

SYMBOLISM OF OMOYELE SOWORE’S “REVOLUTION NOW” MARCH PROTEST TO NIGERIA’S DEMOCRATIC PROCESS.

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Abstract

This paper examines how Omoyele Sowore, a political activist, used the “revolution now” March protest on Monday, August 5, 2019, to raise alarm of insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria under the Buhari government. The issue raised in the protest was a message and symbol that drew public and global attention and hugged the headlines. More so, the protesters really wanted to invoke fears in Buhari’s government, so that they will sit up; not necessary to unseat the Buhari government. The protesters wanted those in Aso Rock, the seat of power of Nigeria’s democracy to do the needful and ensure that governance becomes about security and welfare of the people as enshrined in the constitution of Nigeria. Unfortunately, by arresting the arrow head of the “revolution now” by name Sowore, the government had alluringly walked into their trap, by making Omoyele Sowore a hero for fighting the right of the masses for survival in Nigeria under the Buhari government. The paper argued that the right of every Nigerian to hold a peaceful protest must be respected. In such protests, the security agents must be on the side of the people and not the government in power as it is done in other civilized clime and in a true democracy. The study adopted the descriptive methodology. It drew upon primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include oral information and testimonies. Secondary sources include newspapers, magazines, government publications and relevant books, the research also made use of direct observation method. All the information so gathered were subjected to historical evaluation.

Keywords: Peaceful Protest, Human Rights, Symbolism, Democracy, Nigeria.

Introduction:

Omoyele Sowore, the presidential candidate of the African Action Congress, AAC, in the 2019 election, on Monday, August 5, 2019, mobilized the “revolution now march” protest, to call on Nigerians across the six geopolitical zones to come out in their numbers to protest against what he termed bad governance and worsening insecurity in the land. But the Department of State Security Service, DSS, Swiftly responded, picked up Sowore and his supporters and succeeded in frustrating the protest from going on across the country. The security agent on Thursday, 6 August, 2019, secured a court order to further detain Sowore for 45 days.

It is unfortunate to note that in a democracy, the presidency while responding to the freedom of speech and associations of some Nigerians citizens labeled the planned revolution now march protest as a failure even as it thanked Nigerians for their show of support and loyalty to President Buhari – led administration. In a statement signed by the Senior Special Assistant to the president on media and publicity; Mallam Garba Shehu (2019), the presidency said the resolve of the people to give Buhari government a chance culminated in the failure of the planned nationwide protest. The statement reads: Today (Monday, August 5), millions of Nigerian went about their business, work, seeking employment, attending school/college and caring for their families. By doing so, millions defended our country’s hard won democratic rights – by ignoring calls on social media to join a phantom revolution (Amaeze et al, 2019).

It was important to note that the condemnation of the protest was not welcome by prominent activist in Nigeria, who insisted that the critical, all-important and fault-finding issues raised by Sowore

should be urgently addressed, attended to and focused on or engaged in, if Nigeria must remain a united entity practicing true democracy. Articulating and commenting on the issue, Mike Ozekhome (2019) a Senior Advocate of Nigeria and an activist, faulted the arrest of the Sahara Reporters, explaining that in the past, Nigerians including incumbent national chairman of the All Progressives Congress, APC, Adams Oshiomhole had cause to protest across the country against bad governance by sundry administrations. Furthermore, Ozekhome (2019) also blamed, criticized and rebuked the DSS for arresting and detaining Sowore and while government is celebrating for quelling the protest, the concerns raised by Sowore and his group must be addressed in the interest of Nigerians.

Ozekhome (2019) said: “What has Buhari administration done about herdsmen carrying automatic weapons, killing Nigerians in their homes and in their farms? We are talking of people maiming, involved in arson, raping, dismembering and they will come out and thumb their chest and say, yes, we are the ones doing it. What did the government do?” “Killings are going on and you are not doing anything about it. The Buhari – administration is allergic, hostile and opposed to plurality of voices and criticism. In the 2005, President Olusegun Obasanjo was in office and the present chairman of the APC, Adams Oshiomhole was the President of the Nigerian Labour Congress, NLC, we joined hands with the civil society groups to march on the streets of Lagos on a daily basis. At a point it got to a point that Obasanjo had to rally round and called us for meetings. Furthermore, Ozekhome (2019) said that as early as 2012, when Buhari was still nursing the hope of becoming President of Nigeria, he with other members of the then, Action Congress, rallied on the streets of Abuja with a group called occupy Nigeria that used the Ojota park to close Nigeria. Jonathan was then the president. There were no shooting, no arrest, musicians were called upon and sowore himself was part and parcel of the protest. Responding to the Presidency jubilation and joy over the crackdown on the “revolution now” protest, National Publicity Secretary of A fenijere and an activist, Mr. Yinka Odumakin (2019) describe the reaction of the presidency as “unfortunate and childish”.

