

# FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL PROTESTS AND HUNGER IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

This study aims at examining salient causes of hunger, protests and the clamour for restructuring in Nigeria. This became pertinent owing to the fact that Nigeria a country known with high human and material potentials has been enmeshed to grappling with massive hunger, insecurity, bad governance, economic hardship, and corruption. The foregoing issues necessitated demands for economic justice leading to several days of protests in Nigeria tagged #EndBadGovernance in August, 2024. The study is anchored on assumptions of the relative deprivation and aggression theory that explicate discontents arising from negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality. The study adopts a qualitative approach in generating data. Findings of the study indicate that political elites exploited illiteracy to reinforce ethnic, religious and political divisions between groups of #EndBadGovernance protesters. Also, the #EndBadGovernance protest was hijacked by hoodlums and some selfish individuals and this led to the imposition of curfew in some states mostly in the northern region of Nigeria. Likewise, the incumbent government did not make proper provision for measures that could bring succor and relief to the citizens before implementing the fuel subsidy removal policy. The study recommends the need for people-oriented programmes and policies of government which should aim at cushioning the effect of hunger among Nigerians.

**Keywords:** Hunger, protests, governance, people-oriented policy

## Introduction

Most protests globally and in Nigeria in particular are carried out by youths. Youths have amazing and great potentials but are in a very

serious dilemma of socio-economic hardships, which may invariably hamper the realization of their potentials. Nigeria has a history of civil unrest and protests, with citizens often taking to the streets to voice their dissatisfaction with government policies and practices. The most notable recent example before the End Bad Governance and End Hunger protests was the End SARS movement in 2020, which sought to end police brutality. The current protests have been triggered by a combination of immediate economic hardships and long-standing governance issues. This is the first major coordinated protest in Nigeria since the deadly End SARS demonstrations against police brutality in 2020, which resulted in deaths and injuries after security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters. Though, that protest was described as “leaderless” and had nationwide and international diasporic appeal, as well as heft and momentum.

The Nigerian case presents a country with abundance of human and material resources. Such gifts need to be harnessed for the greatest happiness of the greatest majority (cite source). However, actualizing that seems to be a mirage as the country since its creation (British) in 1960 have been engulfed and endangered by series of challenges to content with. Despite of several efforts mad by successive administration to the present dispensation, it could be said that little or dwarfed progress has been recorded (cite source). One could conclude that the Nigerian state is traumatized especially with the downturn of economic challenges fuelled by the withdrawal of subsidy payment by the President Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration on the assumption of office in May, 2023. The former president Goodluck Jonathan’s administration attempted the removal of such subsidy on Premium Motoring Spirit (PMS) otherwise known as petroleum was vehemently resisted through days of demonstrations and protests largely from the north and other parts of the country in 2012. Hence, the consideration for a reversal of such policy and subsequently measures were taken to engage relevant stakeholders of the economy to softly remove the subsidy to accord citizens the chance to adjust and adapt to the new fuel era. The organized labour unions – Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Trade Union Congress (TUC) including National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Leaders of political parties and religious organizations amongst others

took to the streets after massive mobilization against the government's action.

The End Bad Governance and End Hunger protests that erupted in Nigeria in August 2024 are a testament to the deep-rooted socio-economic and political issues plaguing the country. For the first ten days in August, Nigerians nationwide protested against bad governance and a downturn in their collective economic fortunes. The past 18 months have seen the Naira sink even lower against the dollar, food inflation reach an all – time high (40%), the cost of petrol double after the subsidy was discontinued with no back-up plan and unknown 'bandits' continuing to wreak havoc across the northern region of the country. These protests, which have drawn significant national and international attention, highlight the widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of governance and the economic hardships faced by the Nigerian populace. The End Bad Governance and 'End Hunger' protests were, then, perhaps unsurprising. But compared to other protests in Nigeria in recent years, they were strange. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the immediate and remote causes of these protests across the country, providing a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic and political contexts that have fueled public dissent.

Since the emergence of the present administration, Nigerians had high expectations and hopes as regards the style of leadership in running the affairs of the country consideration serious deficiency in democratic principles in the corridors of power. The removal of fuel subsidy, high inflation rates, high cost of governance, high rates of unemployment (especially among the youths), high level of corruption noticeable in high places amongst others poised to be challenges insurmountable. It is against this background that the study attempts to explore some of these remote and immediate causes of such dilemma that characterized the state of the present Nigeria and the protests that ensued.

### **Economic Hardship and Inflation and Survival in Nigeria**

The conceptual definition of hunger adopted by the inter-agency group on the food security is: "The uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food, the recurrent and involuntary lack of food".

