

# Socio - Cultural Implications of Riots in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

*This is a theoretical paper that looked at the various meanings of riot. It also delved a little into the brief historical overview of riot worldwide. Some remote and immediate causes of riot, like governmental policies, socio-economic situation of the society and student induced crises were equally discussed. The negative and positive implications of public and student induced riots were analysed. The last part of the paper dealt with the conclusion and some recommendations on how riots could be avoided in Nigerian society in order to reap the dividends of Nigerian nascent democracy were given.*

### **Introduction**

The term "riot" has a number of meanings that could portray both positive and negative aspects of the term. For instance, a situation of wild enthusiasm or uncontrolled jubilation by a group of people as a result of great success. The term could also be referred to negatively as a violent outburst of lawlessness by a group of people. This negative side is what most people refer to when talking of riot. Hence, the American Heritage dictionary of the English Language has defined riot as a wild or turbulent disturbance created by a large number of people. It is a violence disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled for a common private purpose. Those involved in the riot see themselves as being important in effecting changes in the political, economic and social policies of government.

Wynne (1973) is of the opinion that in the 70s throughout America, only a small percentage of young people are involved in the active riots. These youths are usually in sharp disagreement or in rebellion

against the government, but they are not in disagreement with their parents and their parents also agree with many of their criticisms about race, poverty and politics issues. While Keniston (1967) opined that it is very difficult if not impossible for a single activist to riot, whatever the characteristics he might have possessed.

Ufots (1980) narrated that most intense riot in Europe and the United States was during the decade of 1930s. He said the decade began with a feeling of social crisis as a result of combined impact of the economic depression and a growing awareness of foreign policy issues, such as the rise of fascism in Europe and the changing role of the United States in world affairs. This made people to become increasingly involved in political activism. In line with Ufots (1980), Altbach (1979) said that the communist and socialist groups grew modestly during the early thirties and the major riots of the period was in 1930s.

In Nigeria however, the first riot according to Eweama (1988) was in 1944 when the Britain needed a place to house the West African Frontier (W.A.F.F), i.e. a military force raised in British West African Colonies to help British in the Second World War. The British authorities then sought to move the students of Kings College out of the school to somewhere else. The students and their parents were against this plan and vehemently opposed it. The colonial administration, not minding the natives opposition went ahead and drove the students out by force, this made the parents, supported by other citizens to riot against the colonial administration.

In early 1961, there was a riot which started in Ibadan by the Nigerian citizens against the Nigerian governments inclusion of the Anglo - Nigerian Defense Pact with great Britain. The Nigerian citizens were so vehement in the opposition to the extent that the riot led to its abrogation in 1962. The general election of 1964 led to another riot in that year when the Nations President, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and the then Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa

were taken to court by the President of University of Nigeria Students Union, Mr. Isaac Adako (Eweama, 1988).

In 1963/64 there was a political riot in western region as a result of Action Group division into factions. The first faction was led by Alhaji Dauda Adegbenro, while the second faction was led by chief Samuel Akintola, the then Premier of Western Region. This division made Akintola to form his own Political Party called Nigerian National Democratic Party. This riot extended to Western Region House of Assembly and later became a religious riot between Muslims and Christians. Danbazau (1993) narrated that just as this riot erupted in the western region, another riot erupted in Benue Province which took the combined might of the Military and the Police under the leadership of Jolly Tanko Yusuf to crush.

The 1970s witnessed a lot of riots by both citizens and students of tertiary institutions. Most of the riots were carried out by students and joined by other people (non-students) in the town. For instance, in 1970, the students of Yaba Higher College rioted as a result of their syllabus which they claimed could not meet the manpower needs of the country. The students rioted because of this and they were joined by other people under the auspices of National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS). Ajibade (1993) considered 1980s and 1990s as a turbulent period in Nigeria and gave some recital concerning riots especially by students across the Nigerian Universities.

