

Why Youth Service in Nigeria: The Contests and Agitations in 1972-1973

by

Yemi Balogun

adeyemi_balogun@yahoo.com

Department of History

Adeyemi College of Education, Ondo, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines the major reasons why young people could react angrily when asked to serve the nation. Young people are usually regarded as social capital¹ whose energy and visions can be harnessed to drive major developmental projects and bring about change in their communities. Engaging them in the service of the nation is perceived to be a two way process that offer them some benefits as well as the community they served.² The thinking is that youth service encourages young people to participate in community and nation building while they feel a sense of belonging. It also allows them to learn and acquire some basic skills of life such as self-reliance, hard work, patriotism and humanitarian attitude. However, the mobilization of youths for national service may be affected by factors which include national security, the type of government in the state, problem of communication, exclusion of participants in decision-making, and suspicion about the objectives of service. Some of these factors are observed in the contests and agitations of Nigerian students against their call to serve in the mandatory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) in 1972-3. This paper thus seeks to understand why the youths in the nation's tertiary institutions faulted the arguments of government to draft them into the civic service scheme. Largely, the paper considers the reaction of the youth as a problem of exclusion in decision-making in the nation and the crisis bothering on the right of the state to request service without commensurate guarantee and provisions for the needs of those involved.

Introduction

Youth service could be part of a developmental approach to encourage young persons to be useful for themselves and their communities. Thus, an assessment of various youth service programmes across the world suggests that they have the capacity to benefit the server and the served in promoting common consciousness, education, discipline, self-reliance, among other tangibles and intangibles benefits.³ The range of benefits offered by youth service is also the reason why it is recommended for rebuilding post-conflict societies like Nigeria.⁴ Although the decision to establish the youth service scheme was late, the Nigerian government has increasingly grown to appreciate its significance to nation-building.

The problem of nation-building predisposed Nigeria's ruling elite to thinking that the youths, who would be the country's future leaders, would help to address its national challenges after the 1967-1970 Civil War. Government believed that the youths have the energy and passion to help in nation building. Some members of the ruling class were particularly convinced that the training of a new set of Nigerians, who would be disciplined, loyal and ready to serve in the interest of the nation, must start with the graduate youths.⁵ Government therefore explained its responsibility to direct the affairs of these youths, as well as giving them the required skills and resources needed to achieve the objective of nation-building.⁶

But, the students thought otherwise. Most of them explained that they understood the problem of nation-building and that they knew the strategies that could be used to solve that problem. They were mostly of the opinion that national service ought to be inclusive, sparing no segment of the population such as ministers, public officers and parents. They added that if the government was insistent on using them as sacrificial lamb to salvage the nation's woes then it should first of all put in place certain measures which included payment of their school fees and employment after their service to the nation. Whatever their agitations and demands were in this period were put to rest when government held a dialogue with representatives of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) and subsequently went ahead to established the scheme in 1973.

The agitations of Nigerian students were centred on several issues relating to the question of why the youths should serve the nation, the objectives of service, as well as the conditions to be met before that service. These questions are part of the competitions for political power, resources, among others, between the Nigerian state and its youths since the 1960s.⁷ Thus, this paper seeks to examine the major issues that incited the contests and agitations of Nigerian students over the call to serve the nation in the NYSC programme. It will analyse how government, students and the Nigerian academia construct the objectives of youth service and their roles in the NYSC programme. The paper will also show how the contest over youth service was resolved between the government and the students.

This paper is divided into six sections. The first section introduces the theme of the paper. The second section explores the literature on youth protests, agitation and violence, and this leads into the interrogation of the role of youths in nation-building in the third section. The fourth section discusses the national challenges that led to the call for youth service in Nigeria, followed by the fifth section where the contests and agitations of Nigerian students towards the decision to establish the NYSC scheme are examined. The sixth section concludes the paper.