Generally, governance has to do with series of strategic (deliberate) that are aimed at ensuring socio-political intervention (welfare of the citizenry) in the polity. Kraay and Mastruzzi (2004), defined governance as the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. Specifically, it includes the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, the capacity of the government to formulate and implement sound policies effectively; and the respect of citizens and the states for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them. The most marked features of bad governance are the increase of corruption and the abuse of power.

The idea of good governance was popularized by the World Bank in the 1990's following the failure of the SAPs in the 1980s. It defines good governance as: The traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes; the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies and the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them (Working paper No. 2196; 1991). Good governance can also be the process of measuring how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources and guarantee the realization of human rights in a manner essentially free of abuse and corruption and with due regard for the rule of law. Good governance is desirable, but good democratic governance should be more desirable as it integrate both effectiveness and efficiency in governance, encourages inclusiveness and participation across sections of the country.

On the other hand, bad governance is a complete departure from the indices of good governance. This means, when those in position of authority (government of the day) failed to deliver on the expected aspirations of the people to justify the mandate repose on them. In other words, when there are no adequate strategies put in place to address the rising societal challenges that results to insecurity, infrastructural deficit, economic challenges, unemployment and poverty especially among the teeming youths and so on.

According to Ortiz et. al (2022), protest is a form of individual or collective action aimed at expressing ideas, views or values of dissent opposition, denunciation or vindication. This include expression of political, social or cultural opinions, views or perspectives. This refers to an expression of displeasure on any issue or policy that affects a group or institutions by its members to the respective authorities for immediate action. This could be carried out in various forms of withdrawal of services which hitherto rendered, coming out to the streets to express their grievances and demands which democratic principles allows. Though, in extreme cases such protests could take a violent form. This however, has far-reaching effects on the security of lives and properties. It is also called demonstrations. In other words, it is a public act of objection, disapproval or dissent against political advantage. However, a state so characterized with the aforementioned, cannot be divorced from conflict and chaos, as it must definitely breed violent youths who can succumb to any means to achieve their rightly denied goals as political violence become the norm for groups to express themselves in pursuit of their own goals (Salihi, 2012). To this effect, therefore, as democracy is the order of the day, the Nigerian youths have no option than to surrender to the offers of those in punitive and corrupt politicians to ease their sufferings through political thuggery and gangsters, which obstruct the major tenets of democracy (election). The right to protest is also strongly associated with human rights activities, including demands for the recognition, protection or exercise of rights. In this regard, protests may be led or supported by different types of actors or by combination of actors. Organized civil society, or NGO's, neighbourhood associations, religious bodies, schools, research institutions, trade unions and professional associations, political parties and social movements make these processes of grievance and expression feasible, within the framework of their strategies. Some of the identified immediate causes of the protests are:

The most pressing immediate cause of the protests is the severe economic hardship faced by Nigerians. Inflation rates have soared, with headline inflation at 34.19% and food inflation exceeding 40%. The removal of fuel and electricity subsidies has significantly

increased transportation and production costs, exacerbating the financial burden on the populace. These policies, implemented by President Bola Tinubu, have been criticized for worsening the economic situation rather than alleviating it (Business day NG). Suffice it to say that, the prevalence of inflation rate that culminated in the hike of foodstuffs in the market was partly as a result of the removal of fuel subsidy and the closure of all borders which was presumed to promote domestic production and consumption of goods to boost the country's Gross Domestic Product and exportation of agricultural produce. This economic hardship poised to be a great concern as the government is seemingly not taking decisive action nor taking 'the bull by the horn' in terms of providing adequate inputs and consistent policies that are aimed at sustaining regular production for ensuring food security and means of livelihood to many households in the aftermath of such stringent impositions. This hardship did not only affect prices of food items but equally increased the cost of transportation in domestic and international travels. The economic policies have led to the exit of several multinational companies, resulting in increased unemployment rates. This situation is particularly dire in the northern region of Nigeria, where poverty rates are relatively high. Reports indicate that 86 million people in the North live in multidimensional poverty, with widespread food insecurity and high rates of child malnutrition (Business day, 2024).

