Trade Unions and Leadership in Nigeria’s New Democracy: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

Under authoritarian regimes, trade unions, which are one of the virile platforms to engage with state excesses through industrial disputes resolution for better organisational performance as well as expansion of democratic culture, are gagged. This is because the nature of governance in such instance is based on total power. Since Nigeria’s political independence in 1960, there is a preponderance of military rule than civilian government, which has precipitated autocratic mode of governance. This has put the activities and the significance of trade unions in building distributed and democratic leadership that is transformational on the back burner. However, as new wave of democracy sweeps across the nation in the wake of the nation’s return to democratic government, the participation of trade unions in the democratisation process is required for mobilising workers without fear or favour to agitate for their rights and for organisations to perform effectively. This will moderate the excesses of the state for smooth transition of the nation from authoritarianism to democracy. More than that, as the relationship between the state and trade unions is normalised in the process, this would contribute to high organisational performance as industrial disputes would be minimised, thus animating national growth and consolidation of the dividends of Nigeria’s new democracy.

Key words: democracy, leadership, Nigeria, Trade Union, qualitative research

JEL Classification: Z18

Introduction: Nigerian Leadership, Trade Unions and Democratisation

A recurring decimal in Nigeria’s political leadership is the tragedies and losses that have bedevilled the nation as it rather sought (until recently) conflict mediation and resolution through arms in the labour industry instead of dialogue. Trade unions thrive where democratic culture operates (Otobo, 2007). The history of Nigeria follows a shadow of inept leadership that has appropriated power for the furtherance of its agenda leaving out other stakeholders in governance (Ubeku, 1983). This is why leadership has been reduced to mere the-killer-takes-it-all kind of game. In view of this ugly landscape, in Nigeria,
“[T]he focus of … leadership became (sic) parochial and with the overriding consideration for personal survival rather than national development. Attempts at providing “democratic consolidation” were hampered by the personality cult of the emerging political gladiators who exploited the instrument of state power to promote their personal agenda” (Fagbadebo, 2009, p. 29).

With above in mind, virtually all strata of Nigeria’s leadership are affected by inept leadership. This leadership development has framed the nature of relationship between the trade unions and Nigerian government.

It is appropriate to understand the concept of trade union before delving into its history in Nigeria. Also, it is necessary to know that depending on contexts, every nation perceives trade union and its implications depending on the legal framework operational in such situation. Traditionally, trade unions are formed to champion as well as protect the interests of workers or suppliers of labour (Fajana, 2006). This practice is the norm as stakeholders involved in the process of mediation and conflict resolution between the state and labour unions are given opportunity to do so. Sadly, in autocratic or military regimes, industrial disputes are not resolved by involving the stakeholders. The stakeholders in this instance include the state and union members, whose interests are at stake. For a long period in the history of Nigeria, there has been ongoing unresolved industrial disputes because since Nigeria gained political independence, there have been more military governments than democratic regimes (Ubeku, 1983). This has fuelled spate of dispute as well as exacerbated the nature of labour disputes.

As Nigeria returns to civil and democratic rule, this paper argues that this era would bring better industrial relations as well as foster better understanding between the state and the unions in resolving disputes. This will in the final analysis help organisations perform better, which will impact on Nigeria’s political process and economy in the end. To this end, according to Alalade (2004) in his piece, “Trade Unions and Democratic Option in Nigeria”, stated that:

“trade unions do mobilise workers without the fear of being molested, much unlike the situation during preceding military era. From the time full democracy was reinstated, hardly are union leaders arrested as a result of strikes or industrial disputes. Political leaders are In fact careful in handling labour crises” (p. 201).

The above substantiates how central trade unions are in consolidating democracy as well as in bringing better relations between the government and workers in society.

