telephony and internet seems to be the major driver of social media use in the country. According to ITU (2013) mobile telephone penetration in Africa stands at 63% while about 16% of the population are using the internet. This is a significant increase when compare to the last few years. Nigeria has the highest penetration rate in Africa. According to Wikipedia (2013), Nigeria has more than 55 million internet users with a penetration rate of about 33%. Consequently, the use of social media for political engagement such as its role in the subsidy removal protest dub as the "#OccupyNigeria protest" by some activist. Social media can assist in coordinating and mobilizing social action. Significantly, social media was use as a tool of mobilization and coordination by organizers of the protest. The mainstream state owned media such as the National Television Authority (NTA), and the Radio Nigeria which have the broadest coverage initially refuse to give any coverage to the protest. Only a few independent broadcasters such as the African Independent Television (AIT) Channels TV and Galaxy TV gave some coverage to the protest. These independent outfits have limited coverage as most can only be access through pay to view cable and satellite which is unaffordable to most Nigerians. Social media acted as a counter-information to government propaganda machinery. Commenting of this state of affairs, Okafor (2013) argues that:

> The traditional media being the most vulnerable to political or economic coercion and manipulation has been reduced in Nigeria to platforms where praise singing takes centre stage, in a bid to stay afloat through government patronage of services.

Others expressed similar sentiments.

> Social media provides us with a means in which we can say virtually anything. It is a platform where serious interaction and dialogue takes place. People can add humor or camaraderie to get attention. At the end of the day, we share serious information much more than we could do on the conventional media outlets (Personal communication, August 5, 2013).

The social media, notably Twitter and Facebook, became rallying points for Nigerians at home and in Diaspora to give the #OccupyNigeria protest wide exposure. Student's website and bloggers provide real time coverage to the protest posting live pictures of the protest on the internet. The negative post on Facebook forced the president to close his own Facebook page. Social media became a hub for connecting protesters on one hand and between them and other Nigerians at home and abroad (Omojolumoju, 2013). It is no surprise when activist of the Occupy Nigeria took to the internet to connect with Nigerians on the fuel subsidy protest. Having been marginalized by the mainstream media, organizers and activist involved in the protest turned to social media. Most participants reported becoming aware of the protest through Facebook, Twitter, blackberry messenger, YouTube and text messages. Facebook pages such as "Nationwide anti subsidy removal: Strategies and protest, "Occupy Naija" were created at the beginning of the protest and within the first week had members in their tens of thousands. Many of videos relating to the Occupy Nigeria protest have made their way to YouTube. Some recorded by professionals and several by amateurs who posses mobile devices with video recording capabilities to publicize the protest. One participant in our interview noted that;

> Protesters, social activist and ordinary Nigerians have used Facebook, twitter and blackberry messenger to disseminate information on venues for protests. Gaffes by paid supporters of fuel subsidy removal have also been tweeted, "*Facebooked*" and broadcast through Blackberries. Caricatures of images and videos portraying the President as a villain have been exchanged through these platforms(Personal communication, August 6, 2013).

Another participant also stated that;

> Social media gives us the opportunity to report and give update to our supporter. It helps us to mobilize people to participate in the demonstrations. We use our pages on Facebook and our followers keep track of what happens by following us on twitter. That helps us keep the momentum (Personal communication, August 6, 2013).

The protest was granted celebrity endorsement. Popular musicians such as Femi Kuti, the son of the Afrobeat maestro Fela Anikulapo Kuti and other stars of the popular Nollywood film industry made appearances at the "#OccupyLagos" rally and also voiced their support for the protest for the protest on Facebook and twitter. These celebrities have thousands of followers on these social media platforms hence further connecting many people in the country and across the world to the protest. For example, music artiste and comedian, Sound Sultan has also been mobilizing for mass protests through his Twitter page. He was reported to have tweeted the following:

> The only place in the world where you have to provide your own light, water, security and tar the road is Nigeria. In Nigeria, new regimes are always worse than the former and we are going to occupy the streets until government listens to us (Itua, 2012).

Don Jazzy, one of Nigeria's popular music producers, was reported to have posted the following on his Facebook page about the fuel subsidy removal:

> I hardly ever regret decisions I make. That my one vote added to put the current government in power is one decision I regret with all my heart. What I don't know is if the man we all voted for deceived us, knowing that he would turn out to be like this, or is there someone else leading us? God help us (Itua, 2012).

The most significant impact of social media in the #OccupyNigeria protest appears to be that it gave impetus to the protest by providing a social space for Nigerians to voice not only their opposition to the subsidy removal but their grievances, frustrations on governments insensitivity to the economic hardship millions are enduring every day. The social media campaign have inspired ordinary Nigerians and raised new awareness of wasteful government spending, lack of accountability and corruption. The fuel subsidy struggle brightened the prospects of a revolution in Nigeria, which implied the exercise of people power for the socio-economic and political advancement of Nigeria. According to one participant;

> When the protest started, people were just asking for the reversal of the prices of petroleum products. It was when people started posting stuff on the social media such as Facebook and twitter that things really heated up. People also started demanding social justice fairness and accountability from the government ((Personal communication, August 5, 2013).

The #OccupyNigeria protest was a new experience which sends a resounding message to the political leadership of the country that it is not business as usual. Perhaps it is the new voice that the Nigerian public found in the social media, a platform that allows them to vent their pent up frustrations about the way their country is governed that is getting government jittery. In the words of a participant interviewed for this study;

> The #OccupyNigeria protest is a harsh lesson to the people in government and future generations of leaders that they must not take the people for granted and must think twice before taking unreasonable decisions like the arbitrary removal of petrol subsidy making it beyond the reach of the average Nigerian. This is a reminder that this is a democracy not a dictatorship (Personal communication, August 7, 2013).