Review of Literature

The form of contest and agitations by Nigerian students against the call to serve the nation is a common phenomenon associated with young people. A survey of literature on youth studies show that protests, agitations and violence have all been used by young people throughout the world to press home their demands and correct perceived injustice of government and the society. In 1968, there were series of students protest movement in many parts of the world which, according to Farik and Weinber,⁸ had its overall individual characteristics and emphases. The protest movements were united in their opposition to the American war in Vietnam, but they also represent a fundamental social change as well as the beginning of a new political culture. The protesting youths used the opportunity to show their distrust of all forms established institutions including parents, the police, the school administrators and the government.⁹ In effect, the protests help to promote the participation of the minority in the public sphere and they encouraged the development of women and cultural studies.¹⁰

In recent times, the problems posed by unemployment, poverty, deprivation, and state repression are critical issues that often motivate many young people to react against government and the society. This is observed in the rebellion of the Niger-Delta militant youth movements in Nigeria from the 1990s to about 2008. Osaghae and Suberu¹¹ pointed out in their findings that the militant youth movement emerged from the longstanding problems of unemployment, lack of respect for human rights, poor economic reform policies and repression by the state, which became more entrenched under the Sanni Abacha led military government. Ethnicity was also identified in the formation of violent youth activities against the state. Oruwari and Opuene¹² identified this trend in Port Harcourt Nigeria in which youths of the same ethnic background hang around together on the street to protect themselves against youths from other ethnic groups in their fight for economic and political rights in the region.

Religion is also traced to the eruption of protests and demonstrations by many youths in the society. Sanni¹³ examined this factor in Northern Nigeria after the return to democratic governance in 1999. In this period, many youths agitated for the implementation of the Shari'a legal code which they believed would assure them of good governance in the new democratic dispensation. This argument would appear plausible after the end of military rule in the country that was characterised by series of human right violations, corruption and mismanagement of economic resources. The argument would also appear as a form of rejection of western democratic values represented by the new government. Apart from the Sharia issue, many youths in the region also demonstrated against the attempt to stage Miss Nigeria pageant in 2002 which they claimed opposed Islamic culture of decency in dressing.¹⁴

Longstanding political exclusion in decision making have also incited protests and agitations of many youths. John Harris¹⁵ discovered in the case of young middle class Indians who protested against public corruption and rape in Delhi in 2011-12 that the need for public reforms and popular representation in government were at the core of the grievances. The protest was also used to show dissatisfaction of the ruling political party, the Congress Party. In their final report prepared for DFID's Equity and Rights Team on youth exclusion and violence in fragile states, Hilker and Fraser¹⁶ identified certain structural factors that underlie youth exclusion and their propensity to get involve in violence and rebellion in the society. Among these are unemployment and lack of livelihood opportunities, unequal and insufficient educational skill, poor governance and weak political participation, gender inequalities, as well as legacies of past violence. There are cases where these structural factors do not lead to protest or violence, but where there are weak institutions for mediating issues of grievances with the state, the outburst of protest and agitation might be expected.

However, apart from the studies on youth involvement in protests and violent activities there have also been studies which identified the important role of young people in peace-building, community development and economic growth. It is argued that young people embody the hopes and dreams of the society they belong and thus, the task of community building must revolve around them. This is why it is also necessary to involve them in civic duties that would help them to acquire skills and habits required for civic engagements in the society.¹⁷ This argument is one of the major reasons why national youth civic service programmes have been prescribe for training the youths in many countries. Indeed, this argument resonates in the establishment of the NYSC scheme in 1972-3. Beyond this, there is a need to interrogate what other reasons are adduced in support of the establishment of the scheme and the motives for recommending it to graduate youths in Nigeria. This will help to understand the relevance of civic youth service and the relevance of young people in this initiative.

Civic Service and Nation-Building: Interrogating the Role for the Youths

The NYSC scheme is a civic service programme through which the government of Nigeria mandates graduates of tertiary institutions to undergo one year of service to the nation in several establishments across the country. The scheme is aimed at nation-building, involving the promotion of national consciousness and awareness, the development of the youths and economy of Nigeria. Calling on the youths to serve the nation was therefore considered as a conscious and direct attempt to combat challenges against stable, united and self-reliant nation. This entails teaching the youths the values of patriotism, hard work, tolerance and honesty. It also includes the need to create common consciousness among them, encouraging them to seek employment in their place of primary assignment and appreciating the need to live permanently with indigenous people after the service programme. It is a micro-initiative which focuses on social change from a section of the country regarded as Nigeria's future leaders.¹⁸ This youth service experiment is not limited to Nigeria.