The history of Nigeria’s trade union could be traced to the period when Lagos Colony was formally considered as a British colony and the events that followed in the wake of this. What followed was the substitution of slavery, which was considered illegitimate and forceful trade in human, for legitimate trade that gave birth to urban labour force. The urban workforce came with it. On record, formalised Nigerian trade union started in 1912 with the formation of Civil Service Union (NUPENG, 2009; Fajana, 2006). There is no gainsaying the fact that some further historical sketch is necessary to properly situate the rise of trade union in Niger; however, this is not the remit of this paper. Nevertheless, in the structure of the trade unions as exemplified below, a graphic distillation is offered more understanding of Nigeria’s trade unions. This is shown in Table 1 below.

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<td>Industrial Unions</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Senior Staff Associations</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Employers Associations</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>Professional Unions</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>87</td>
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Source: Fajana (2006)
Theoretical Framework

In democracies, trade unions are more effective as their activities are democratised through enabling environment to negotiate issues with government (Nwoko, 2009). Thus, in the world over, trade unions have represented interests of the working class against capitalist exploitative system. In Nigeria’s new democracy, the powers of trade unions have been expanded as the new order gives them leverage to assume the role of protecting workers’ rights, welfare and interest. In Nigeria, trade unions are represented by Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC). This has galvanised research in recent time, as scholarship has been focused on articulating the interface of the trade unions and government vis-à-vis the tyrannical era of military government that besteged Nigeria’s leadership like the colossus (Ubeku, 1983). Prior to this time, the NLC was under the shadow of military governments that stifled opposition as well as chased the activities of the unions to the fringes. To this end, this paper draws its conceptual impetus from how the present democratic order in Nigeria can reshape the relationship between trade unions and the government, as Nigeria’s political leadership is reconfigured in the process. It is pertinent at this juncture to take a brief look at the phenomenon of leadership.

Leadership is a term that has obsessed management scholars, political leaders, intellectuals and policy makers for many decades. According to Bennis and Nanus (2007), it is a word on everybody’s lips, meaning that it is a subject of concern to all as it affects virtually everything that we do. Because of the manifestation of the term leadership in almost all that humanity does, it has been given diverse meanings (Senior & Swailes, 2010). No matter the amount of definitions that have been proffered, leadership is about motivating, inspiring and making people to act or behave in a way they would not have done. This is what John Kotter in his book, A Force for Change (1990, p. 64) sees as “energy surge”. It is the ability of a leader to influence people in organisation, community, political sphere, and almost in every human sphere in a manner that makes them to act without coercion, intimidation or fear. To this end, in the view of Armstrong (2009) leadership

“is the process of inspiring people to do their best to achieve a desired result. It can also be defined as the ability to persuade others willingly… Leaders and their groups are therefore Interdependent” (p. 376).

Following from the above, we are concerned with a style of leadership that adumbrates democratic order, which is crucial for empowering trade unions in Nigeria. This point brings to mind the difference between leadership and management, the former is transformational, inspiring and charismatic, while the latter is transactional and deeply anchored in cost-benefit relations/interaction (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1993). This is however not the remit of the question under review. Traditionally, there are three basic types of leadership styles as enunciated by Lewin (1948), they include the following: democratic, laissez faire and autocratic leadership. Over the years, leadership styles have been framed in relation to theories of leadership, leadership traits/behaviours and persuasions/approaches to leadership as well as contingency postulation about leadership.

Statement of Problem

This paper will be arguing that the relationship between the state and labour unions in Nigeria has been dissonant most of the time since Nigeria became a nation. And to turn this ugly trend, democracy is the answer as it is an enabling system for conflict resolution between the unions and government given democratic leadership style. Thus, following Nigeria’s recent dawn of democratic culture, the unions are less gagged; this has consolidated the birth of democracy as industrial disputes are relatively resolved by taking into account the concerns of workers for better governance and organisational performance (Nwoko, 2009).
Research Hypotheses

This paper will be testing the following hypotheses in order to substantiate our purpose in this study.

