

GROWTH OF HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS AND THEIR MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

All over the world, the activities of Human Right Groups have become pivotal in the assessment of political growth, social maturity and even economic development, within nation - states. Yet, not all scholars would agree on what Human Rights are all about. Even fewer would agree on how human right groups arrived at their current pedestal of importance and visibility. This paper attempted a clarification of the term 'Human Rights'. Such clarification aimed at providing a broad platform to accommodate even the rights enjoyed by animals, flora, faunas and a plethora of natural species which are now being protected by state laws and international conventions. Also, it traced the rise of human rights groups and attempted to locate the forces behind the growing relevance of groups both at the domestic and international levels. The study also dealt with major impacts and achievements of the groups, especially within the known boundaries of nation-states. Consequently, it concluded that the single most significant contribution of Human Rights groups to national development lies in the political changes which brought in more actors and opened the political space to many citizens. Such a change, along with its ripple effects, has been quite beneficial to the Nigerian system and national development.

Keywords: *Human Rights, National development, citizens*

INTRODUCTION

Human Rights refer to these demands which citizens of nations and citizens of the world claim they are entitled to enjoy as human beings. These demands and claims, whether they are made by individuals or by groups, form the core of agitations to national governments or to international authorities. Ideally, many of these demands are protected by state laws and come are incorporated into the basic law, that is to say, the constitution. The irony of the situation is that most of these human rights issues are only listed in the constitutions but not justifiable. They are demands that cannot be enforced by the courts or compulsorily claimed by the citizen.

In reality, much reference to human rights would first and foremost refer to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1984. In addition to this popular declaration, there are two of other international covenants adopted in 1976: the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These three documents of the United Nations comprehensively spell out Rights of man in virtually

every field of endeavour and further spell out the modalities for universal implementation of these rights. Indeed, it is the entirety of these rights and modalities that is called "International Bill on Human Rights". Since the end of the world war in 1945 and the articulation of the United Nations Declaration of Human Right in 1948, all progressive countries and newly liberated nations have made profound additions to their respective national constitutions. In Nigeria, chapter 2 of every constitution fashioned for us from 1976 have always contained the Rights of the citizens. The chapter is usually labeled as Fundamental Objectives and Directive principles of State Policy.

From the foregoing, it would appear as if the international community has been largely responsible for the meaning and development of awareness of Human Rights. It must infect be stated that national governments initially treated agitators of Human rights as rebels, trouble shooters and meddlesome rabble rousers who were to be avoided. Leaders of governments openly displayed antagonism towards the Human Right groups because those leaders felt that these demands were direct indictments of their governments. For instance, to demand for freedom of Speech meant that there was intolerance and restriction on press activities. Therefore, affected leaders of governments saw the Human Rights groups as part and parcel of the opposition which had to be dealt with, neutralized, disbanded, arrested and treated with a high dose of incivility and even violence.

Fortunately, the United Nations and other international regional organizations were much more receptive to the ideas from the Human rights groups. It is therefore not surprising that the United Nations and other international bodies helped to define the content, meaning and path of the groups. Initial recognition and cooperation came from the international level and indeed, it was the international system that started recognizing the various rights. As of today, human rights groups have extended their activities to Anti-whaling duties, protection of Ozone layer, protection of domestic animals from human abuse, protection of the white-face baboon, protection of certain forests reserves etc. Along with these exotic human rights, there are others that are of direct import to peoples' lives: freedom of worship, right to education, right to association, freedom against social discrimination on the ground of place of origin, circumstance of birth, sex, religion, status, etc, right to employment, protection of the child from all forms of abuse, protection from all forms of slavery, social equality of all before the law etc.

It is obvious that the Human Rights groups derived the initial sustaining energy from the international system as the groups found solace, receptivity, welcome and acceptability at that level. The international system helped to define the content and meaning of Human rights. But they did more than that, the international system readily accepted and accommodated the expansion of 'rights' from human to animal and plant rights, championed by human beings. The acceptability which the human rights groups found at the international level conditioned the domestic nation state governments to become grudgingly more receptive of the Human Rights groups.