The studies of youth service in other countries show that the programme has been employed to deal with a number of challenges facing the youths in particular. In their study of the youth service programme in the United States, Sherraden and Eberly pointed out that these challenges, among which are unemployment, drug abuse, alcoholism, violence, crime and educational imbalance.¹⁹ It is usually presumed that the youths could be reformed and made productive for themselves and the community through this service scheme. Roger Landrum *et al* have also identified three significant perspectives and reasons for calling on the youth to serve.²⁰ First is that youth service is seen as a form of human development programme which shapes the abilities and character of people that educational institution failed to inculcate. The second reason is that young people are seen as national resource whose energy, flexibility and innovativeness can be used to deal with social and economic needs beyond the reach of existing institutions. The third reason is the view that young people are needed to address social problems like crime, drug abuse and unemployment.

It has also been argued that civilian young people can play a vital role in post-conflict societies. Eberly and Gal have noted that in such cases as that of Nigeria after the civil war, young people can serve as social capital or work force by rendering voluntary welfare, economic, health and social services.²¹ Youth behaviour, by which young people identifies with the state, remain loyal to the state and serve the state is another way through which they can contribute to post conflict societies. In addition, service learning, by which young people acquire academic skills, and learn from providing the needs of other people, among others, can help rebuild post-conflicts societies.

The nature and significance of such civic service schemes as the NYSC to nation-building is underscored by the republican state system.²² According to this republican tradition, citizens are thought to have purposes which connect them with the state in a mutual relationship that ensures just and stable republican polity in which the individual enjoys freedom. The republic exists through the support of the people, and they are assured the enjoyment of their freedom in the republic.²³ The republic further stresses the importance of an organic society in which the state and citizens become one community.

The republican system emphasises the importance of such virtues as temperance, justice, courage and wisdom which are rooted in patriotism in contemporary times. The concept of patriotism is at the core of a citizen-soldier which was held by Machiavelli to be the product of a military training and religious indoctrination. It therefore signifies the ultimate sacrifice for one's country. This patriotism must be constantly renewed to prepare the citizen-soldier in the service of the state. The citizen has a duty to defend the state and partake in its administration. This is necessary because if the citizens are not willing to fight for the republic, according to Heather, it will be dominated by external forces; and if they are unwilling to contribute to its civil affairs, the republic will degenerate into corrupt practices and disagreement.²⁴

The republican tradition also demands an absolute loyalty and complete sacrifice from the citizen which, according to Dagger, is rarely a natural activity.²⁵ It “requires the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills; it requires considering the interest of others, not just one’s own, even preferring them.”²⁶ This republican tradition, according to Obadare, however, has some limitations which are built into it.²⁷ First, the republican tradition assumes that both the state and its citizens are mutually engaged in a common project of nation or state building. Second, it is assumed that the “effects of this common or joint venture are evident at every stage of the process, thereby renewing and revalidating the ideal or/and the target – state consolidation and nation building through national solidarity and development.”²⁸ Third, it is assumed that the “only legitimate means of public participation is as a citizen-soldier involved in the defence of the state - or in contemporary times, citizen-civilian involved in *sacrificial* communal or national service – and one who directly participates in governance.”²⁹ The first and second assumptions did not explain that differences exist in the interest of the state and its citizens because it construes the state as being formed by the governors and the governed. Therefore in multi-ethnic states like Nigeria, these assumptions and emphasis on duties above rights may be problematic because the service rendered to the state may serve to reconstitute rather than consolidate the polity.³⁰

It could also be observed in the arguments used to support civilian youth service programmes that there is a divide between the statuses and roles of the state and the youths in nation-building. Government assumes the role of guardians and mentors that should train the youths and direct their affairs towards building a better society. In this division of responsibilities, therefore, the effectiveness of the state would depend on the institutions and values it put in place to train the youths. Should government provide the necessary infrastructures that are required for human development and those at the helm of affairs show evidence of good character and patriotism, it is possible that the state will produce better citizens who will be ready to fight in its interest when called upon to do so. In situations where the state is unable to guarantee what citizens needed to achieve their dreams in life, their cooperation and readiness to fight for the state might be in doubt.³¹ And, there is a possibility that citizens will also display unpatriotic attitude if those at the helms of affairs of the state fail to lay good example.