According to Agbedo (2012: 7) the social protest represents:

> A sudden socio-political awakening of Nigerians for participatory democracy, one that predisposed them to appreciate the fact that power belongs to them and that those who hold position of authority do so on behalf of the people and must of necessity remain accountable to the people.

More than a decade ago before the internet became widespread, Manuel Castells argues that that the internet will increasingly facilitate individual expression, collaboration and sociability. In regards to political activism it offers the prospects for network of people to aggregate and join forces to spread their message and agenda around the globe (Castells, 2001). Throughout history mass movements originates with people coming together in market places, social arenas, to discuss wide ranging issues that are critical to their survival and wellbeing. For Habermas (1989), these arenas' of public discourse which he calls the "public sphere" is an arena of public debate in which issues of general concern can be discussed and opinions formed, is an imperative for efficient democratic participation and lubricates the wheel of democratic process. The public sphere involves people converging as equals in a forum for public debate. It is significant for the early development of democracy because it introduces the idea of resolving political through public discuss. Habermas further argued the development of the mass media cause the public sphere to be largely ineffective. Politics is stage managed in the parliament and the mass media. Public opinion is formed not through open and rational dialogue but through control and manipulation of the media (Giddens, 2013).

Recently however, new forms of media such as the social media are creating a new avenue for social engagement. Social media such as Facebook, Google plus, Twitter, blogs, chat rooms are increasingly playing the role of the public sphere where public issues are debated outside the control and the dominance of government. Social media has promoted the role of this public space, facilitating social interaction, information sharing, and fast and easy communication. Social media have given credibility to and extended Habermas' conception of the significance of the public sphere. These communicative platforms have afforded various actors the chance to play out political engagement and activism on numerous online sites. The significance of social media has opened up new promise for citizens to connect with each other and with their political representatives, and contribute towards an inclusive and broad-based political process (Banda, Mudhai & Tettey, 2009).

CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN SOCIAL PROTEST IN NIGERIA : The Occupy Nigeria protest movement have brought to the fore the underlying potential of social media platforms to drive socio-political engagement with a view fostering positive social change. If recent trends are to be relied upon, it is reasonable to be guardedly optimistic about the prospects of social media to promote political participation and active citizenship. The power of the social media network in shaping modern day discourses in Nigeria cannot be under-estimated. Yet it is important that we take into cognizance some of the challenges and limitations faced in the use of this new media in the context in which it is are utilized.

A fundamental challenge to social media use for political activism in Nigeria is the increasing distrust by government. The implication of this is the propensity by government to monitor, block or censor the use of these platforms. Although the Nigerian government has not done any of these yet, the fear is palpable that it will act accordingly if it perceived that its interest is threatened. It was reported in the *NBF* an online news portal that President Jonathan acknowledged the power of the social media network to shape public opinion that he deemed negative to his administration and expressed negative sentiments when he lamented that:

> There are a lot of mischief makers going around to misinform Nigerians, especially through social networks like the Twitter, Blackberry, Facebook and others – to communicate very wrong things to Nigerians (Orimisan, 2012).

Other African countries have demonstrated the ability to restrict the social media for reasons of "national security" (Institute of Security Studies, 2012), therefore the Nigerian government can do the same if it feels so constraint. During the Occupy Nigeria protests it was rumored that the government mooted the idea of blocking Facebook, Twitter and Blackberry broadcast until it was vehemently denied by the communication regulatory body, the Nigerian communication Commission (NCC). Another challenge to the social media political activism such as the Occupy Nigeria protest was the inability to exploit and sustain the initial momentum to translate itself into a movement. Many people argued that the protest fizzled out with the initial success of the reversal of the complete removal of fuel subsidy. The protest fails to pursue underlying factors such as bad governance and massive corruption in the oil sector. Abiodun Aremu, one of the Occupy Nigeria protests leaders surmise it as such in Premium times, an online news portal;

> The major gain is the resolve by Nigerians to struggle. The major losses are whether there has been consistency in forging ahead with that struggle and I think for us that is the challenge…So if you have struggled on account of the hike and inadequate supplies of fuel and those things still persist, what it shows clearly is that there is a need to further that struggle. Because the whole thing about the subsidy thing which we have claimed over and over had been a ruse and an avenue for further looting of resources have been further exposed by the probe panels. What has happened to the perpetrators? What has happened to the corrupt atrocities that are perpetrated? These are the issues. So for us the challenge is how to intensify the struggle (Emmamuel & Ezeamalu, 2013).

VI   CONCLUSION

When the #OccupyNigeria protest started and gain so much momentum on the social media many Nigerian expressed optimism that the campaign will be the "tipping point" of the war against government impunity and the beginning of a new dawn of social and political activism. Many hailed the protest as a success even though it did not achieve its aim of a full reversal of government decision to deregulate the oil sector. There is a general consensus that use of the social media in the protest has brought about a level of mobilization and solidarity among Nigerians that is unprecedented. As Nigerians are increasingly becoming social media savvy the prospects of the platform becoming a hub of social and political activism is bright. The #OccupyNigeria protest may well serve as a template for other numerous issues that plague the country. Given that notions of democracy are closely tied to the ability of citizens to express their opinions and to the ability to organize collective action; social media will continue to provide more opportunities for discussion and collaboration amongst the citizenry, thus creating a healthier public sphere and a vibrant democracy. While the phenomenon is still a novelty in the country, discussion of public issues will likely be shaped by the social media in the future.

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