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Contentious and institutional politics in a petro-state: Nigeria's 2012 fuel subsidy protests

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ABSTRACT

This article explores relations between popular protests and institutional politics in a petroleum-dependent economy. The 2012-protest against fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria was one of the biggest popular mobilisations in Nigeria's history, and possibly the largest in the wave of protests in Sub-Saharan Africa. This article uses perspectives of contentious politics that bridge structure and agency through a focus on relational dynamics between protests and institutional politics. This article makes four interrelated claims of how the protests are conditioned by and contribute to institutional politics: First, the protests build on a historical trajectory of labour-led subsidy protests that in itself form part of institutionalised politics. Second, the 2012-protests were historically large due to the particular context of a decade of democracy and oil-led growth, without a popular sense economic justice and real political participation. Third, while new actors came to the scene in 2012, intra-movement fragmentation exposed trade union and civil society weaknesses and failure to build a sustained social movement. Fourth, the 2012-protests inspired civic agency and influenced institutional politics and state-citizen relations, especially reflected in party politics and elections.

1. Introduction

Just over a decade into Nigeria's democracy and economic growth related to the international oil boom, the 2012 protests against the removal of fuel subsidies were among the largest popular mobilisations in the country's history. Protesters took to the streets on 2 January, the day after President Goodluck Jonathan removed the subsidy. Two days later, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) announced a general strike beginning 9 January. Hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets, and the strike action brought Nigeria to a standstill. On 16 January, the president gave in to the protesters and announced the subsidy's reinstatement.

The contestation of fuel subsidies in Nigeria dates to the 1980s and relates to the contradictory perspectives of petroleum governance. On the one hand, the liberal paradigm sees subsidy as a form of political settlement where elites buy off ordinary citizens with cheap fuel (Lockwood, 2015) that is financially, socially and environmentally efficient (Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2018). On the other, the popular idea of cheap fuel has been seen as a question of social rights and the just distribution of oil wealth (Guyer and Denzer, 2013; Houeland, 2017). However, as much as the 2012 protests were historically significant, most analyses only indirectly link them to institutional politics and emphasise their temporal character and limited impact. This contrasts

with the analyses of other events in the global wave of protests, such as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring. I argue that this blind spot in understanding the long-term dynamics between the Nigerian fuel subsidy protests and institutional politics relates to structural and elite biases in the dominant theories of governance and the political dynamics of African petro-states.

This article explores how the fuel subsidy protests relate to institutional politics before and after 2012. It does so from the perspectives of contentious politics, which consider historical, relational, and dynamic processes involved in claims making, collective action and politics. Through this lens, this article will reveal that the protests had a deeper impact on political institutions and petroleum governance than has been acknowledged.

The following section briefly explains perspectives on petroleum governance and civil society, and maps out the contentious politics framework. Sections 3–5 are concerned with this paper's empirical analysis and connect to four interrelated claims regarding how the protests were conditioned by and contributed to institutional politics. Section 3 historically situates the protests, an exercise related to the first claim that the 2012 protests built on a historical trajectory of labour-led subsidy protests that formed part of an institutionalised politics that crossed regime types and macroeconomic status. Additionally, this section shows that, in contrast with the 2012 protests, the large

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protests of the 1980s and 1990s occurred in the contexts of the economic recession that followed the oil crisis, non-democratic regimes and a radicalised civil society in which labour had a clear leading role. Section 4 discusses the specific political opportunities and mobilising structures that made the 2012 protests historically large, which relates to the second claim that the 2012 protests should be understood in the context of popular expectations and opportunities for political participation and economic benefits after a decade of democracy and oil-boom-related growth. Section 5 reflects on the influence the 2012 protests have had on activism and participation, which is related to my two final claims: on the one hand, while new actors came onto the protests in 2012, intra-movement fragmentation exposed weaknesses in trade unions and civil society as well as a failure to build a sustained social movement; on the other hand, the fourth claim is that the 2012 protests inspired civic agency and influenced institutional politics and state-citizen relations, particularly in the context of elections and party politics.

In this paper, I have utilised material from my PhD research, which considered the power and agency of Nigerian labour in the context of the political economy of oil, which centred the fuel subsidy protests (Houeland, 2017). I undertook an extensive literature analysis and conducted interviews with activists and trade unionists in my 2012–2014 fieldwork. To update these materials, I have engaged with the new literature, conducted five additional interviews and conducted informal conversations with activists engaged in the 2012 protests during my fieldwork in Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt in 2019 and 2020.

2. From structures and elites to the dynamics of contentious politics

Nigeria's 2012 protests were part of a global wave of demonstrations, and it was probably the biggest in sub-Saharan Africa. Within the global wave, the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring are the most studied, whereas the sub-Saharan African protests are understudied (Branch and Mampilly, 2015). This relates to the dominance of theories of state-society relations and governance approaches that privilege structure and elite politics at the expense of contentious politics and civic agency. Privileging of elite politics is a general issue in African studies and is particularly strong in the context of petro-states and theories related to petroleum governance. Nigeria is depicted as a prototypical example of a resource-cursed state (Karl, 1997), and perspectives on Nigerian politics are generally oriented towards the elite, which has led to a 'lopsided, if fashionable, reading of Nigeria's political economy' (Amuwo, 2013, 122).