In this regard, the thinking that youth service is relevant to nation-building has continued to be seen by many Nigerians as a deception.³² For instance, in 1972, many academics seek to know if the government can be trusted in training a new set of Nigerians and rebuilding the nation when it is obvious that the ruling elite are the ones responsible for the malaise that befell the nation. Part of this deception is also the impression that those who undergo the service programme will be the leaders of the nation in future. Indeed, many youths now consider such sayings as a ploy to perpetuate the continuity and survival of the ruling class in power.

Hence, the concept of ‘youths as leaders of tomorrow’ often connotes “the non-interrogation of the existing power relations in society and is a recipe for preparing the youths to perpetuate a particular mode of power relations that suggest a permanence of structures of dominance and interests, but with the entry and exit of occupants’ overtime.”³³

Obi has further emphasized that:

This conceptualization also suggests the sub-ordination of youths to the power structure controlled by elders in order to facilitate system stability, cohesion and continuity. Political time then becomes a conveyor belt that takes the loyal and disciplined youth into future power, when the elders pass into myth and history.³⁴

This perception of the state does not preclude the youths from knowing that the state has powers to make laws, take decisions and enforce them on behalf of citizens. This includes the power to call on any citizen to render service for the nation. However, the youths expect that, in the exercise of its powers, the state should seek for their own contributions on issues that concern them. This will particularly ensure that they have proper information on the issue and know how to deal with it. This is a principle assured in a representative democratic system of government. Not allowing people to have a say or know about an issue that concern them in the society can create room for negative suspicion. It is therefore realised, as will be shown later, that one of the major reasons why the university students contested their recommendations for the national service scheme is lack of proper information on the operation of the scheme and why they are chosen.

National Challenges and the Call for Youth Service

Nigeria is a plural society made up of people who live side by side without mingling in one political unit. Their inability to mingle is the consequence of politics and its colonial creation. Because of this, one of the challenges faced by the country at the time of independence in 1960 was that there was little or no common consciousness of being one among the various ethnic groups in the country.³⁵ This problem led to the question often asked: is Nigeria a nation? And if so, who is a Nigerian? The country faced other challenges at independence. One of these is that the country’s domestic economy was largely dominated by foreign firms. Owing to their huge financial outlay, foreign firms controlled a large share of the country’s manufacturing and industrial sectors in spite of government’s effort to promote economic dependence.³⁶ Among these firms were Unilever and the United African Company (UAC) which have investments in trade and manufacturing, as well as Shell Petroleum Development Corporation responsible for the exploration of crude oil in the Niger-Delta.

International trade was also dependent on Britain, its former colonial overlord. Although the country's export relied on few cash crops like cocoa, palm oil and groundnut, it was still a poor nation. The country's other challenges were unemployment, low per capita income and inadequate social and economic infrastructures such as schools, hospitals and roads. These challenges made nation building a necessity after independence.

In building the nation, the Nigerian government had a national development plan for the country. Many Nigerians, including academics and artistes also took bold steps to promote nation-building. These efforts however failed to bring the desired goal because of the attitudes of many public office holders who did not openly play the game of ethnicity but also became enmeshed in serious corruption, repression and bullying of oppositions.³⁷ For instance, in the commissions of enquiry constituted by the Aguiyi Ironsi in 1966, it was discovered that many office holders in the Nigerian Airways, Nigerian Ports Authority and Electric Corporation of Nigeria used their influence to secure personal contracts and established business firms to enrich themselves.³⁸ Their actions thus contributed a great deal to the collapse of government in 1966 and a civil war the following year. Towards the end of the war, Nigerians made calls for the establishment of a youth service scheme that would be useful in post-civil war reconstruction programmes across the country.

The service scheme was recommended to the youths for several reasons. One of these was the thinking that Nigeria's ruling elite who pushed the nation to the brink of disintegration were not patriotic and disciplined in behaviour as people needed to build a strong, stable and viable nation.³⁹ It was thus expected that through the scheme, Nigeria would be able to train new set of leaders who would be scrupulous in orientation in any endeavour, particularly when they take up the leadership of the country in future. This conviction was predicated on the notion that the ruling class were ethno-religiously conscious because they do not understand each other's culture nor appreciate the challenges they face in their environment. It was thus believed that young people could break the cordon of ethnic prejudice when they relate with other Nigerian groups and sharing their experiences when they are made to work and live with them for a brief period in their lifetimes.