- Trade unions can help to foster democratic culture and its consolidation;
- Organisations can perform better under democratic dispensations;
- If empowered, trade unions can help shape leadership process in Nigeria.

Methodology

The methodology adopted is a qualitative method of inquiry as well as action research to arrive at our purpose in this paper. Action research was developed by Lewin (1948) as a research method that aims to make immediate contributions to practical issues that concern people in an organisation. The people concerned in this respect are the stakeholders, whose welfare the matter in question is being addressed for change. As a methodical collection of data for practical solution to issues, action research facilitates the process of taking data collected from stakeholders (employees and employers), who then interpret it and make decision in relation to objectives/problems at hand. The impacts as well as outcomes of the actions are being taken into consideration for future purposes. Thus, the stakeholders are key agents of change process. As a qualitative method of research, it utilises the path of (social) constructionist inquiry to social issues for solutions to them (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499). In the thinking of Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2008), action research is underpinned by the following:

1. Action research is concerned with learning about an organisation or social system via attempting to change it; this is central to action research;
2. The people (stakeholders) affected by, or involved in the change process, should be part of the research process.

To this end, action research is appropriate because it takes as its focal point, leading change, which is at the heart of determining employees’ opinions in order to possibly motivate them for transformational leadership (Kotter, 1990). This is also good in ascertaining employees’ behaviour. Thus, in order to gauge transformational leadership style, which technicly deals with motivating people (employees or stakeholders) to act without coercion, action research will be a good research method; this is because it largely addresses stakeholders’ involvement and contribution in the process of finding solution to issues that concern them. This is done without coercion. In this direction, since employees whose interests and welfare are being investigated are crucial in action research, it becomes a veritable method to ascertain this both in terms of their behaviour and performance. Secondly, the consequences of this process will help put things in perspective in the future should there be any need to investigate employees’ behaviour or performance. This same process accounts for determining the effects of transactional leadership on employees’ performance and behaviour, hence, action research takes stakeholders’ views on board as seen with the case of transformation leadership. Action research is context bound like surveys; there is a correlation between these two variables in relation to using them in assessing employees’ performance and behaviour.

Survey method was used to get data for our qualitative approach. Surveys are usually associated with deductive approach. It is used in business research as well as other social settings through the collection of sizeable population of sample to make decisions. In corroborating this, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) observed that

“[T]he survey strategy allows you to collect quantitative data which you can analyse quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics … In addition, the data
collected using survey strategy can be used to suggest possible reasons for particular relationships” (2009, p. 144).

The reasons for using survey are as thus:

- It ensures that research sample used is representative of the population involved;
- It facilitates the piloting of a researcher’s data collection instrument and method;
- It also supports a good response rate.

Since the stakeholders (employees) are not too many (unlike other research populations), survey is suitable as it is not as wide-ranging as other research methods. However, depending on research approach, surveys could also be used in qualitative research as we see in action research above (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The table below offers some clarity on this.

### Table 2. Claimed Features of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualitative Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td>Soft</td>
<td>Hard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>Fixed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political (value-bound)</td>
<td>Value-free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td>Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculative</td>
<td>Hypothesis Testing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grounded</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
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Source: The Analysis of Qualitative Data, Halfpenny (1979), p. 799

In order to select a sample size for this survey, it is necessary to consider the population involved in the survey so as to make a reasonable selection of sample, as well as to reflect believability and validity of findings. Thus selecting small sample would make results invalid; on the other hand, selecting sample that is too large would constitute what Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009, p. 235) refer to as “data saturation”. In order to avoid this research dilemma, it is instructive to heed the following:

- Engage in simple random.
- Systematise your sample.
- Stratifying one’s random selection.
- Clustering.
- Multi-stage process for triangulation.

