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BRIEFING

Battling to save the soul of higher education in Africa: attacks on intellectual labour in Nigeria

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SUMMARY

Violations of academic freedom are on the increase in Africa and are attracting organised resistance from academic unions across the continent. Africa has one of the worst records of attacks on academic practitioners in the world. In the early post-independence period (the 1960s and 1970s), these took the form of the politicisation and state control of the academies. In the 1980s and 1990s, the context was defined by the impact of the contradictions in the character and nature of the state, the crisis in its political economy and the role of international financial institutions and local elites. The present context is characterised by state repression and by resistance from academic unions. The resultant crisis is connected to the economic hardships experienced by the general population and the neglect of universities. This plays out in tense relations between most state officials and the universities.

KEYWORDS

Academy; Africa; the state in Africa; universities

Introduction

There are many examples of attacks against academic freedom and intellectual labour in Africa but there has been little analysis beyond journalists' accounts of the relationship between armed conflict and attacks on higher education.[1]

In Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, armed conflicts and government forces have imposed restrictions on the learning environment. From 2017 to 2024, the impact of Boko Haram and other armed Islamist insurgent groups forced Dori University and the University of Fada N'Gourma in Burkina

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Faso, together with the University of Bamenda and the University of Buea in Cameroon, to shut down. In Somalia, universities have been pressed to beef up security as threats from Al-Shabaab have continued to intensify (Rajab 2024). In South Africa, heightened concerns over the sustainability of government funding of its tertiary education have been underlined by soaring increases in university expenditures relative to the cuts in state-led investments in the sector (Naidu 2024). South Sudan and Sudan are two of the worst examples of crises in education globally (UNESCO 2023). Nineteen million children are reportedly out of school in Sudan (UNICEF 2023, 2024; Tsimpo and Wodon 2024).[2] In 2022, the L'Institut des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed Baba de Tombouctou (Ahmed Baba Institute of Higher Learning and Islamic Research) in Timbuktu – responsible for about 1,500 out of 9,000 learning centres and universities in Mali – were exposed to rebel attacks (World Bank 2022). The outbreak of conflict, since 2012, between the M23 rebel group and the Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo (FARDC) involving the FARDU, Hutu militia groups, M23, the Allied Democratic Forces and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda in the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu and Ituri have continued to undermine learning in the region (Kigotho 2024). To these are added the continent-wide effects of brain drain, governmental neglect, infrastructural collapse and the overseas diktats of international financial institutions since the 1980s.

The agenda to halt these situations, redeem the integrity of university practices and seek protection for university students and teachers has shaped the development of academic unions, industrial action and other negotiation strategies by university academics in Africa. Academic unions in Africa have a long history of resistance. Their tenacity has been affirmed under the most repressive regimes, both civil democratic and military. Struggles against government bans, the imposition of salary cuts and attempts to curtail dissent have been waged by Algeria's Conseil National des Enseignants du Supérieur (CNES); the Egyptian University Teachers' Union; the Forum for Academic Staff of the Public Universities in Uganda; Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU); the Fédération Générale de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique in Tunisia; the Researchers, Academician and Allied Workers' Union (RAAWU) of Tanzania; the Universities Teachers' Association of Ghana (UTAG); and Zimbabwe State Universities Union of Academics (ZISUUA), among many others.

The role of academic unions in Africa has been widely neglected. Yet, the activities of these groups affect the overall quality of democracy and university education on the continent. They are also important in contributing to democratic transformation. Comparative case studies would help to fill existing gaps in our coverage and understanding of political economies of organised resistance and struggles. Against the backdrop of established regional variations, this briefing draws on Nigeria's higher education experience and highlights ASUU's contribution to the broader African struggles for academic freedom, decolonisation, institutional autonomy and the quality of education in public universities from the 1980s to the 2020s.

The briefing analyses the dynamics of the resistance by Nigeria's academic trade unions in the public universities and the efforts to save the soul of higher education in Africa. The struggles are for academic freedom; comparatively better renumeration; improved funding and working conditions; and the institutional autonomy of the universities against repressive authoritarianism from civil-democratic and military regimes.