It was also realised at the end of the civil war that such socio-economic challenges as unemployment and inadequate skilled personnel had increased across the country, particularly in rural areas. Before the war, the problems in the rural areas were caused by the immobility of skilled labour, as many of them preferred to work in the urban centres that have social-infrastructures and where their chances of securing 'white collar jobs' are better guaranteed. After the war, it was realised that many skilled personnel, especially the Igbo, had left the crisis prone region in Northern Nigeria. Unemployment was a problem that affected most youths, including university graduates in this period, yet they refused to take up employment in the rural areas. It was therefore expected that through the mandatory service scheme, graduate youths would be used to address the problem of labour immobility and shortage in the rural areas. It was also expected that these youths would take up permanent employment at the end of their service years in these areas after working and familiarising themselves with the local people.⁴⁰

Similarly, given the poor economic condition of the country, the scheme also intends to make the youths self-reliant, and in the process, contribute to economic development of the country from the bottom. This was expected to be achieved through their involvement in technical, scientific and vocational skills in their states of deployment. Calling on the youths to serve the nation was also regarded as a cost effective measure to address the problem of inadequate financial resources. And, as part of duties of citizenship, the youths were expected to sacrifice their time and energy, providing cheap labour for the country's urgent social and economic needs.⁴¹

It cannot be ascertained when the first call for a service corps was made in Nigeria. But there were indications that the idea had been suggested around 1963 by many individuals in the country among who was Tai Solarin.⁴² From about 1965, the call for youth service received more attention from many groups in the country. Prominent among these groups were members of the nation's university system (university undergraduates, lecturers and Vice-Chancellors).⁴³ In his visit to the University of Ibadan in 1965, students' leaders were said to have besieged the Prime Minister, Sir Abubakar, imploring him to consider establishing a Youth Volunteer Corps for both civilian and military purposes. Sir Abubakar was said to have remarked wittingly: "you are dangerous without guns."⁴⁴ But while students appear to be waiting for the government, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors of Nigerian universities took a step to establish a service scheme for students in their schools. In the 1969/1970 academic session, Professor Lambo of the University of Ibadan, on behalf of the committee announced to the nation their acceptance of the idea of a National Youth Service.⁴⁵ Although it was reported that students lustily welcomed this initiative, the service scheme did not appear to have taken off because government also seem to have bought the idea of introducing a national youth service scheme for the student after graduation.

Thus, after realizing the pre- and post-war socio-economic and political challenges in the country, the Nigerian military government commissioned a study committee in 1968 to advise on the possibility of introducing a youth service corps for Nigeria.⁴⁶ Government was critical of objectives which had military and political implications for students in this period. Because of the problems created by the civil war, the service corps according to the government was therefore to be "concerned with relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction, but potentially becoming a permanent scheme mobilizing Nigerian youth for Development Tasks".⁴⁷ But in spite of this enthusiasm, discussions on the service corps appears to be silent in government circle up to 1970 when the Second National Development Plan was launched.

Gowon's Independence Day Address: Protests and Reactions

Following its 1970 development plan to establish a national youth service scheme for the country, the Gowon administration made good its promise in his speech marking the twelfth year independence anniversary of Nigeria in 1972 when it announced government's readiness to start the scheme in the following year with graduate youths of Nigerian universities.⁴⁸ In his address, Gowon stated:

The Federal Military Government recognizes that the future of this country lies in the hands of the youth of today. It is therefore prepared to ensure that it provides the physical, mental and spiritual environment in which these young persons can grow up to be worthy citizens of this great nation.

...I promised the nation when launching the current Four-Year Development Plan that Government proposed to ... establish a compulsory National Youth Service Corps, the aim of which is to bring together our qualified young men and women and to inculcate in them a sense of discipline, dedication, national pride and consciousness through nationally directed disciplined training, not necessarily in the Armed Forces, but in serving the nation in any capacity for a short period in their life before settling down to their chosen career.⁴⁹

Gowon noted further that the reason for committing the service scheme to the youth was because of his abiding faith in the younger generation and his belief that if the energies of young people are directed into the proper channels, the future of Nigeria can be assured. Although he made further clarifications on the scheme at the Tenth Year Anniversary of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, his address spurned protests and reactions from various segments of the Nigerian society.⁵⁰