### Data Analysis

Therefore, given that 500 trade union representatives, workers and managers in Nigeria were surveyed – our sample frame – in relation to better relations between the government and trade unions in the wake of new wave of democracy in Nigeria, we have to employ purposive or judgemental sampling. This process enables a researcher to use his judgement to choose cases that will best enable them to answer key research questions that are salient to the matter under investigation (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 237). This sampling technique falls under non-probability sampling (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 218). This process also reinforces our sample frame to avoid bias. So, in this kind of survey, a reasonable proportion of the research population (500) should be dealt with. This is because the larger the sample size, the lower the likeliness of error in generalising findings from the research population surveyed (Bryman, 2006).

In this regard, an assessment technique as a coding parameter to gauge the new wave of democracy in Nigeria that impacts on trade union and government relations is adopted. This was done by taking into account six issues that affect trade unions and government, namely:
dialogue, inclusiveness, consultation, engagement, autonomy and workers’ rights. Also, each of the six government-union issue was measured on a five-point Likert Scale depicting the levels of salience given to each in relation to government’s commitment to give trade unions in Nigeria appreciable level of independence and freedom in contrast to how they were during previous governments (undemocratic dispensations). Adopting the Likert Scale, 1 signifies low level of commitment by government towards democratising the trade unions; while 5 means high level of commitment to democratisation. To this end, recurring themes are taken from the data collated and analysed against action research to ascertain how the information (data) gathered can be relied upon to gauge change of behaviour on the part of the Nigerian government as the new form of democratised leadership dawns on the nation. This is represented graphically below.

![Likert Scale Representation of Govt. Commitment](image)

**Fig. 1. Levels of Government Commitment to Trade Union Issues about Democracy**

Given that 461 respondents were received out of the 500 people surveyed, figure 1 above demonstrates how they responded to the questions asked in relation to the recurring themes above.

**Discussion**

From the above, it can be seen that although Nigeria is at the moment experiencing change in governance, which has impacted positively on its leadership structure, more still needs to be done to better the relationship between it and the trade unions. The qualitative approach adopted by using survey suggests that there is a movement towards better government-trade union relations in Nigeria, but for a better Nigeria, the democratic dividends need to be fully tapped by designing more appropriate framework for better engagement and freedom of trade unions. If this is done, there will be more cordial relationships and less conflict between government and trade unions in Nigeria.

**From Labour Activism to Democratic Consolidation**

As a nation transits from authoritarian rule to democracy, the strategic relevance of trade unionism in the emergence and functioning of such democratised society is a prerequisite in order to consolidate the transition (Iyayi, 2009). This process brings to the fore the tenets of trade unions in bringing better governance and virile democratic culture in society. Nigerian Labour Congress is the umbrella body under which all trade unions in Nigeria are located.
Founded in 1975, Nigerian Labour Congress is the body that champions labour activism as well as wages industrial cause in order to improve the conditions of workers and to agitate for their rights. Since its inception, NLC has been under serious contest with Nigeria’s federal government as it dialogues with the government for better working conditions of all employees. In establishing the philosophy behind NLC, its former president, Adams Oshiomole, states categorically what the organisation was formed to do:

“No one must continue to sit on the fence or else the fence must collapse. People must ask questions and insist that political leaders must give account of their stewardship because the people must get a feedback. … They must ensure that programmes of government are followed in the interest of the people” (cited in Alalade, 2004, p. 202-1).

Thus, for stronger workers’ rights as well as for consolidating Nigeria’s recent democratic wave, empowered trade union is required to bring this to fruition. This will help shape leadership in the nation, which has been under the shadow of leadership ineptitude and lingering dispute between the state and trade unions.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that for a reinvented government and trade union relations in Nigeria, the government should make provision for more enabling environment to engage with trade unions. The qualitative approach adopted that is couched in action research, which is traditionally used to gauge change in behaviour in an organisational setting, is corroborated with survey. The approach adopted has demonstrated that for the consolidation of Nigeria’s fledgling democracy that promises to improve relations between government and trade unions, more institutions and implementation of programmes as well as more inclusive way of engagement are of the essence.

References