Resource curse theories highlight the inverse relationships between large petroleum resources and economic growth and democracy. The assumption that oil-based economies are more resilient to democracy and popular protests is based on the logic that they can buy off the population and do not rely on citizen tax income but, rather, oil rents (Ross, 2011). Fuel subsidies are a typical example a political settlement (Lockwood, 2015). Resource curse theories are closely related to a liberal governance paradigm that sees the main task of government to doors for international oil companies through technical policies while ensuring transparency and combating corruption (Sørreime, 2019). Governance is a fixed and objective end-point rather than a result of historical power relations and contentions, and the politics of contention is often seen as a nuisance rather than an integrated part of democracy (Olukoshi, 2009). Civil society's primary role is as to act as watchdogs and knowledge providers, not representatives of multiple interests (Engels, 2015). Within this school of thought, a recent edited volume by Overland (2018) fills a gap in the resource curse literature by highlighting the role of civil society in petroleum management. However, resource curse theories and governance perspectives have largely hindered scholars from exploring and understanding the rising demands of protest movements in the contexts of resource booms since

2002 (Grugel and Singh, 2013).

Good governance is not only a scholarly perspective but also a favoured political practice. One sees it in what can be termed 'depoliticised democracy', characterised by elite pacts that in practice exclude ordinary people through privatisation and decentralised government, and a technocratic governance delinked from power relations, interest-based politics, and economic inequalities (Stokke and Törnquist, 2013). Such practices have caused a legitimacy and responsibility crisis and inspired global protests against austerity and in favour of democratic transformation (Della Porta, 2015).

Fuel subsidy reform is an example of such a liberal governance perspective and practice. The mainstream perspective considers fuel subsidies as a form of political rent to citizens that undermines good governance: According to international institutions dominated by Western countries, fuel subsidies are financially inefficient and detrimental to environmental and social sustainability (Lockwood, 2015; Rentschler and Bazilian, 2017; Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2018). From a macroeconomic perspective, subsidies primarily benefit the wealthiest, while popular protests are a key hindrance to subsidy reform (Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2018), which seems counterintuitive. In fact, resistance against subsidy reform spurred the revolution in Sudan in 2019. In the Global South, fuel subsidy reform dates to the 1980s and is associated with austerity policies and the neoliberal economic reforms of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) structural adjustment programs, which led to reduced state welfare and increased unemployment. In practice, the poor are particularly vulnerable to fuel price increases, as they drastically affect inflation and decreases in real income. In oil-producing countries where social benefits are few and the state's capacity for welfare is weak, such as Nigeria, cheap energy is often considered a right and minimum entitlement (Guyer and Denzer, 2013; Houeland, 2017).

Political economists have criticised resource curse theories as ahistorical, deterministic and detached from interest politics, and they analysed the relevant actors, interests and power relations (Obi, 2010a). Exploring contentious petro-politics in Nigeria, political economists have primarily focused on violent and non-civic forms of contention (Obi, 2010a; Watts, 2004). Recent studies have used political settlement approaches to demonstrate that when it comes to managing the extractive industries, political elites depend on and are influenced and constrained by social actors (Hickey and Izama, 2016; Usman, 2020). This school of thought recognises dynamic, relational, interest-based and contentious politics as necessary part of the shaping oil governance (Bebbington et al., 2018). However, the starting point of these analysis is still at the elite level.

There is an 'extensive body of literature' that holds that the contestations over the 'price at the pump' are 'an excellent barometer of the ebbs and flows of Nigerian politics' (Obadare and Adebani, 2013, 2), though this literature tends to look at the protests as recurring but temporary episodes. Analysing civil society's impact on Nigerian petroleum governance, Obi (2018, 209 and 213) concluded that it only had a 'modest impact on the petroleum industry' and that 'ultimately, [all it] succeeded in achieving was [influencing] the timing of oil-product price hikes and the adoption of certain palliative government policies aimed at "cushioning" the effects of oil-product hikes.' This is arguably a static point of view on the relationship between claims making and policy outcomes as end-points.

Arguably, what remains underdeveloped is analysis of the role of social actors as part of democracy understood as open-ended and dynamic process, not an end-point. Contentious politics gives us such a dynamic, relational and open-ended approach. It concerns the relational processes between collective action, claims making and institutional politics from the perspective of social actors (Tarrow, 2015; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). In linking protests to institutional politics, I am interested in the mechanisms that brings together subjects, objects, and claims of contention' (Tarrow, 2015, 8; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). The term political institutions refers to 'established, organized, widely

recognized routines, connections, and forms of organization employed repeatedly in producing collective action' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015, 157). Of these, political parties, elections, the legislatures, courts and executives are simultaneously contention-shaping and contention-responding institutions (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015).