Nigerian students, who had hitherto canvassed for the establishment of youth service, were among the first to react. Their reactions mostly centre on that the scheme was not properly introduced to them. In fact, they wanted to be part of the planning process of the scheme in a way that would give room for negotiation on certain objectives and activities of the scheme. However, by not including them in the planning of the scheme, they pointed out their doubts in the objectives of the service scheme. The students of the University of Lagos were worried that the motives behind the service scheme which they believed was the “handiwork of a few senile advisers” of General Gowon were “mischievous, unrealistic and lacked seasoned reasoning.”⁵¹ They were also disturbed by that there was no consistency in the way and manner the service scheme was introduced. The student noted that they knew about the service scheme through Lt. Col. Ayanru who said that the scheme would be a voluntary organization and that it would be financed by private individuals. Later, Gowon in his speech stated that the scheme would be compulsory for one year. Gowon was also reported to have changed the one year programme to five years with *reasonable* salary in his later speech.⁵²

While government believed that graduates of tertiary institutions are in a better position to serve the nation, students explained that they were not suited for the service scheme, noting that disgruntled graduates would only succeed in indoctrinating the peasants among whom they would work.⁵³ Because of the misinformation, the students wanted the government to explain a number of issues to the public. They wanted the government to define reasonable salary to mean the civil service scale, including the necessary allowances. In addition, the students wanted government to explain the inconsistency in age and status of graduates to be mobilized for the service scheme.

While the government was said to have announced that those within the age bracket of 15 and 23 would be mobilized, the students wondered how graduates of higher institutions came into this age-group. The students argued that many of them were not only in their late thirties and forties, but were also married with children to cater for. More than this, it was also realized that many states in the country lacked skilled manpower and were waiting for their university graduates to come and take employment in their services that were being managed by expatriates. For these students, therefore, allowing graduates to serve the nation while expatriates continued to be in the employment of their states would be detrimental to their growth and development.⁵⁴

At a press conference in Lagos, the students' representative body under the umbrella of NUNS asked why university graduates had to be the "guinea pigs" for the NYSC experiment. It contended that if the government truly intended to address the problem of nation-building, then the service corps should embrace all citizens including public officers such as the Commissioners and Permanent Secretaries who must set the ball rolling.⁵⁵ It therefore went ahead to state that Nigerian students would not serve in the proposed scheme unless these four conditions were met by the government:

- a) provision of federal government sponsorship and loans for all students in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria;
- b) provision of adequate accommodation in all institutions;
- c) guarantee of vacation employment during long vacations; and
- d) guarantee of employment after graduation.⁵⁶

It reminded the government that even though university education was said to be subsidized many of them were either sponsored by their community associations, business firms or through loans. However, if their school fees and employment after school were taken care of, they stated that no students would have any grudges against service being demanded by the government who had invested in them.

But beyond these protests, the NUNs noted that the idea of service was a good initiative.⁵⁷ It therefore advised that the scheme should not be made compulsory.⁵⁸ NUNs believed that the scheme would achieve the same purpose if it was made voluntary. It therefore advice the government to ensure that the scheme had military training, anti-illiteracy campaigns during long vacations and a place for secondary school leavers in service.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it stated that students were prepared to organize debates, symposia and workshops with a view to presenting well informed papers to the government on the scheme. To this end, it warned government to ensure that planning, decisions and policies on the scheme should not be carried out without representation of the student body because it was a matter that concerned their lives.⁶⁰

The students of the University of Lagos added that if the motives of the government were genuine and was bent on conscription, then a compulsory military training as alternative to the NYSC should be established for graduates to train them in the use of arms. They argued that this military training should commend itself to true pan-Africanism that would be used to sustain the nationalist struggles in Africa. The military training, they also argued, would not make them revolutionists overnight; rather it would suppress their pride and make them better citizens. The other alternative, apart from the training in the use arms, was to make undergraduates use their long vacation each year in such military camps. This was expected to make travelling abroad for vacation redundant and allow the youths to spend more time together in various past-times.⁶¹