Odumakin (2019) said; If there is awareness at the presidency, there is no cause for rejoicing over what happened. It should have been a moment for sober reflection. That the federal government had to deploy all its security agencies against the protest is awareness that Nigeria has become a fertile gown for the people to back such action. If the Buhari-administration had addressed the needs of the people a thousand Sowore shouting revolution on the streets would provide only comic relief to the people. But with the situation on the ground today, if a Miyette Allah cow is able to shout “revolution” it would gather followers. How to change the perilous condition of the people should be the concern of the government and not a childish celebration. Sowore’s “revolution now” march protest stands for symbolism for cry of hunger and poverty in the land, which need urgent attention to rescue the Nigerian people from bad governance and insecurity. During the “Revolution Now” protest in Abuja, activists defy crackdown and protest in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), as they converged on the office of the National Human Rights Commission, Maitama, to protest against the poor security situation and other social vices in the country. The protesters chanted “freedom comes by struggle by struggle” and demand the release of Omoyele Sowore, the leader of “Revolution Now” protest and the organiser of the Global Coalition for Security and Democracy in Nigeria, who was arrested by the DSS on Saturday, August 5, 2019.

In the FCT, the protesters had planned to hold the rally at the popular unity fountain, but changed their plans following heavy security presence at the park. At the office of the National Human Rights Commission, NHRC, they delivered a letter in which they expressed displeasure over the continued silence of the commission to the undemocratic incidences in Nigeria. Coordinator of the group, Dare – Aloye Ariyo (2019) condemned the government for tagging the protest a violent one. “We have intelligence that some compromised Nigerians have been paid, to attack us during this protest so it will be labelled a confrontation. We are peaceful people, this is a revolution against corrupt ruling elites. Ariyo (2019) said the arrest and detention of Sowore was undemocratic and disgraceful. Aside the protest at the NHRC, the FCT did not witness any protest because of the deployment of security operatives. Heavily armed and drawn from all security outfits including anti-riot and civil defence officers, the military, National Civil Defence Commission (NSCDC) and DSS, were visible in all public arenas including stadia, apparently to crackdown and foil any “illegal” gathering. Across the country, heavy armed security operatives foil the “revolution now” protest.

An Overview of Sowore's "Revolution now" march protest and His detention.

The story of Sowore's "Revolution now" protest and his detention has many symbolism and tale of fabrications and falsehood on the side of the Buhari – administration. It was unfortunate the Federal Government interprets Sowore's revolution protest as an insurrection which to those in Aso Villa labels it as treasonable because of the phrase "revolution now". Unfortunate, many Nigerians felt the government's claim against Sowore was false as many argued, does Greed Revolution amount to violent takeover of government? Or does industrial revolution mean the same thing? They try to argue that words do not actually mean what they are intended to mean, as words are naturally ambivalent. They don't always mean what their user intended them to mean. Words like revolution are used depending on the context of situation which the user what it to be (Obioha, 2019).

Sowore saw the protest as a "revolution", He saw the "revolution now" as a protest that would draw public and global attention to the bad governance and insecurity under the Buhari – led administration. Sowore's carefully chose the words "revolution now" for maximum impact to hug the headlines of the media. Sowore wanted to remind the Buhari government that governance is about the security and welfare of the people as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. As Obioha (2019) aptly pointed out, "the continuous detention of Omoyele Sowore on account of the "Revolution Now" protest would make him and his cause more popular, appealing and acceptable by many. With "the revolution now protest", Sowore has captured the imagination of frustrated and unemployed Nigerian youths. Keeping him in detention will make him hero and messiah, I think that Sowore may have achieved his aim. The best the Buhari-government can do to its image is to release him and his co-revolutionists now in detention". It is important for the Buhari-led administration to understand that Sowore and his group have made their point known to the public about the state of insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria through their choice of words and strategies. The word, revolution, did the magic for them, as it creates fear and panic to those in power and authority, to sit up. Sowore's revolution now protest vent out the wishes and aspirations of the masses in Nigeria. This shows that democracy is government of the people, for the people and by the people.