### **Some causes of riot**

Public riots are caused by many factors including national and international issues. Bereday (1983) opined that rioters often protest to correct internal government abuses or what he calls "domestic cleavages". He also continued that on occasion, rioters have even toppled the

government they opposed. According to him, this was the case of the overthrow of Menderes in turkey and the removal from power of Sygmon Rhee in Korea. Fagbougbe (1983) explained that in 1961, a few months after political independence was achieved in Nigeria, people rioted against the Nigeria government inclusion of the Anglo - Nigerian Defence Pact with great Britain. The pact was viewed by the citizens as a veiled form of perpetuation of Britain's hold in Nigeria.

Also, on National (and international) issues, Ajibade (1993) said that rioters have been found expressing their views. On this, she asserted that student rioters are usually relied upon by the public to express the general opinion of the public on such national and international issues. This is because, while the individuals in the public would hesitate to express their opinion and students on the other hand feel free to talk. She gave an example of 1985 riot against the abortive coup of late Major - General Maman Vatsa. Public RIOTS against fuel hike and Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of 1986 and 1989 respectively were all started by students of tertiary institutions. Ajibade (1993) also said students have led public riot to complain about the spending spree surrounding the h -Ming of ECOWAS summit conference in Abuja in 1991. They had equally at one time or the other queried the 'big brother' role Nigeria plays to other African countries.

Rioters equally protest against some government orders. Daily Times of May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1986 and May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1986 reported that the parents, citizens and students of Ogun State University rioted against the state

government's directive that their parents should produce tax receipts before being allowed to stay in school.

Socio - economic situation of the society has been described by Ajibade (1993) as another cause of riot in the society. The writer said mass unemployment, high inflationary trend and the high cost of transportation caused by nation-wide fuel scarcity in the 1990s were responsible for public riots that were started by students of higher institutions and later joined by the public. Jayaram (1979) said that the rising inflation of the early seventies marked the turning point in economic scene in India. He reported that between 1971 and 1974, the per capital available of food grains fell by 11% and industrial production stagnated. Also prices of food items including meat, vegetable and edible oil rose between 30 and over 100 percent. This made the "people facing hardship to blame and protested against the ruling congress government. The author also reported that the widespread of corruption in India made a local leader to instigate some people, including students to riot against the government of Bihar in 1974. When the governor of Bihar was due to address the legislature, the Narayam and Bihar rioters prevented him from reaching the legislature. The governor then reacted with excessive use of police force against the public and this led to great riot and violence in Bihar in 1974.

### **Socio – cultural implications of Riots**

Public riots, which are induced disturbed situations in the public has a lot of devastating disaster on political and socio-economic situation of any nation. Government and individual properties are always destroyed and in some cases innocent lives are attacked and individuals may die.

An instance of destruction of government property was cited in Daily Times of May 29, 1986. The paper reported that the May 1986 riot led to the burning down of a Federal Government Car. Also, the rioters were reported to have burnt down a police station at Ijebu-ode. The paper also reported that in Lagos, a Bedford Lorry belonging to the Nigerian Police Force with registration number N.P.F 8030 A. Carrying drinks, beverages and semovita was burnt down with the goods at the foot of the flyover along Western Avenue, Suru-lere.

One other section of the paper again reported that some angry rioters seized government vehicles and set them on fire. According to the section, six government vehicles including two Volkswagen beetle cars with registration number 6LALG 128 and LA2053 A.H., a Peugeot 504 car with registration number 12 FGN 94 and two others whose registration numbers could not be known were set ablaze at Jibowu Street, Lagos. Also a Lagos State Transport Corporation bus with registration number LA 8654 A.N was driven to an unknown destination by the rioters. This wanton destruction of government properties makes both federal, state and local government to spend a lot of money in repairing or replacing the damaged and lost properties.