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The latest articulation of this struggle took place during an eight-month strike by ASUU which began on Monday 14 February 2022 and ended on Friday 14 October 2022. In embarking on this strike, ASUU aimed to compel the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) to deploy the University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS); implement the Memorandum of Agreement signed with the Union on 23 December 2020; mainstream the Earned Academic Allowances (EAA); pay all ASUU members at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) Ile Ife their EAA based on the stipulated guidelines; and publish the White Paper on the Visitation Panel Reports of all public universities. Other issues included demands to address the victimisation of academics at Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Ebonyi State University (EBSU), Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) and Kogi State University (KSU); approve and implement the renegotiated 2009 FGN–ASUU Agreement that had been submitted for finalisation; and stop the proliferation of state universities (Osodeke 2022).[3] The strike was implemented nationwide[4] and the impact of the state's ill-treatment of this struggle are yet to be examined.

The ongoing standoff has been long in the making. The major actors, ASUU and the FGN, are at variance and are operating as adversarial negotiators. Both parties are sworn to conflict. Each side counters and opposes the position of the other. Rather than conciliating, the two groups are digging into the trenches of class struggle. They view each other as enemies working towards contradictory and opposite goals. The tensions are irreconcilable as they are based on fundamental contradictions between capital and labour relations in the postcolonial state. They emanate from the actions and failings of historically inconsistent government elites that are neo-patrimonial and often corrupt, seeking to placate limited and narrow crony interests. These elites are not committed to investing in public education and the needs of working-class citizens. ASUU continues to raise compelling issues at the material bases of higher education and the Nigerian society. The FGN glosses over these, paying lip service, and offers scant solutions that merely scratch the surface of the dispute as a means to get ASUU to call off or suspend its strike actions and return to work. Agreements are entered into with ASUU by the FGN; promises are made by the state. Memoranda of Agreement and Memoranda of Understanding are signed by education ministers and government spokespersons. Parents, students, the media and the public look towards the end of the strike. Yet they mistake strike suspension as the resolution of the deeper causes of industrial action: university teachers demand autonomy, improved facilities and funding. The FGN, in contrast, claims the right to control higher education and complains that it is operating under financial constraints that limit the possibility of alternative policies. This dispute complicates the resolution of the crisis.

Industrial action has extended beyond ASUU to include all the other unions at Nigeria's public universities. On 27 March 2022, the National Association of Academic Technologists (NAAT), together with the Non-Academic Staff Union of Universities (NASU) and the Senior Staff Association of Nigerian Universities (SSANU), declared a 14-day warning strike. This was later extended. On 21 April 2022, in a statement signed by the General Secretary of NASU, Prince Peter A. Adeyemi, and the National President of SSANU, Comrade Mohammed H. Ibrahim, the Joint Action Committee of these unions extended their strikes by two months; and later, indefinitely. The trigger for this collective strike was the demand for several categories of unpaid earned allowances. The five-month-old strike was suspended on Wednesday 31 August 2022. This left ASUU striking alone until 14 October 2022.

The background was the 2020 nationwide strike which began on 23 March 2020 and ended on 23 December 2020, spanning 274 working days. Nigeria's return to civil-democratic politics in May 1999, after 15 years of military rule (1983–98), has neither constrained nor resolved the disputed issues underlying the strikes by ASUU and other unions in and outside the universities. In the Fourth Republic (between May 1999 and October 2024) the working days lost to ASUU strikes exceeded four and a half calendar years.

The resultant crisis has been alarming and debilitating, including the massive relocation and transition of Nigerian academics overseas and decline in higher education provision. My analysis of the protracted struggle in Nigeria's higher education is informed by the need to look at the historical interactions between ASUU and FGN from the 1980s to 2023. My enquiry is limited to the federal five, first-generation universities[5] together with the second and other generations of public universities in Nigeria. Private and state universities in Nigeria are both marred by the absence of academic freedom. Private universities are driven by the profit-centred motivation of their owners, which inhibits a questioning culture. Likewise, the appointments, governance and ownership structures of most state universities in Nigeria are extensions of the political machineries of the dominant political parties and incumbent governors. In both the private and state universities, attempts at institutionalising universally shared ideals and norms of academic and intellectual traditions of a world-class university acquired from the first and other generations of public universities have neither succeeded nor taken root. The expectations of internalising industrial democracy in these institutions have led to endless court cases and litigation nationwide. In Nigeria's private and state universities, violations of academic freedom and intellectual labour emanate from the complicated and contradictory relationships between the academics and the institutional ownership structures. In the federal universities, the problems stem from the industrial rights-based demands and other exchanges from the academics; their unions; and the autocratic actions and responses from the FGN, as well as state institutions and their officials. The gamut of neo-patrimonial, primordial and other sub-standard practices that continue to disappoint such world-class expectations have been examined (Lebeau and Ogunsanya 2000). As the experiences of Baba-Ahmed, Babcock, Bowen, Covenant and Igbinedion Universities show, these citadels are deployed to serve the private interests of their owners in many ways that undermine the functional workings of the institutions.