This approach closely links to social movement studies, but although social movements and contentious politics overlap, they are not equal. Social movements are a form of organised contentious politics that is sustained over time. Contentious political action is often more episodic, and it is broader, as it can include civil war, revolutions and other kinds of struggles (McAdam et al., 2003; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Political, social and economic systems shape the conditions and prospects of collective action, while the forms and effectiveness of that mobilisation are shaped by the existing structures of mobilisation in the capacity of a social movement (McAdam et al., 1996). Thus, the approach bridges structure and agency (Della Porta, 2015).

3. Leading up to 2012: the legacy of fuel protests on institutional politics

The 2012 protests are often depicted as a historically new, but they also built on a series of fuel subsidy protests dating to the mid-1980s.

3.1. Resisting fuel subsidy reform during recession

Ten years after the oil discovery in 1956 and four years into independence, the Nigerian government decided to guarantee cheap fuel as a universal benefit of its oil endowment. As oil revenues floated to the state, this was a time of expanding public welfare and active state intervention in the economy (Osaghae, 1995). The state defined a fixed selling price for fuel and compensated sellers for the gap between this and the market price. There were no price-changing mechanisms based on market fluctuations, which made the subsidy vulnerable to fluctuation.

The first fuel subsidy protests occurred after a 1985 removal attempt. After the Biafran War (1967–1970), the country underwent a succession of military dictatorships and coups, and corruption deepened. When the oil crisis hit Nigeria in the late 1970s, the state was heavily indebted. Nigerian per capita income contracted from USD 874 to USD 270 between 1980 and 1991 (World Bank).

The fuel subsidy was expensive, and a series of removal attempts followed. This was part of an ideological shift towards neoliberal economics, austerity politics and structural adjustments. For workers and ordinary Nigerians, this implied unemployment, reduced welfare and worsened living conditions. By 1993, workers took home 20% of their 1983 wages in real terms (Viinikka, 2009). Reforms 'triggered skyrocketing inflation, averaging 200% per year between 1985 and 1999, as well as severe unemployment, which stood at over 25% in 1997. The popular impact has been one of intense pressure on livelihoods and a surge of entry into informal economic activities' (Meagher, 2010, 57). Attempts to cut fuel subsidies were part of this austerity, and they were called for and supported by the international community, its financial institutions and powerful international oil companies. Notably, also during the period of economic growth that began at the turn of the millennium, labour-led mobilisations of civil society again resisted removal attempts, which will be further examined below.

3.2. Insisting on popular participation

In Nigeria, the struggle for democracy links closely to the struggle for economic justice and against fuel subsidy reform (Kew, 2016). Two protests of 1993 were indirectly and directly linked to fuel subsidy resistance, and they led to the fall of two dictators and the entrance of another.

President Ibrahim Babangida, the military head of state, was unpopular after introducing structural adjustments and fuel-subsidy

removal attempts and for failing to keep his promise to democratise the country (Houeland, 2017; Kew, 2016). In a context of growing poverty and inequality, fuel price increases went against popular understandings of justice in both wealth distribution and price-setting mechanisms (Guyer and Denzer, 2013). When Babangida failed to honour the 12 June 1993 election, the NLC leadership that was close to him dragged its feet. The oil unions, the blue-collar NUPENG (The Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers) and the white-collar PENGASSAN (Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria) responded to popular demands and led what was possibly the largest mobilisation in independent Nigeria. Babangida was forced to step down. Rather than instating the president elect, Moshood Abiola, Babangida appointed an interim government led by Ernest Shonekan. One of Shonekan's first actions was to remove fuel subsidies, spurring another trade union strike in November 1993. Shonekan's lack of popular support paved the way for another military head of state: the brutal and corrupt Sani Abacha (Viinikka, 2009). Interestingly, Abacha reinstated the subsidy and did not attempt to remove it, allegedly to keep a minimum level of legitimacy (Akanle et al., 2014) and, one can assume, avoid popular protests.

Broken by incarcerations and repression, civil society continued its struggle for democracy (Kew, 2016). After Abacha died in 1998, the 1999 elections marked the start of Nigeria's current and longest period of democracy. The trade unions again took centre stage in the inter-related issues of wages and fuel prices. This went together with an 'oversight of the judiciary' (Kew, 2016, 309). During the fuel subsidy protests, trade unions pressed the national assembly to mediate between labour and government. 'Remarkably', the labour-led resistance resisted the deregulation of the oil industry and the strengthening of the country's legislative branch relative to its executive branch (Okafor, 2009, 241). Popular and parliamentary support for labour later enabled the trade unions to cushion President Olusegun Obasanjo's attempt to curb union power through anti-labour provisions in the labour law (Okafor, 2009).