The contests and agitations of the students also provoked series of reactions from university campuses to the town. In a symposium organized by the Association of Economics Students, University of Ibadan, virtually all the academics observed that youth service has a positive role to play in the political and socio-economic development of the country.⁶² But they had many concerns and questions which they wanted government to answer before the scheme commence. Part of these concerns was that the scheme could be a clever move to dampen the revolutionary potential of the youth, or simply a dress rehearsal to create a cult of personality. There was the issue of social justice, in which the symposium asked whether it was “fair to ignore the few (ruling elite) who consume a disproportionate share of the nation’s wealth though they have contributed little or nothing, while the young ones are exhorted to increasingly exert themselves.”⁶³ Further, if the slow pace of development in the country was the problem which the government wanted to address through the scheme, the symposium asked whether it was not “an overhaul of the total system that is appropriate rather than a surface scratching of whatever contradictions exist in our development plans.”⁶⁴

C. O. A. Sowunmi was one of those that welcomed the scheme but asked the government to explain the philosophy of the service corps. Apart from seeking to know the infrastructural facilities that were in place to make the scheme have any useful impacts, he also asked the government to explain the reason why it must compelled self-sponsored students to serve the nation.⁶⁵ While Akeredolu-Ale opined that the inputs of the youths in technical, scientific and vocational skills would help to lower the cost benefit ratio to government’s socio-economic programmes, he did not believe that the scheme would solve the problem of unemployment nor curb any revolutionary spirit in the youths.⁶⁶

For Ola Oni, the important question to ask was: “does the Federal Government have any overall programme for the nation so that we can by logical deductions arrive at the vision of the Nigerian youth it wants?”⁶⁷ He noted that if the scheme was meant to address the problems of indiscipline and unpatriotic attitudes of the youths, then the question to ask was who created such malaise that infects the youths? While acknowledging that these problems were created by the society and the ruling elite, Oni stated that the service corps may not bring any appreciable impacts on the society unless the ruling elite correct themselves. He went further to state that the problems of under-development in the rural areas were created by the government, and as such, the impacts of the youths in these areas would only be minimal.

In the same vein, while explaining that the scheme was a measure by the elite to manage a social crisis it created, Oni observed that this action was reactionary. It was also part of an institutional measures needed to tame various segments of the society, this time, the off-springs of the 'silent revolutionaries' called the peasants.⁶⁸ This is because, for many of the ruling elite, the graduate youths like their lecturers are potential revolutionaries. The action of the students had been demonstrated in 1962 when they protested against the 'neo-colonial' Anglo-Nigeria Defence Pact of the government of Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. That pact was subsequently abrogated.

Ola Opeyemi's concern was that the call for national service started with two errors.⁶⁹ First was mobilization, and second was an error of mass communication. In the former, he explained that nation building might not have any significant impact if the objective was to mobilize only a section of the society. In the latter, he observed that government did not explain to the general populace what the scheme meant to them and the nation. Also, he observed that the number of youth which the scheme would generate would be significant for the economic needs of the country. Population size, according to him is closely related to the productive capacity of the economy. The problem with this size, however, is that many of the proposed servers would be men of letters who would not be useful for technical works being proposed for the scheme. Against this backdrop, Opeyemi suggested that government needed to take practical steps on its own such as reduction in corruption and expenditure on administration and allocate revenue to various sectors of the economy which would help to complement the effort of the servers in building the nation.⁷⁰

Outside the university were other opinion leaders and socialists like Tai Solarin who was concerned with the age of the proposed corps members.⁷¹ University graduates, according to him, were 'too old' and 'too steeped' in orthodoxy, and as such, were not malleable to discipline and patriotic changes which the service experience would instil in them. Meanwhile, there were those who argued that the scheme was primarily designed due to labour shortage and slow pace of socio-economic development in states mostly in the northern region. In addition, there were parents who expressed their objection based that the scheme would delay their wards from entering the labour market. Many of them reasoned that this would not allow their wards to pay back the cost of their educational investment by assisting the family or relieving them at home. They therefore noted that such scheme ought to be preceded by free education. Also, most parents expressed their fear of insecurity in other regions separate from theirs. As noted by Obadare, Enegwa and Umodem⁷² this was heightened by two factors: the scary "narratives of the 'bestial' and/or 'evil spirit' 'Other' that pervaded" inter-group relations in Nigeria; the other is that since the civil war ended about three years ago, many of them still fear that the program (especially towards the Igbo) might happen again.