The transformation of higher education in Africa

Universities in Africa have changed and expanded phenomenally. In the late colonial and early post-independence periods the University College Ibadan and the University College of the Gold Coast were the only universities in anglophone West Africa, while Makerere University, the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Nairobi were the only universities throughout East Africa. The present context, in contrast, is marked by an expansion in the numbers of national public universities.

Higher education in the twenty-first century has seen a continent-wide expansion in both the number of existing universities and student numbers. There has been curriculum development and the entrance of new private universities with profit-driven motives,

together with the presence and role of external actors such as China, the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Additional active agents involved in universities in Africa include the African Development Bank (AfDB); the Association of African Universities (AAU); the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU); the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and national organisations like the British Council, French and German overseas educational offices and Russian and US cultural centres. Internal agents include the funders and owners of the private universities together with the governing councils of the public universities. There has also been the development and rise in the activities of academic unions. The motivations for this are many. First was the aspiration to liberate the early post-independence universities from autocratic state officials in the 1960s and 1970s. Second was the need to stem the agenda and influence of global finance and other multilateral external actors to commercialise and liberalise higher education in Africa through privatisation. Third is the battle for academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Academic freedom is critical to the broader democratic struggles in Africa. It is fundamental for delivering the democratic revolution; for building the Fourth Republic; and for articulating resistance against different forms of autocratic rule, civil 'democratic' and military regimes with their international collaborators. It includes the development and prioritisation of education, human rights protection and the redistribution of wealth across Africa. Its dynamics are not limited to only national struggles within individual states and their universities. These are connected to the global asymmetrical relations of power between the North and the South; the externalisation of sovereignty; the struggles against the neo-colonial operations of global capitalism; and the contradictions of ongoing core–periphery relations articulated through the structural adjustment programmes implemented in sub-Saharan Africa and the global South by international financial institutions from the mid 1980s. These programmes helped international financial institutions to control the direction of public education across the continent. They also continue to determine the investment in the public universities. The role of national elites across the continent has been central for repressing academic freedom. Rather than accommodating and respecting the autonomy of universities, African elites have been resentful of intellectuals. The thinking in government quarters is that if allowed autonomy and freedom, the universities would threaten the state and its status quo.

ASUU and democratic resistance

The challenges of higher education are underpinned by the crisis in the political economy of the states in Africa. The experiences of Nigeria's public universities are most telling here. Public universities in Nigeria are in crisis. Following the state's intrusive behaviour in the 1960s and 1970s, the result of contradictions in the character and nature of the state, the contemporary context is underlined by debilitating material conditions (Nwafor 2023; Omenazu 2023a; This Nigeria 2023). These are compounded by heightened national debt (Akubo 2023; Alechenu 2023; Iyatse and Chibueze 2023; Salau 2023); deliberate neglect of the universities by the state; poor national priorities (Business Day 2023); and unabated poverty. Added to the continued fall in the value of the naira (Omenazu 2023b) and insecurity of lives (Musa, Adama and Isamotu 2023; Sunday Tribune 2023), Nigeria offers a

disturbing confirmation of Afro-pessimism. These situations affect the healthy functioning of the universities. They also attract resistance from ASUU and other unions.

On 29 May 1999, Nigeria's democratic Third Republic began with the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo. This followed 15 years of uninterrupted military rule (1983–98). The Third Republic has continued to the present time, during which many working days have been lost to industrial action across several sectors, including in higher education due to ASUU strikes (Arowosegbe 2021, 2023). Nigeria's return to civil-democratic rule has not had a positive effect on the demands of organised labour. It has rather escalated them.