Furthermore, by 2012, the labour-led fuel protests had in practice become an institutionalised price-setting mechanism. Without an in-built mechanism to regulate the fuel price according to market fluctuations, price adjustments follow from government negotiations with labour after resistance against removal attempts as a 'well-oiled routine' (Ibrahim, 2015). Funmi Komolafe, former labour editor of *The Vanguard*, considered this bargaining an institutionalised practice and part of the social dialogue system (personal communication, 2012).

3.3. Building class and mobilising capacity

Fuel subsidy protests formed a central point in the social mobilisation and ideological radicalisation of civil society. Up to a million workers were retrenched between 1984 and 1989 (Osaghae, 1995). Trade unions lost thousands of members to unemployment and the informal sector (Meagher, 2010). Deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation reduced traditional labour power, and the fuel subsidy protests assisted trade unions in building mobilising capacity and remaining relevant (Houeland, 2017).

Advocates for removing fuel subsidies typically assert that such subsidies primarily benefit the upper classes—the biggest consumers of fuel—and are detrimental to the interests of the poor (Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2018). By contrast, unionists and their allies emphasise that increased fuel prices disproportionately affect the poor and are a working class issue (Houeland, 2017). When Jonathan removed the subsidy in 2012, the pump price rose from NGN 65 to NGN 141 overnight, with immediate effects on the costs of food, transport and medicine, all things that consumed a larger share of the poor people's incomes. In practice, fuel price increase reduces workers' purchasing power (Houeland, 2018). Fuel prices also affect employment in small and informal businesses that depend on fuel-based generators, according to Abdulwahed Omar, then president of the NLC (personal

communication, 2012).

Relevant beyond the trade unions' direct members, the subsidy was key in building a class solidarity and broadening the social base for the Nigeria's labour movement (Houeland, 2017). The fuel subsidy has been the core issue for formal alliance between the NLC, the TUC and Joint Action Front (JAF), named the Labour and Civil Society Organisation (LASCO) in 2005 (Assistant General Secretary of the Nigerian Labour Congress Denja Yaqub, personal communication, 2012). The subsidy protests built popular support for trade unions on other issues, such as in the aforementioned resistance to labour-law reforms (Okafor, 2009) as well as on minimum wage and pensions.

4. Entering 2012: oil-led growth, liberal democracy and new social actors

Although there were several fuel subsidy protests after 1999, the protests of 2012 were by far the largest.

4.1. Oil growth without economic justice and subsidy as a social right

During the international oil boom, when the price for Brent crude exploded from USD 28.50 a barrel in 2000 to a peak of USD 111.67 in 2012 (Luciani, 2016), oil-rich Nigeria experienced steady growth. Even though Nigeria is less capable than many smaller oil economies in the Middle East of buying the support of its 180 million inhabitants (Ross, 2011), per capita income rose from USD 498 in 1999 to USD 2747 in 2012 (World Bank). Nonetheless, historical wealth and power inequalities continued. The number of people living in absolute poverty only improved from 63% to 64% between 2004 and 2009 (Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics), while jobs creation did not keep up with population growth, and the unemployment rate increased from 14% to 24% between 2000 and 2011 (Nigeria Data Portal). Furthermore, new jobs were often precarious and characterised by systematic labour rights violations (Houeland, 2017).

Removal attempts were again resisted by labour-led protests in 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2007 (Kraus, 2018). By 2012, there had been no price adjustments since 2007. With international prices rising, subsidy expenditures skyrocketed by 800% by 2011 according to the Nigerian central bank governor, Sanusi (Usman, 2020). That year one-third of the operating budget went towards the fuel subsidy (Africa Confidential, 2012), the national debt increased (Campbell, 2013), and state budgets were stretched thin. In October 2011, the government announced that the subsidy would be removed in April 2012. Trade unions and civil society responded by threatening to strike and protest. The 1 January 2012 removal came before the conclusion of the following civil society dialogue, which further angered civil society (Houeland, 2018).

At the same time, corruption increased, a large part of which was directly related to fuel subsidy practices (Campbell, 2013). The government and IMF argued that removing the subsidy was necessary to combat corruption. Protesters in Lagos carried signposts and T-shirts saying 'Kill corruption, not Nigerians' (Premium Times, 2012), indicating the popular sentiment that taking away a public good instead of going after the corrupt elites was unjust.

4.2. Limited state responsiveness and demands for deeper democracy

Nigeria has been a formal democracy since 1999, fitting the description of a depoliticised democracy in that formal elections are the order of the day even as popular influence on state resources is limited (Stokke, 2018). When the national assembly in 2007 resisted Obasanjo's attempt to alter the constitution to pursue a third term in 2007, and when it in 2010 insisted on handing over power to the Vice President Jonathan when the President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was sick and later died in 2010, it demonstrated that constitutional processes was the order of the day. At the same time, democracy did not alter the

underlying power relations or the actors in the political elite. Many of the civilian politicians were former military rulers or from that establishment.