The 1963/64 western region riot led to operation wet e, whereby political opponents were burning themselves alive and properties were being destroyed. This resulted into repeating of election exercises in western region (Danbazau, 1993). The recent Kano riot and Zango Kataf riots led to loss of many lives and properties and many others were rendered homeless.

If riots involve students in form of student riot or what Taiwo (1997) tagged student unrest, it often has the adverse effect of non-completion of prescribed course of study. This is

due to the fact that students might have not covered enough topics in their course content before closing down the school. The schools so closed down usually re-open only for students to face their examinations. The resultant effect is that the students, according to Abdulkareem (1992) are "ill-baked". The author said, this is responsible for falling standard of education. Student riot also leads to KILLING and wounding of students usually by police or by another group of students.

A lot of arrests are usually made by the security agents during riots. Daily Times of May 29, 19<sup>86</sup> reported that some people were arrested over a riot carried out by some rioters.

Public riots lead to halting of traffic flow. This is because rioters are usually seen barricading roads and making burn fires on major streets. The above mentioned Daily Times also reported that an eye witness said that the rioters had earlier barricaded Alake areas under the flyover to stop vehicles coming to western avenue. And that many people who use Western Avenue had to trek to their destinations following the scarcity of commercial vehicles along the route.

More so, there is the effect of innocent people being dehumanized by the security agents during riots. For instance, some female students were said to have been raped during the May 1986 public riot. Daily Times of May 27, 1986 reported "At least, eight female students were allegedly dehumanized by the law enforcement agents during last weeks crises. Some of the students of the institution claimed that two of them died during the process" (p.7).



This indicates that in the public riot action, property are often destroyed, participants and non participants attacked by rioters or law enforcement agents and unlucky citizens may even die premature and needless death. These are negative outcomes of riot in Nigeria and other nations. But these outcomes should not turn ones attention away from the fact that some positive outcomes may stem out of public riot. One of such ways through which riots have positive outcomes is by forcing the government or those in authority to meet rioters' demands. Odetara (1991) observed that an observant school administrator is not threatened by conflict, as conflict is not only inevitable in any organization, but it could also be functional. This observation means that as riot is dysfunctional, it could also be functional.

Psacharopoulos and Kazamias (1980) said that when Greece was under the Iron grip of a military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974, there was an open riot against the dictatorship which led to the end of the regime. And a new government headed by a Veteran Politician Constantine Karamanlis was restored in the summer of 1974. The new regime then embarked upon a reformist program.

Coming to Nigeria, the open public riot against the Nigerian governments inclusion of the Anglo – Nigerian Defence Pact with great Britain led to its abrogation in 1962.

Many demands made by students when rioting have been met before. Eweama (1988) opined that in 1970, the students of Yaba higher college protested against the college been administered from Britain, they also wanted autonomy for the school and standardisation of its certificate as well as the abrogation of the city and Guides Syllabus which they claimed could not meet the manpower needs of the country. The author said that the students concerned rioted under the auspices of national

union of Nigerian students (NUNS) and their demands were met.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

A brief history of early public riots were analysed after giving some definitions of riot. Both negative and positive outcomes of riots were briefly analysed. Due to the pro-destructive and anti-establishment of riots concerning economic, political and socio-cultural situation of Nigeria, as whenever riots occur, they usually present an ugly scene by disrupting the government programmes, destroying properties and attacking individuals. To avoid destructive riots therefore, the following recommendations are made; the public (and students) should always embark on dialogue with the government whenever there is grievances between them and the government instead of taking to street as rioters.

The political riots among political opponents should be avoided. Political opponents should always see themselves as partners in progress instead of seeing themselves as enemies that should be attacked.

Politicians should not take the game of politics as do or die affair. Winners and losers during political elections should accept whatever comes to them as their destiny. Losers should rally round the winners and see themselves as one. Here political thugery should be discouraged in all

its ramifications. With this, political and public riots will drastically reduce if not brought to an end and the citizenry shall start to reap the fruit of democracy in Nigeria.

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