Today, Human Rights, in one form or the other, have been included in the domestic constitutions or other basic laws of most countries of the world. Some regions of the world, like the European Community, the Organization of American States and the organization of African Unity (now called African Union) have also adopted regional charters on human rights that more or less correspond to the universal standard.

Therefore, in clarifying the concept and usage of Human Rights, four empirical statements can be made:

- a. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations is considered to be the basic, empowering document for Human Rights Groups. The two documents of 1976 are deemed supplementary to the original 1948 text in the legal status was added to the declaration.
- b. While governments at the state level were initially hostile to Human rights agitators, the international community cooperated and collaborated with the groups. Little wonder therefore, why some scholars believe that the international community did not only give meaning to the terms but also provided the initial sanctuary that subsequently guaranteed the survival and proliferation of human right groups.
- c. Today, Human Rights Groups cover all forms of demand ranging from the mundane to the bizarre; from protection of rights of expression to protection of the rights of animals - both domestic and wild.
- d. Virtually all countries of the world have inserted the demands and claims of the Human Rights Groups in the constitutions and statutes of their countries. The cat and mouse relationship which hitherto existed between domestic governments and the Human Rights groups appears to be improving, though marginally, in many countries of the world.

HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From the vintage point of history, we know that human rights agitations predate 1948 and indeed the United Nations. The Roman emperors called those who demanded for more peoples' involvement in decision taking renegades and misfits. Many of them were condemned and stoned to death over their agitations for transparency and peoples' involvement in government. In 1750s, during the attempt to unite the Germans into a nation, some German intellectuals who considered Bavaria more relevant to the unification than Prussia lost their lives for calling on the palace to build Germany on the reality of history and not on the personal recollection of palace courtiers. Such "boldness" amounted to interference from "upstarts" of low social standing punishable by banishment.

The ideas of Karl Marx in 1848 in his books "Das Capital" and Communist manifesto" were perfect example of Human Rights groups', thesis. For all his brilliance and connection within the nobilities of the time, Marx was banished to France and England where he finished other manuscripts. The German elites preferred to banish him to Europe, especially Britain or France where his ideas would be less disruptive

to the privileged class. Even then, Britain and France of the 19th century were merely tolerant of the human rights agitators; as such agitators were closely monitored and prevented from public addresses. The British monarchy found them amusing and entertaining in some respect but carefully monitored their activities while on the soil of Britain. On the other hand, the French latitude and understanding of the human rights agitators was essentially an intellectual thing. As a build-up to the French revolution of 1789, a number of groups sprang up in Paris and environs which canvassed varying ideas on government, public duty, citizenship, obligations to authority and reciprocal expectations of the people. The plurality of these ideas meant that none was a major risk to the reigning monarch as these ideas neutralized or cancelled each other. While some agitators advised the people on revolution, another advised evolution, while some offered violence as a course, another prescribed tolerance and pacifism. In the end, no human rights idea was dominant enough in France to agitate the government into urgent change or serious embarrassment.

In Africa, human rights groups existed even in the pre-colonial societies but the focus was more on the inclusion of more groups into power sharing. Consequently, as new professions grew in popularity and membership, in the pre-colonial societies, such practitioners of the emergent professions made a case for recognition and inclusion into the ruling class. As early as the beginning of the 18th century, metal and gold fabricators in old Oyo kingdom demanded to be included in the Oyomesi which was readily granted, in recognition of the prominence of blacksmiths in the empire. Similarly, the Ibadan women under the leadership of Efusetan Aniwura demanded for three seats in the Ibadan Ruling Council in 1852 and got one seat immediately while another was conceded six years later. Perhaps the case that is most similar to the modern day concept of Human Rights group was the Ekiti issue led by Fabunmi of Oke Imesi. Indeed, he led a revolution (which climaxed into a war) against the treatment meted to his people by the Ibadan occupiers of Ekiti land. It was more like an agitation against slavery and servitude, against in human or degrading treatment. The argument of this section therefore is that