There is a systematic limit to the Nigerian state's responsiveness to citizens (Obadare and Adebawwi, 2010). Continued economic liberalisation has eroded the state's ability and role in delivering social welfare. Privatisation of health and education has moved welfare from the state to the market and away from democratic decision-making. The fuel subsidy was not only one of the few public welfare benefits from the petroleum resources; its removal was caught up in the anti-privatisation agenda that was about protecting popular decision-making. Rather than respond to citizens, Nigeria's elites depend on and are often loyal to Western oil powers and the IMF (Obi, 2010b). By 2012, 80% of the state's revenue came from petroleum, and the subsidy removal that year came less than two weeks after a visit from IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde, who again pushed for the removal of the subsidy. The protests were a response to these limits of liberal democracy (Branch and Mampilly, 2015), and as in earlier protests, demands for cheaper fuel were interlinked with demands for deeper democracy (Houeland, 2018).

The state's willingness to repress is another key component of how social movements are conditioned (McAdam et al., 1996). The Nigerian state has been unable to protect its citizens and is itself a culprit of human rights violations. The elections in 2011 were the most flawed and violent since 1999, and Jonathan's regime was weak and had limited legitimacy. At the time, there were increased security threats, including Boko Haram's escalating terror attacks (Campbell, 2013). With emerging calls for regime change, especially from Lagos, Jonathan argued that the protests were politicised. With the recent regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia in mind, the Nigerian political elites' willingness to repress increased. Remembering how the 1993 protests led to dictatorship instead of democracy, trade unions were concerned with politicisation and calls for regime change (Houeland, 2018). The police and military were deployed to crush the protests, and at least 16 people were reportedly killed (National Mirror, 2013). Soldiers surrounded the NLC's offices in Abuja, and union leaders felt pressured to end the strike due to security concerns, according to Owei Lakemfa, then acting general secretary of the NLC (personal communication 2012).

4.3. Old and new actors in protests and increased mobilisation

What matters most in the struggle for transformative democracy is the capacities of key political actors (Stokke, 2018). The opened policy spaces that came with democracy in 1999 changed the landscape for social organisations. A growth of civil society organisations was linked to more liberalist good-governance-type non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Additionally, many civil society actors and democracy activists from the 1990s joined political parties or NGOs (Adunbi, 2016). Closer to 2012, renewed antagonism with government made civil society more ready to take on the elites regarding corruption and state abuse (Adebawwi and Obadare, 2011; Kew, 2016). In 2012, both new and old protest actors entered the protests, bringing different kinds of mobilising strengths and weaknesses.

The previous fuel subsidy protests had 'contained character ... waged by constituted (that is, self-defined and publicly recognised) political actors' (McAdam et al., 2003, 315). In 2012, the unions' position was again decisive through mobilisation of the trade unions' 4.5 million direct members from structures across the country's many regions and economic sectors. Strike action halted the economy. It was only when PENGASSAN threatened to stop oil production that Jonathan called for negotiations, confirming the importance of the oil unions in the political economy of oil (Houeland, 2018). Unions had technical competence and experience, and they used their institutional access to lobby parliament and negotiate with government. However, non-labour activists complained that unions were slow and rigid.

Unions said this was due to their democratic procedures. Further, oil unions where accused of social disengagement, as oil production was not shut down and there was low protest participation in the Niger Delta, the heart of Nigeria's oil production. This should be understood as a combination of a lack of will due to local insecurity and lack of capacity after a long-term weakening of labour power after the casualisation of privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation (Houeland, 2015).

Unions are both actors of contentious politics and producers of compromise. What the unions saw as their long fought-for right to political access and bargaining was by others seen as state co-optation. Additionally, the unions were weakened by decades of pressure on labour rights and austerity, and in 2012, the largest and most important union-centre, the NLC, was characterised by relatively inexperienced leadership and stressed by internal conflicts. This gave more room to the more liberal-oriented TUC. Ideologically, labour and their civil society allies in LASCO were historically left. However, that ideological foundation had withered somewhat since 1990 due to a weakening of intellectual strongholds at universities and reduced ideological training in the labour movement (Houeland, 2018).

The 2012-protests also had a 'transgressive character' that introduced 'previously unorganized or apolitical actors into public conflict processes' (McAdam et al., 2003, 315). Brought on by social media, a new generation of young people from a growing middle class joined the protest (Akor, 2017; Orji, 2016). New actors built on different kinds of mobilising structures, organisational logics, social identities and ideologies. Occupy Nigeria, which became the popular name of the 2012 protests, was comprised of loose networks operating through social media with the flexibility to quickly act and react (Houeland, 2018). From a labour perspective, the lack of structure and a representational mandate was a challenge in terms of communication and coordination (Yaqub, personal communication, 2012).