Political elites in Nigeria also exploit poverty and illiteracy to mobilize voters with food items such as rice and money. The rice is usually packaged strategically with the image of political candidates and the parties they represent. The assumption is that people are more likely to vote for a politician who influences them with food than one who only brings messages of hope. Social inequities, particularly in access to resources and opportunities, have been a long standing issue in Nigeria. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened, with the political class enjoying substantial privileges while the majority of the population struggles to meet basic needs. This disparity has fueled frustration and a sense of injustice, driving people to the streets to demand better governance and equitable resource distribution (Punch, 2024). Moreover the social structures

and governmental policies of the country have been creating and recreating poverty among youths. For instance, high school fees, especially at the tertiary institutions level which are great burden to settle by many parents who are consistently wrestling for daily-bread result greatly in a number of school drop-outs, and the non-availability of productive alternatives for these young people unarguably frustrate them to resort to other means, including protests.

### **Government Response and Public Perception of Protest in Nigeria**

The government's response to the economic crisis has been perceived as inadequate and disconnected from the realities of ordinary Nigerians. President Tinubu's address to the nation failed to provide concrete solutions to the economic woes, further fueling public anger. Additionally, the perception of corruption and the lavish lifestyles of the political elite have intensified public resentment. The organized labour – NLC and TUC who are well – known to register their displeasure through ultimatum, protests and strike actions in extreme cases were seen to be submerged and silenced by the government which made their mobilization and support for the protest to be shabby. This is partly because of the ongoing talks with government representatives on the implementation of the new national minimum wage projected to commence in August, 2024.

Be that as it may, twenty – five (25) years later into the civil rule in 1999, Nigeria is still enmeshed and bedeviled with high rate of corruption in both high and low places, bad governance characterized by an irresponsive government to the yearnings and aspirations of the teeming population especially the youths, high spate of insecurity still persists in the land across different regions including the threat of secession. The aforementioned only formed a fraction of the myriad challenges evident in Nigeria. Similarly, the study has posited the some remote causes of the protests that ensued within the period under review. However, they are not limited to the following: Nigeria's governance issues are deeply rooted in its history. The persistent lack of transparency, accountability, and

efficient governance has created a culture of distrust and disillusionment among citizens. These issues have been compounded by systemic corruption, where public resources are mismanaged, and political leaders prioritize personal gain over public welfare (Business Insider Africa, 2024).

Brennan (2012) opined that Nigeria lacks a system of governance in which leadership is based on capability. Rather, the political system in Nigeria is dominated by individuals who gain power through nepotism and by proxy rather than competence, influence voters with food rather than vision and consolidate power through intimidation or by incentivizing constituents with material gifts which they frame as “empowerment” to keep them subservient and loyal political followers. By implication, the failure of governance in Nigeria is arguably the result of incompetent leadership.

The ongoing security challenges in Nigeria have also contributed to the protests. In the northern regions, banditry, kidnappings, and insurgent activities have disrupted agricultural activities, exacerbating food insecurity. The inability of the government to effectively address these security issues has further undermined public confidence in the state's capacity to ensure safety and economic stability (Business day, 2024). As a result of the massive protests witnessed in parts of the country, threats to the security of lives and properties became a concern to many as some protesters took to the streets to burgle shops and looted items worth millions thereby sabotaging the efforts of other genuine protesters. This action led to the imposition of curfew in states like; Kano, Yobe, Borno, Jigawa, Zamfara, Plateau to mention but a few and strict enforcement by the security agencies to restore public order and safety.

The government's economic policies, particularly the removal of subsidies, have had direct and severe impacts on the cost of living. Fuel prices have doubled, leading to increased transportation and food costs. The subsequent economic strain has pushed many Nigerians into poverty, exacerbating public discontent. The failure to implement measures to mitigate the impact of these policies has been a significant driver of the protests (Business day, 2024). Furthermore, the high costs of living in the country has led many sectors of the economy



including the private sector to lay – off staff to cut – cost of running. This has in large measure left many working class in dilemma of losing their jobs or means of survival through daily earnings. The under – employed are left at the mercy of their respective struggles to make ends meet. The unemployed become more fed up by unfulfilled campaign promises of revamping the economy. Similarly, seemed to have their hopes and desires dashed – out owing to the growing number of those at the helm of affairs are at the cross – roads.

The Nigerian government's long history of corruption and mismanagement has eroded public trust. Instances of embezzlement, lack of accountability, and inefficient public service delivery have created a sense of disillusionment among the populace. The perceived disconnect between the government and the needs of ordinary citizens has further fueled the protests (Business Insider Africa). Statistically, Nigeria has consistently ranked low in the world Governance index in areas such as government effectiveness, political stability and the presence of violence and terrorism, rule of law and control of corruption. The country is perceived in the 2020 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index as a highly corrupt nation with 25/100 while its corruption ranking increased from 146 in 2019 to 149 in 2020 out of 180 countries surveyed. While President Muhammadu Buhari won the 2015 election on his promise to fight insecurity and corruption, his promises went unfulfilled; Boko Haram continued to unleash unspeakable violence on civilian while the fight against corruption proved counterproductive.