Following these reactions, General Gowon announced in February 1973 during a special convocation at the University of Lagos that the debate on the proposed Service Corps was still open. While emphasizing the contributions of members of academia to the debate, he charged the university graduates to join hands with their colleagues in other institutions of higher learning in the country to bring the benefits of knowledge and research to the people of Nigeria.⁷³ He observed that graduates were very important in promoting national unity and that he hoped they would be willing to take up appointment in any part of the country.⁷⁴

Consequently, a workshop was organised at the University of Ibadan by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors where NUNS was invited. In that workshop, the NUNS discovered that the scheme was initiated by a former Vice-Chancellor and that one Mr. Dickson had been invited from London to advise the government on the implementation of the scheme. It was also learnt that a sum of N60 would be paid to the intending corps members.⁷⁵ The students' representatives at the workshop were not happy with this information. They were particularly angry that no student representative was invited during the planning of the programme. Similarly, they also became suspicious of the invitation of Mr. Dickson from London. As far as the students' body was concerned, the scheme was another neo-colonial policy, similar to the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact which they rejected in 1962. They therefore walked out in protest from the workshop, pointing out that "...both the Federal Government and the Committee of Vice-Chancellors seem to have taken vital decisions affecting the destiny and lives of the citizens of this country in respect of the proposed National Youth Service Corps"⁷⁶ without consulting them.

Afterwards, NUNS ordered lecture boycott in universities across the country.⁷⁷ At Benin, Ife, Kano, Lagos and Zaria, students went on rampage with war songs against what they called imperialist programme.⁷⁸ To stem the tide of violence, the authority at Ahmadu Bello University shut the students out. Meanwhile, government decried the student's actions as those that were based on undue haste and prejudice.⁷⁹ And, in reaction, Chief Abdul Eke, the Federal Commissioner for Education on behalf of government, declared that the debate on the scheme was still open and that no final decision has been reached.⁸⁰

The impasse was resolved when preliminary discussions were held between the leadership of the NUNS and the representatives of the Federal Government on the proposed scheme.⁸¹ By the 15th of March, the matter appeared to have been resolved, with the student body pledging its loyalty to the government. According to them:

While we shall not compromise our stand over the Youth Service Corps as stipulated by our latest communiqué, this did not in any way detract from our loyalty to the Head of the Federal Military Government...

To this end, the NUNS have sent a letter to the Federal Military Government for further clarification on the compulsory National Youth Service Corps.⁸²

The reasons why the student body pledged its loyalty to the government cannot be firmly established. But their demonstrations and subsequent meeting with the government suggested that many Nigerian youths were keen about national issues, especially those that concerned their future. While they were clear about what they wanted from the society, they were also mindful of the strategies needed to get them. As explained by Faniyi, students were aware of the importance of the NYSC as a device for plural societies like Nigeria to achieve national cohesion and progress.⁸³

Conclusion

The call for a nationwide youth service in the NYSC scheme was made in response to rebuild Nigeria anew in a way that would help to address the problems of national unity, inadequate infrastructures and economic development that faced the nation before and after the 1967-1970 Civil War. It was targeted at the younger generation, represented by graduates of tertiary institutions, who were believed to be the country's future leaders. The youth service programme aimed to prepare them economically, socially, morally and politically before they take up leadership positions in future.

Nigerian students, however, protested against government's request to participate in the service scheme, citing different reasons. They were agitated by their non-inclusion in the decision making process of the proposed scheme. Consequently, they were not properly informed about the objectives of the service scheme and what were expected of them in the realization of those objectives. The students also believed that it was morally wrong for a government who did not invest in their education to request for voluntary services. More importantly, they believed that government wanted to punish them by making the service scheme mandatory, delaying their employment opportunities into the labour market and asking them to go and work in poor rural areas.

The reactions of the students showed the significance of inclusion and representation of citizens in the formulation of policies and programmes that are expected to affect them. Isolation gives room for suspicion and lack of support for policies and programmes that people are not informed about, since they have no sense of belonging in them. The students' agitation also pointed to the importance of duties and responsibilities between the state and the citizens. In any socio-political system, government do not only have the responsibility to ensure that such basic necessities as food, cloth and shelter are guaranteed for the survival of the citizens, it must also help them to secure their other needs in life. It is only when the government can fulfil these responsibilities that it has the moral right to request for citizens service for the state.

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