5. Looking beyond 2012: youth engagement, movement fragmentation and an emerging two-party system

The direct effect of the 2012 protests was the reinstatement of the fuel subsidy, as Johnathan reversed the fuel price from NGN 141 (without subsidy) to NGN 97. However, this confirmed how the protests effectively hindered the deregulation of the downstream sector despite massive international pressure (Okafor, 2009). Another concrete, if often ignored, outcome was the probes committee the House of Representatives established to investigate allegations of subsidy-related corruption (Lakemfa, 2015). The probes report has contributed to the pressure unions and civil society organisations put on government as well as in the prosecutions of officials and oil companies (Obi, 2018). Osuoka (2019) argued that the 'the January Uprising of 2012 [...] spurred more significant disclosures about mismanagement of public revenues than NEITI (Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative), a typical 'good-governance' institution for civil society influence.

This section reflects further on how a new sense of civic agency and empowerment translated into social activism and institutional politics but also deepened fragmentations within civil society.

5.1. Renewed youth engagement

Whereas the students' movement provided intellectual and mobilising capacity to protests in earlier protests, by the 2000s the student movement was weakened by numbers and by internal problems (Kew, 2016; Osaghae, 1995). The 2012 protests brought 'a realization by youth groups of their power to substantially affect the course and conduct of governance in the country' (Akor, 2017, 107). There is no study of whether or how young participants in the 2012 protests translated protest engagement into institutional politics, but the

experiences of three young activists in Lagos indicate that, directly or indirectly, the protests inspired a belief in the possibility of social change and that their own efforts could make a difference.

Kunle Wizeman Ajayi, a poet and a long-term activist close to labour, said that the 2012 protests were part of a series of many protests that he had co-organised as a unionist and activist. He was the general secretary of United Action for Democracy, Lagos, and a member of LASCO. Wizeman said that the 2012 protests created a space for building comradeship and solidarity, one in which protesters combined their demands with the celebration of individual rights and power (personal communication, 2019). He is now an activist for the opposition party, African Action Congress (AAC) (below, I argue that the AAC was linked to the 2012 protests).

Banwo Proficiency Olagokun, a musician and activist, attended protests before 2012 but did not get further involved. The 2012 protests inspired him to engage in concrete, sustained activism:

[They] fuelled my hunger to start bonding with people that [were] already ... involved [in activism]. I started looking for organisations as I kept on going to protests. Online, I found my left[ist] inspiration. ... I now started thinking of [the] movement ... when I joined it, it was strictly for that: to advocate and to resist. (personal communication, 2019)

Proficiency is now a mobiliser for Take it Back and an organising secretary with the AAC, Lagos.

The feminist writer OluTimehin Adegbeye reflected on the 2012 protests:

Occupy Nigeria was the first time I had a sense of what it meant to be a Nigerian: to embody, embrace, and fight for a vision of that identity that was different from what the 'Powers' imagined. It was the first time I felt powerful enough to insist, as a regular citizen of the variety that generally minds my own business, that being a regular citizen allowed me to make demands for my well-being and that of other Nigerians ... That fire never went out. Occupy was my first protest but not my last; in the years since, I have joined Bring Back Our Girls, Save the Waterfronts, Justice for Otodo Gbame and others (personal communication, 2019).

5.2. Movement fragmentations

In 2012, the protests brought people together across an otherwise divided country, including its regions, religions and ethnicities (Obadare, 2012). Although the protests were among the biggest in history, activists failed or were unwilling to mobilise a sustained and transformative movement. The protests' old and new actors engaged via different platforms and even different venues (Houeland, 2018). Divisions were reflected in the contrasting narratives of the protests' purpose, ownership, successes, failures and its character as contained or transgressive.

While labour and international media framed the outcome as a victory in which protesters forced the government to do reverse its policies (Onuah and Brock, 2012), activists complained that unions were bribed into calling off the strike before it reached its full potential (Kew and Oshikoya, 2014).

Unions and their allies typically describe the protests as part of a historical trajectory in which labour had a natural, democratic and legitimate role in leadership. 'To understand 2012, you need to understand all the revolutionary actions before 2012. ... All of them came together to produce a massive ground for 2012' (Wizeman, personal communication, 2019). While labour activists refer to the protests as 'revolutions', 'uprisings' or 'simply fuel subsidy protests', non-labour activists and the media typically refer to them as 'Occupy Nigeria'. In this transgressive protest narrative, trade unions were latecomers who captured the protests that started 2 January (Branch and

Mampilly, 2015; Kew and Oshikoya, 2014) rather than continuers of a historical protest cycle who had already threatened to strike in October 2011.

There are clear ideological and representative divisions between labour, its allies and others. Abiodun Aremu, secretary of JAF, Lagos, and senior organising secretary of the Union of Air Transport Employees reflected that labour failed to use the opportunity to build and expand the movement and create awareness of how the bread-and-butter issues link to larger systemic questions of failed democracy and capitalism (personal communication, 2019). Civil society 'kept complaining [and] bastardising labour leaders' instead of reflecting on their weaknesses and recognising the political capture, said Wizeman (personal communication, 2019).