In the northern regions, the security situation has had a devastating impact on agriculture, which is the primary livelihood for many. Banditry and kidnappings have forced many farmers to abandon their fields, leading to reduced agricultural output and increased food insecurity. The government's inability to address these security challenges effectively has been a significant factor in the protests (Business day, 2024). The protesters also called on the government to address the country's worsening security problems, amid challenges including kidnappings for ransom. Like in the northern region, the primary cause of hunger is insecurity. The people cannot go to their farms. A lot of people are living in

internally displaced persons camps. The growing disparity between the rich and the poor has been a major source of public frustration. The political class' opulent lifestyle, in contrast to the struggling masses, has exacerbated feelings of injustice and inequality. This social inequity has driven many to participate in the protests, demanding a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities (Punch Newspaper). It is attributable to the level of poverty and human deprivation in the society today, as many families are unable to feed well. Thus, for peanuts and at the expense of their lives, Nigerian youths go on a rampage at the slightest provocation or rather instigation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study adopts the relative deprivation theory to aid in elucidating the hunger protest and the call for restructuring in Nigeria within the period under review. The credence of this theory, was informed by the fact that there was discontent in the political system arising from bad governance by various administrations in the country. This culminated in the relative deprivation of the material resources by the powers that be. This partly explains the nature of radical confrontations by different groups (whether of the left or right); Messianic religious, the rise of social movements, industrial disputes and a whole plethora of crime and deviance (Young, 2006). The relative deprivation theory has the central argument that it is not the objective condition of a person that determines his extent of dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction instead depends on many factors that are cognitive and emotional. By implication, a person that feels deprived and alienated or dissatisfied not on absolute, but relative terms. A person constantly compares himself to others around him and his dissatisfaction depends on his condition compared to that of others.

The quotations most often cited as formal definitions of the theory include those of Aberle (1962), Morrison (1971) and Cloward et al (1960). To Aberle (1962, p.209), "Relative deprivation may be defined as a negative discrepancy between legitimate expectation and actuality". For Morrison (1971), the basic notion of Relative Deprivation is that of the feeling of deprivation and alienation on issues that affect one's interest, that deprivation and alienation occur

in relation to a desired point of reference, often the reference group, rather than in relation to how little one has.

Cloward et'al (1960) opined that, people engage in anti-social and apathetic behavior not because they are acting out the values of their "culture of poverty", but because they have absorbed achievement oriented, materialistic culture of middle class life. They want to participate in the middle – class life style, and it is because they are deprived and alienated of this opportunity that they become politically and socially delineated in their relationship with the wider culture. Therefore, the relative deprivations result on the condition that a person has an expectation that is legitimate yet blocked by a few.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, Runciman's notion is considered to be most appropriate to serve as a model to explain the behavior of the youths involved in protests, and political thuggery. Runciman's (1966) model argued that the necessary preconditions are wanting, comparison to others, deserving and future expectations. Out of them, future expectations and comparison to others are the most critical variables that determine the seriousness of the feeling of deprivation. For example, when a person sees something he is deprived of and alienated as very bleak, he will feel highly deprived and alienated and protest harder to get it. Runciman writes of egoistical and fraternal deprivation. When a person compares himself to others in his group and finds out that he lacks what others have, he suffers from egoistic deprivation. If he compares himself to others in an outside group and rates himself lower in terms of the desirables possessed, he suffers from fraternal deprivation. Thus, a person may be deprived both egoistically and fraternally. In this situation, he suffers from what may be referred to as double deprivation.

The justification and relevance of this theory to this discourse is that youths tend to compare themselves within and outside their groups in the society in terms of socio-economic and political conditions and find out that they suffer from what Runciman referred to as double deprivation. Thus, the feeling of deprivation and alienation ensues when they find out that their condition is worst compare to that of others. This condition is barely known by the youths to have occasioned as a result of neglect, marginalization and deprivation in terms of socio-economic and political aspects of their

lives, by the few elites who siphoned resources meant for the improvement of their lives.

Salihi (2012) clearly averred that the manifestation of political protest in form of militancy or violence, which largely involves the youth, is attributable to the character of the state, particularly with respect to governance. Jackie Cillers (cited in Salihi, 2012) observed in several ways that the armed groups are specific responses to the multiple and deep crises of the state and to the challenges of development, democratization and governance due to centralized, patrimonial, privatized and ‘hegemonized’ state power, exclusionary politics, corruption, state malformation, de-constitutionalism truncated transitions and successions, inequitable distribution and the distribution of public goods, inter group tensions, poor leadership and the misuse and abuse of the state.