The federal and the state government are not only those elected to serve the people or the police and the military. In democracy, the government is the people of Nigeria. That is why Abraham Lincoln said that power belongs to the people on whose behalf those elected gained and secured their power. Therefore, in democracy, power does not belong to the few who are elected to serve the people. Even though, the majority can win power, but that majority must respect the wish of the minority, the majority must respect the wish of the minority for peace to reign. In a democratic setting, those elected to serve and the security agents are given the mandate by the Nigerian people to serve them. If they are not doing their job well, their employer, the masses, the people of Nigeria can call them to order. The Nigerian people need not wait till another cycle of election to check the excesses of those in power. It is important for Buhari-led administration to note that keeping Sowore in detention would not help the cause of the government. A truly democratic government that respects freedom of speech and association should not have arrested Sowore for expressing his democratic views no matter how he expressed them or the words he used to carry the weight of his views. Good enough, Sowore and his group were enlightened and educated enough, the group explains in detail what their aim is all about. They mention about bad governance and insecurity in Nigeria. Nothing in it symbolized violence or forceful takeover of the Buhari-led administration. A democratic government in place in Nigeria should not be afraid of the word revolution. Revolution can mean so many things in democracy other than bloody or violent takeover of a government. The Buhari-led administration should not tolerate the Miyetti Allah cattle Breeder Association protesters and loath another group because of their position or tone of protest. Democracy tolerates and accommodates dissention views. The best way the Buhari-led administration can stem the tide of protest is to govern Nigeria well, listen to the masses, people and respect the different ethnic groups and the rule of the law. (Obioha, 2019). Sowore's "revolution now" protest shows and symbolizes that the challenge confronting Nigeria needs urgent dialogue. Nigerian leaders and people need to sit down and discuss their challenges and try on the best ways to move the country forward. Sowore's protest is a symbol to point out that Nigeria is sick and it need divine healing.

Furthermore, a former politics editor at *Daily Trust Newspaper*, Ibrahim Dan-Halim (2019) was arrested by the DSS in Kaduna, for allegedly supporting Sowore's "Revolution Now" protest in a Facebook post, where he endorsed and supported the protest. The post reads: I feel I should share because it resonates with me.... The aim of the "revolution now" protest is to challenge the uncommon hardship, why we have 16m children on the street; challenge why we have become the poverty capital of the world; challenge why we have 20 persons with corrupt cases as federal legislatives and would be ministers.... We are revolting against the continuing killings that have left 20,000 Nigerians dead while those in office move around under state paid security and do nothing. We are revolting because of a thousand Nigerian soldiers killed by Boko Haram have been secretly buried without identifiable graves, dignity or honour. \$16 million was purportedly spent on mosquito nets but our children die daily from malaria. \$320million Abacha loot was purportedly distributed to the poor, where is the verifiable list? \$500 billion was purportedly distributed to the poor as so called trader-moni, where is the verifiable list? (Dan Halilu, 2019). The persons destroying Nigeria in and out of government are less than 10,000. For how long will the 201 million of us be silent? Forever? It will be sheer stupidity and very unfair of us to be silent and bequeath today's sorry Nigeria to our children. For how long shall we continue to endure bad leadership from certificate forgers, election riggers, ritualists and yahoo politicians, hoping upon hope for a better tomorrow when things get worse by the day? We are too rich to be poor. We are too blessed to be a mockery of the world!!! No!!! (Dan Halilu, 2019).

Conclusion

Sowore's "Revolution now" March protest was necessary given the state of insecurity, killings poverty, bad governance, and other issues affecting Nigeria under the Buhari-led administration. Therefore this paper condemned the arrest and detention of Sowore and called for his immediate release along with members of his group. The arrest and detention of Sowore was a huge abuse of human rights to freedom and association in Nigeria. Sowore's "revolution now" protest could not be said to be treasonable since it was yet to be implemented before he was arrested by the DSS. It is unfortunate to note that the long stay of the military in power has militarized Nigeria democratic space and culture, as Nigeria emanated from military dictatorship and tendency to oppress the masses, people, the press, the judiciary and the legislature to prevent freedom of speech and expression in Nigeria's nascent democracy since 1999.

The essence of Sowore's "revolution now" protest would have offered Nigerians the needed opportunity to express their feelings and pains to president Muhammadu Buhari. The arrest and detention of Sowore by the DSS was unfortunate because Nigerians are entitled to express their affection, feelings, opinions, perception and point of views, emotions and passions to a democratic government. Clime

Recommendations

This study has comfort with the following recommendations on Sowore's "revolution now" march protests on the level of Nigeria's democratic process and development.

- 1) The idea that Sowore's "revolution now" march protest was tantamount to anarchy, unrest and unpatriotic in a democracy was a falsehood. Sowore's "revolution now" protest was a constructive means in criticizing government and leaders in a democracy so that they can sit up. Sowore's protest was a complementary contribution to take Nigeria out of insecurity and bad governance challenges under the Buhari-led administration.
- 2) The protest was a patriotic move to enlighten and educate the leaders of the nation to deliver the fledgling dividends of democracy to the Nigerian people.
- 3) Sowore's "Revolution now" protest was out of love for Nigeria to deliver the nation out of bondage and anarchy. The protest was people driven to curb insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria under the Buhari led administration. Sowore's protest was delivered wisely to the National Human Right Commission, NHRC, office, in Abuja to complement the commission and the Buhari government efforts at addressing it perceived weaknesses in the area of insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria.