In 2012, the trade unions' historical role as protest leaders was challenged by other actors (Houeland, 2018). Although labour was decisive in the protests and their outcome, it did not have a practical coordinating role in a united protest. Labour failed in its communication and responses to the accusations of other protesters who felt short-changed. As environmentalist and human rights activist Nnimmo Bassey said, 'The reasons why the mass action was called off [were] not satisfactorily explained to the public' (personal communication, 2019). Conversations with civil society actors across Lagos, Port Harcourt and Abuja reflected the same disappointment in labour.

The reactions to the fuel price increase of May 2016 are indicative of changes in civil society and their relations to politics. In stark contrast to 2012, *Reuters* reported that 'Some 300 union activists gathered [in Abuja] to stage a march, and some 200 protested in the commercial capital Lagos, where some banks and many shops were also doing business' (Eboh and Ogunleye, 2016). Wizeman reflected that 'the masses could not trust "labour bureaucracy"' (personal communication, 2019). Additionally, the unions were divided after a faction broke out of the NLC in 2015 and formed a competing labour group: the United Labour Congress. This group that included the powerful oil union NUPENG that had played decisive roles in previous strikes, did not support the NLC strike in 2016 (Kraus, 2018). Furthermore, civil society actors undermined the 2016 strike, according to Aremu (personal communication, 2019).

After 2012, Occupy Nigeria had receded to the internet (Kew, 2016), and most non-labour actors were now silent or even supported a subsidy removal. Large part of this massive corruption exposed post-2012 was linked to the importing of fuel and related subsidies, and the exposure had not translated to punishment for members of Jonathan's 'cabal' (Emmanuel and Ezeamalu, 2013). It was increasingly difficult to see the subsidy as a popular benefit rather than a source of elite enrichment. Additionally, opposition politicians that supported Occupy Nigeria in 2012 were now in power and supported by many of the 2012 protesters. As an example, Ogunlesi (2015) was an active social media and protest actor against subsidy removal in 2012, while in 2015 he was President Muhammadu Buhari's special assistant on new media arguing for removal of the fuel subsidy.

This time, Nigeria was steeped in an economic crisis following the international oil price collapse and subsequent inflation, though there was still some hope that the 2015 Buhari government would deliver on its election promises of change and anti-corruption. While in 2012, activists had three months to prepare for the protests and strike, the 2016-fuel price increase came as a surprise. Buhari insisted that it was not a removal of the fuel subsidy but a price adjustment to the oil crisis (Ibrahim, 2015).

5.3. Consolidating political opposition and electoral democracy

The 2015 elections marked a milestone towards consolidating democracy in Nigeria, as they were the most free, credible and transparent in the country's history. This was firmly linked to increased civil society contributions via education and monitoring (Lewis and Kew, 2015), which can be connected to the sense of civic agency created in 2012.

Furthermore, for the first time in Nigeria's history, an opposition party – the All Progressives Congress (APC) – defeated the incumbent from the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), which had until then been considered unlikely (Lewis and Kew, 2015; Owen and Usman, 2015). This may signal the emergence of an evolving two-party system (Obe, 2019, 109). There is a direct relation between activists' 2012 experiences and the election process, as 'many activists turned their sights on the 2015 elections and the removal of the sixteen year dominance of the corrupt PDP-machine' (Kew and Kwaja, 2018, 381). Essentially, 2015 could not have happened without 2012, Wizeman and Proficiency agreed (personal communication, 2019).

As with earlier protests, the 2012 protests were arenas for building popular support, while this time, the political opposition, rather than civil society, bridged this popularity into longer-term support. At the time of the 2012 protests, Nigeria was seen as a one-party state under the PDP, but the opposition was growing and held governorships in bigger cities where the protests were the largest (Campbell, 2013). In contrast to Abuja, where police and the army were sent to strangle the protests, in Lagos, the powerful previous governor, Bola Tinubu, and then governor Babatunde Fashola, both of the Action Congress (AC), actively supported protests. Another key figure was Pastor Tunde Bakare, leader of the Save Nigeria Group, who was also the vice presidential candidate for the opposition presidential candidate Buhari for the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) in the 2011 election. In contrast with the civil society divisions post-2012, the four main opposition parties, including the CPC and the AC, merged in 2013 and formed the APC.

The year 2012 led to an increase in the popular awareness of corruption, which weakened incumbent Jonathan's regime (Campbell, 2013; Lewis and Kew, 2015). Occupy Nigeria had demonstrated the power of social media, and the APC actively used social media in the 2015 campaign (Kew, 2016). Buhari's personal credentials as not corrupt and the APC's campaign on fighting corruption were key success factors in the 2015 victory. Wizeman and Aremu linked the call for change from the street in 2012 to the APC's 2015 election slogan: 'change' (personal communication, 2019). Interestingly, the PDP's 2015 slogan was 'transformation'.