### **Research Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative approach in examining the nature of hunger protests and the need for restructuring in Nigeria. This offers a descriptive nature of the several factors that account for the massive dissatisfaction by different sections of the country as regards bad governance. This is seen to validate all other data obtained from other sources.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The study has among other factors unraveled some major causes of the hunger protest under the Tinubu presidency in 2024 to include:

#### **The irresponsible character of the government**

The masses especially, the youths consider the government as irresponsible to the yearnings and aspirations of the people. Despite several calls on the government to reconsider the removal of fuel subsidy, providing remedies to aid in cushioning the effects of such economic decision by the government on the growing population of the country yet the government seemed to be adamant to such agitations. Rather, what is obtainable is inflation at geometric ratio across the sections of the country without pragmatic measures taken by the regulatory agencies of government.

### **Inadequate sensitization on the positive impacts of subsidy removal**

Undoubtedly, the incumbent administration failed to carry out proper citizen-awareness on the positive impacts of the subsidy removal on fuel as presumed to boost national growth and development of the economy especially the long term gains for the country and its citizens. Though, this position was emphasized by the foremost candidates that contested the 2023 presidential elections. The announcement on the passed subsidy regime was received with enmeshed panic by all and sundry. The seemingly corrupt tendencies that characterized the payment of subsidy by the government was also not tackled neither was it publicized to a common man.

### **Inefficient remedies and alternatives by the government**

Suffice it to say that the government equally failed to consider putting remedial measures and alternatives in place before the proper enforcement of the 'No subsidy' payment. With such inconsiderate manner of the government, the teeming population would out rightly conclude that the government is out to cause deliberate hardship on its citizens knowing the high rate of people living in poverty in the country. This was partly a factor for the hunger protests.

### **Inadequate strategies for mass mobilization and protests**

The perceived organizers of the hunger and End bad governance protests in Nigeria could be said to have lacked strategic plan in expressing their grievances through ultimatum and peaceful demonstrations. The protests were largely regionalized as not all sections of the country vehemently supported the ideology. This could possibly be because there was no adequate consultations and backing of the relevant stakeholders like the labour unions, elites and other social movements across the country. This further led to experienced escalation of looting valuable items from shops, warehouses and breach of security due to the uncontrollable dimension of the protests. Secondly, the protesters were largely seen from the northern region of the country which did not actually portray the true nature of the intention the protest intends to serve in restoring the status quo.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Given the foregoing trend of events that unfolded, one can out rightly agree that the government did not arrange for proper remedial measures to cushion the effects of its onset policies on fuel subsidy regime. Therefore, it is only normal for citizens to express their dismay and displeasure with the policies enthroned by the present administration through demonstrations and protests on the streets. This is to further buttress the rights to freedom of speech and expression that democratic process promotes. It is also viewed by many as a signal sent to the government of the day on the need to step – up people oriented agenda for actualization and redeeming the trust reposed on them through the mandate at the polls by fulfilling them. The position of the Nigerian youths is clearly attributable to the nature and character of the state in which these youths find themselves. That is to say youths in Nigeria are not adequately catered for, which in essence led to their involvement in a number of criminal engagements including protests. No society will thrive if the most ingredient of that society is mismanaged, that is the youths. Moving forward, it is advisable for aspiring leaders to demonstrate high intellectual pedigree to translate knowledge into effective, transparent and accountable governance that leads to national prosperity, the need for any people-oriented government to ensure timely consultation with relevant stakeholders, enlightenment on any public policy and adequate provision for alternatives to cushion the effect of new policies on its citizens.

Having considered the varying impacts of the hunger protests across the country as a result of the new subsidy regime and the challenges caused by bad governance in the country, the study have suggested the following recommendations for onward considerations by any people – centred government. There is the need for leaders at different levels of government to be responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the people. This can boost the confidence reposed on them as true representatives of the people. The government should engage in timely consultations with all relevant stakeholders to assess every well – meaning public policy. This can aid in adequate sensitization to the grassroots so as to avert any unhealthy confrontation like protests that can easily be hijacked by hoodlums as

witnessed. Adequate remedial measures and alternatives that would aid a common man should be put readily available in order to cushion the effects of any policy.

Alos, any demonstration in form of protests should be exercised within the ambits of the laid down procedure for effective measures to be taken. Mobilization should cut – across different regional identities that exist in the country. All aggrieved parties protesting should readily avail themselves for dialogue in order to reach a consensus through the principle of collective bargaining and compromise for the interest of the country.

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