- a. Human Right agitations predate the Second World War;
- b. Virtually all peoples and continents have had to deal with agitations for inclusion and respect, for a long time;
- c. Perhaps, the greatest achievement of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights lies in the fact that the document comprehensively itemized the notions inherent in Human Rights agitation

ESSENTIALS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEMANDS

Having dealt with the twin problems of term clarification and historical perspectives of human rights, we may now turn attention to the issue of itemizing the essential ingredients of Human Rights as spelt out in national and international charters together with the current practice of the groups. As stated earlier, human right demands are spelt out in national constitutions, the United Nations declaration of 1948, the two

international covenants of 1976, and many recent charters of various activities all over the world. The two international covenants are not really profoundly different from the 1948 declaration, except that the covenants now confer legal status on the documents by countries which ratified and signed the covenants. In fact, the two covenants could just be seen as a more detailed elaboration of the Universal Declaration.

Based on the Universal Declaration and the various national constitutions, these rights could be divided into civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights. The civil and political rights include: the right to life, liberty and security of persons; freedom from slavery and servitude; freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the right to recognition as a person before law; the right to effective judicial remedy; freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention or exile; the right to a fair hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal; the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty; freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence; freedom of movement and residence; the right of asylum; the right to a nationality; the right to marry and to start a family; the right to own property; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom of opinion and expression; the right to peaceful assembly and association; the right of everyone to take part in the government of his country; the right of everyone to equal access to public service of his country.

The following rights fall under the category of economic, social and cultural rights: the right to work, the right to equal pay for equal work; the right to social security; the rights to rest and leisure, the rights to standard of living adequate for health and well-being; the right to education and the right to participate in the cultural life of the community. Apart from these rights, there are some important international rights which forbid any state, group or person from engaging in activity aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth in the declaration. In the 1976 covenants, one major international human right is that which forbids any state or power from conducting activities like genocide, ethnic cleansing or discrimination against identifiable group either because of bias, hatred, disaffection or mental reasoning. Another international human right recognizes the freedom of people to define the rights of other species which have equal rights to this planet as created by divine wisdom. It is this international right that has been successfully pursued which led to the reduction in the killing of Tigers whales, white face baboon and other natural habitats which were being callously destroyed in the name of industrial expansion. Obviously therefore, the international and national statutes have given wide ambience to concerned human rights groups as virtually all sensitive interests can be adequately covered in these provisions. In Nigeria, as well as other countries of the world, various non-governmental organizations (NGOS) have sprung up to defend and pursue different aspects of these human rights. Just as we have organizations devoted to the plight of orphans, widows and abused children, we also have NGOs working for abused dogs, abused physical environments etc.

MAJOR IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF HUMAN RIGHT GROUPS

Taken together from the holistic dimension, whether from continental Europe or from the developing nations in Asia and Africa, one cannot deny the fact that Human Rights Groups have impacted heavily on national development in the political and social fields. Indeed, they have also made tangential but important contributions to economic growth and the modernization of states.

Agenda Setting: In virtually all countries, especially the democratic nations, the Human Rights groups have become central to setting the agenda for the development of their respective countries. The past twenty years have seen the steady growth of the International Green Party devoting attention to environmental issues, recycling of goods, lowering of pollution etc. The green party in fact was formed by Human Rights agitators. Today, the future of Britain and the options available in the course of development appear to be firmly dictated by these Human Right groups.

In Nigeria, the introduction of the Environmental Assessment Impact certificate has become an essential condition before approval can be given to any building plan. The current attention being focused on Orphanages and social welfare homes has to do with the activities of Human Rights groups. The civil societies which are natural extensions of the Human Rights groups are today calling attention to the lopsidedness of power division - between tiers of government and between states. They have, since 1999, been actively involved in the monitoring of elections and calling attention to grey areas requiring modification.

The implication of the foregoing is that Human Rights groups have become central to setting national and state agendas.