Some argue that the 2015 election was more of a shift of elite platforms than a democratic consolidation and that the APC is just another platform for old elites. This is represented by the fact that Buhari, head of the party and the president who emerged from the 2015 elections, is a former military dictator (1983–1985). It is also reflected in the extensive floor crossings of PDP members to APC after the election. Critical of the elitist focus of Nigerian party politics, Husaini (2019) found that Nigeria's parties have advanced from an elitist phase to one of mass-parties with substantive membership. By observing party activities and interviewing grassroots party activists in 2014 and 2015, he found that the parties' dynamics cannot be reduced to elite processes and that activists' motivations to canvass and mobilise cannot be reduced to clientelism and patronage but are rooted in rational and ideological reflections. Party records show that a large share of active party members are millennials. However, data for party membership only date to 2014 (Husaini, 2019) making it hard to indicate shifts in party activism following the 2012 protests.

Although Nigerian political campaigns in 2019 were still more focused on people than issues and many saw the 2019 elections as an uninspiring two-horse race between similar candidates, parties and their supporters were nevertheless ideological. The APC and the PDP gravitated towards centrist economic policies and ethno-populism (Husaini, 2019). At the same time, the two-party character can be teased out a clearer ideological distinction, where the media reported that Buhari leaned towards socially democratic state-interventions, while PDP candidate Atiku was more of a market-oriented liberalist. A few candidates from smaller parties contributed to a more issue-based public policy debate, such as liberal Obi Ezekwesili and Kingsley Moghalu and socialist Omoyele Sowore.

In the context of this article, Sowore is particularly interesting as he personifies a history of contentious politics turning towards institutional politics. In 1989, he was a leading student activist in protests for democracy and against austerity politics reducing university funding and fuel subsidies. In 2012, he played a key role as the founder of the online news site *Sahara Reporters*, which inspired activists in Nigeria and around the world. In 2018, he formed the AAC and announced his presidential candidacy for the 2019 elections. (Remembering both Wizeman and Proficiency actively campaigned for the AAC and Sowore). In 2019, Sowore called for protests against the election outcome, whereupon he was arrested for attempting to overthrow the government. This seem only to expand Sowore's support base. Informal discussions with leftist activists in Nigeria now point to Sowore as a joint candidate for a larger civil society that is preparing for elections in 2023.

6. Concluding remarks

This article has used agency-oriented, historically rooted and relational perspectives of contentious politics as a frame to expand ideas of socio-political relations and governance in an African petro-state. Beyond probing the protests' specific outcomes, such as policy reform or politicians' resignations, this article has shown that popular mobilisation has a dynamic relation to policy processes and their outcome. None of the historical fuel subsidy protests altered the system, but they contributed to shifts in popular ideas, civic action and institutional politics. However, historical relations are not linear and progressive; rather, they are characterised by disruption and setbacks.

The protests are conditioned by the particular social fabric and oil-dependent political economy of Nigeria. The fuel subsidy protests can be seen as the institutionalised politics of contention and have routinely functioned as a fuel price regulation process since the 1980s. Whenever governments remove the subsidy, protests emerge and unions engage the government to negotiate fuel price adjustments.

The 2012 protests were another milestone in Nigeria's democratic history, in line with the massive anti-austerity protests of the 1980s and the 1993 democracy protests, all of which were linked to fuel subsidies. Interestingly, the large protests of the 1980s and 1990s occurred in a context of non-democratic regimes and economic recessions, and the removals fuelled anger, loss and senses of social, economic and political injustices. The 2012 came over a decade into Nigeria's electoral democracy and oil-boom-related economic growth. However, the fuel subsidy removal triggered larger protests concerning the limited political influence and lack of economic distribution to the general population, this time fuelling anger related to the injustices of unmet expectations from liberal democracy and growth.

The 2012 protests also constituted something new, as they engaged a new generation of middle class youth and empowered new groups and individuals into further civic action, some of which came in the form of electoral monitoring that helped improve the 2015 elections. As earlier protests contributed to open policy spaces, the 2012 protests did as well. However, these openings have contradictory effects on contentious politics. In contrast with the earlier protests that built class solidarity, movement capacity and union strength, the 2012 divisions between a weaker trade union movement and new civil society actors deepened. The protests became arenas of contention over legitimacy and ownership, and civil society and labour were incapable or unwilling to take advantage of the opportunity to organise and build a sustained movement.

Finally, the more assertive political opposition parties were better able to use the protests to build capacity and support. The political opposition came together and built on the popular call for change, thereby winning the 2015 elections. This marked a milestone in the consolidation of democracy as the first party political transition in Nigeria, which is a key indicator of democratic consolidation and, possibly, the country's transition from a one- to two-party system.

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