- 4) Sowore's "revolution now" protest has made the International Community to know that Nigeria masses and people are enlightened, educated and democratic to confront dictatorship and anti-democratic forces. Sowore's protest march against evil in Nigeria was an exercise of political maturity in the act and conduct of moral and God fearing leadership to strengthened Nigeria's democracy by pointing out the loopholes and set back of Buhari-led administration.
- 5) For Sowore to defy the heavily armed security outfits of security agencies and planned a nationwide protest in Nigeria to drive home to the government of Buhari its weaknesses in the open public makes Sowore a hero; for such courage to speak out the truth to power. When other politicians and activists in Nigeria are today stooges and sycophant to the government in power. Many Nigerians are applauding Sowore for standing firm and strong on the victory for democracy in Nigeria.
- 6) Those who went out on "revolution now" March protest across Nigeria defended once more again our country's hard won democratic rights-by obeying calls on social media to join the crusade for true democracy in Nigeria. They did it to defend Nigeria's young democracy and the rights of freedom of speech and association. Sowore and members of Global coalition for security and democracy in Nigeria were courageous to still uphold democratic values of modern day Nigeria as the preferred democracy rather than dictatorship, killings, insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria. Sowore was spear heading the "revolution now" protest because he was trying to protect his human right and democracy in his fatherland. In democracy, protest is one of the ways to solve the problem bedeviling doctoral regimes in developing countries.
- 7) It is important to note that one of the best strategy to fight dictatorial regimes in Nigeria and Africa at large is for activists of different groups to come together to support one of their own like Sowore who was protesting against insecurity and bad governance in Nigeria under the Buhari led administration, but was arrested and detained by the DSS. Therefore, the drive by a civil right group "Concerned Activists" to petitioned the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) over the arrest and detention of Omoyele Sowore by the DSS, was a good measure and step to fight dictators. In a joint petition signed by Ariyo-Dare Atoye and Deji Adeyanju (2019), the group called on the commission to rise up to its statutory responsibilities of defending the rights of Nigeria citizens under the strong hold of dictators.
 The petition submitted at the registry of the NHRC expressed displeasure "with their continued silence over the undemocratic incidences that are happening in the country. We are even more displeased by your silence in the face of the alarming human rights abuses considering the consistency of such anomaly under the Buhari led administration.
- 8) Meanwhile, Human Rights Writers Association (HRIWA) 2019 has described "the arrest of Sowore as clandestine, primitive, and accused the Buhari administration of "lacking the frame of mind to tolerate dissenting voice" HURIWA (2019) in a statement signed by its National Coordinator Emmanuel Onwubiko (2019) emphasized the need for the Buhari administration to respect the rights of Nigerians to protest if they feel disenchanting with the scheme of things.
- 9) In his own reaction, President of the Committee for Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Malachy Ughumadu (2019) said the ordeal of Sowore is nothing short of DSS misguided mischief to legitimize an otherwise illegal action through the courts. Clearly, the (CDHR) condemned the illegal arrest and detention of Sowore in the circumstances that was made which was highly characterized as a breach of his fundamental rights. It was unfortunate to note that during the Sowore's "Revolution now" protest march, the government raised a Pro-Buhari protest group, as well as to also demonstrate simultaneously at the same time the anti-Buhari protests were going on. It became a conflict between these two groups that created the seeming violence. The pro-Buhari group was aided by security agents and they turned it into violent protest. If you really want to look for who breached the peace of this country that day, it was the government that did it and should be held responsible. (Femi Falala, 2019). The Buhari led government should understand that there is power in the voice of the masses. The masses of Nigeria deserve the cause of Justice, good governance and order. The freedom of expression of everyone in this country is guaranteed by the constitution, and not treasonable
- 10) Today in Nigeria, it is unfortunate that all the critic and protest like that of Sowore's revolution now against the government is labelled an enemy of the government or a dangerous person who is

conspiring with foreign forces to undermine the government; whereas the voice of the masses do matter in a democracy. A protest like that of Sowore's revolution now march symbolizes the high point of public disappointment with political leaders. It is an important outlet through which citizens draw national leaders' attention to serious challenges confronting the nation, such as, growing poverty, breakdown of law and order, rampant kidnapping and callous killings, crumbling infrastructure, endemic corruption and lawlessness by members of privilege class (Obijiofor, 2019).

- 11) It is important for Nigerian activists to know that the call for a revolution does not imply there are no realistic ways through which Nigeria could be transformed for good. Non-violent options should be explored and, if viable, should be implemented, we must be mindful of the many unintended consequences that could accompany a revolution (Obijiofor, 2019).

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