Identification of Desirable New Goals: It is one thing to be involved in agenda setting but a completely different thing to succeed in pointing at new goals and successfully steering the apparatus of government towards these new goals. Ever since the Human right groups got involved in the plight of orphans living in Homes and orphanages in Lagos State, a lot of improvements have been recorded. In the past two years only three homes have been registered with stringent and compelling conditions spelt out for operations. Indeed, it is no longer business as usual. The children's welfare in the orphanages has improved while many of the sharp practices have been cut-off. The official monitors of these Homes and Orphanages have been put on their toes to perform roles expected of them. Through the activities of the Human right groups, new goals and standards have been set for orphanages and the underlying logic is that the war against child abuse is not limited to only children who have parents but to all children whether invalid, orphaned or deprived in one way or the other. Human Rights groups have become central to identification of desirable goals and the attainment of these goals.

Infusion of Higher Dose of Morality into Public Office: In truth, the Human Rights groups are not mainly interested in the operation of state laws or the mechanistic

procedures of getting things done by state. Rather, they are more interested in how to do things better. For instance, the Human Rights groups focusing on elections are more interested in making sure that elections are better organized with greater credibility. Similarly, groups focusing on widows and children are not merely interested in pursuing the known benefits of widows and children; they are more concerned with improving the existential conditions of widows and children in such a way that attention is drawn to their demeaning conditions of living. It therefore appears as if the Human Rights groups are basically interested in elevating the level of morality in public governance. There is greater focus on good and bad, right and wrong, correct and incorrect, humane and inhumane etc.

Even in the basic and usual arguments of Human Rights activities, there is always a strand of logic connected with morality, ethical standards and natural state of equality. This line of philosophic morality is seen most in the argument against slavery, child labour or abuse and also in their rejection of death sentences, torture or corporal punishments. Progressively, the Human Rights groups have influenced the social ethos of the western society and other regions of the world. As noted by Bala Takaya, the Human Rights Groups have become the critical conscience of the industrializing democracies. Therefore, if respect for the views of Human Rights groups could be regarded as a contemporaneous infusion into modern democratic governance, then, increased morality and conscientious objection have become the hallmark of their contributions to state policies.

New Political Mechanisms and Expansion of Political Space: The fourth and perhaps the most profound impact of the Human rights groups could be traced to the introduction of new political mechanism which has greatly expended the political space by making political calculations less predictable. To be sure, the Human Rights groups operate through Non Governmental Organizations and cells of civil societies. Many of this N.G.O.S has become so well established and vibrant that they impact on partisan political parties. In fact, some of the cells are more virile than registered political parties. Like political parties, they (too) contest for the minds and support of citizens. But, while political parties are statutorily forbidden from external linkage, the NGOs derive their sustenance mainly from external support. They are therefore, better placed to make quicker impact on the lives and minds of people, through access to better information and funds.

In very substantive ways, the NGOs have been able to moderate views, dictate political alternatives to followers and alter the terrains hitherto dominated by few players. This means that more political players have been added to the field. This player's variety is today being noticed in the inability of local elites to singularly manipulate the masses and dictate choices to largely illiterate supporters. In Nigeria, political calculations have become more complex; thanks largely to the Human Rights formations which are shrinking and diminishing the scope of influence and operations of the political in gods operating in virtually all states of the federation.

By creating alternative platform for political mobilization in addition to adding more players to the field, the Human Rights groups have also expanded the political space. Ever since their emergence, political discussions have ceased to be monologues and have become more interesting and diverse. A basic canon for national development is the availability of plural or multiple ideas as options toward the path of development. Therein lays the greatest contribution of Human Rights formations to national development.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to clarify the term 'Human Rights', this clarification aimed at providing a broad platform to accommodate even the rights enjoyed by animals, flora, faunas and a plethora of natural species which are now being protected by state laws and international conventions. As observed by many scholars, while not denying the importance of the idyllic spiritual message of the Human Rights groups in terms of higher utilitarian value, while accepting that agenda setting and new goals identification are contributory to development, it is our considered opinion that the single most significant contribution of Human Rights groups to national development lies in the political changes which brought in more actors and opened the political space to many citizens. Such a change, along with its ripple effects, has been quite beneficial to the Nigerian system and national development.

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