Nigeria's return to civil-democratic rule enabled hitherto suppressed grievances to be fiercely articulated by previously unheard groups. Notwithstanding the democratic opening, the FGN's positions and responses have been premised on its perception of the education sector as incapable of delivering constituency-based economic gains and immediate political returns for politicians. Between 1993 and 1998, the late General Sani Abacha described universities as the least productive segment of the state in Nigeria.[6] Other regimes have continued to compare and evaluate the performance and relevance of the universities based on business outcomes and profit motives. University academics alone are incapable of bringing down existing governments. They do not have, for example, the influence and power that have been exhibited by retired generals and serving officers in the armed forces. They are neither strategic nor threatening to the narrow ends of regime stabilisation in Third World societies. From the military generals to the populist state actors, Nigerian politicians favour the establishment and licensing of new public universities without funding them.[7] This is pursued as a strategy for stimulating patronage from various political constituencies during elections. Constituency and giant projects are approved and pursued for funding, only to be abandoned later and possibly used for siphoning off public funds for election campaigns, enlarged overseas bank accounts and foreign trips, among other personal interests. The compelling demand and intensive nature of the tripartite spheres of university life and work, facilities, faculties and funding, into which enormous resources must be injected, would restrict the volume of funds that are tapped by Nigeria's governing class and their ruling elites, neither of whom favour a developmental state. Hence the state's continued repression of the universities.

Conclusion

The current post-strike period is marked by 'work to rule' and other industrial conflict practices. Local branches of ASUU have demonstrated and reacted. Many university teachers have died during periods of industrial action.[8] Some have left for work overseas or to other vocations. Students are not spared the impact of the crisis in Nigerian higher education. The absence of a welfare state capable of delivering social services worsens students' impoverishment, with many dropping out and others lamenting their inability to contribute to the cost of their education or rising living standards in higher education. After graduation, it takes between 8 and 10 years for the average Nigerian graduate to secure employment. The taught curricula in most African universities do not include technical, vocational and other practical problem-solving training and Nigerian graduates are often condemned to dependence either on their parents or *non*-existing job markets. Many students from affluent backgrounds have relocated for overseas education.

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Most disturbing in this dynamic is the repressive nature of the state's responses. The state continues to accuse ASUU, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and other active unions of regime subversion. The clearest examples of state repression are the 1986 deaths of about 20 undergraduate students at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria (Mohammed 1986; Mustapha and Othman 1986) and the students and youth activists killed in the streets during the 'End SARS' protest in Lekki in southwest Nigeria in October 2020.

Another consequence, which has accompanied many years of economic austerity, is the undermining of post-independence publishing and research culture in many African universities. The combined effects of governmental neglect together with economic repression imposed by international financial institutions have continued to undermine the contributions by Africa-based academics, intellectuals and scholars to the global stream of knowledge production. The agency and capacity of home-based African scholars have been sharply reduced to one of data generation. As David Mills et al. (2022, 2) observed, the 'bibliometric data on Africa's share of global scientific publishing shows a slow increase of just over 3% of all indexed articles.' This is mostly dominated by Egypt, South Africa and Tunisia. From the 1990s, academic publishing has been transformed by commercial consolidation, digitalisation and the internet. These infrastructural and technological developments have reinforced knowledge-based dimensions of North–South asymmetries, hierarchies and inequalities. They have created new access barriers for global South academic authors and publishers. These challenges are algorithmic, financial, social and technological. They also demand that national academies relate directly to the global science system and its metrics-driven culture of knowledge production. Regional responses vary. Many African universities, concerned about their rankings, demand that their academics publish mainly in globally indexed journals. Inclusion in the two commercially owned and dominant citation indexes, Scopus and Web of Science, has become the key marker of journal credibility and reputation. These two indexes exclude most Africa-based published periodicals. Other indexed journals also struggle to meet their demanding citation thresholds, integrity requirements and technical standards. This renders many long-established serials invisible. A similar challenge faces African book publishers. Access to e-book distribution and other print opportunities through the major online platforms entails meeting data and library standards driven by the global North. These continued asymmetries remain an abiding concern for Third World scholars working on knowledge production (University World News 2023).

Given the totalising impact of Africa's cumulative adversity and precarity, the comparative rankings of African universities among other regional universities across the world have continued to fall. Broken town and gown relationships, together with external donor abandonment and systematic neglect by the states in Africa, continue to undermine the decolonisation and revival of collapsed research cultures. Hence the brain drain and the migration and relocation of specialised workers abroad. It is in these biting challenges and precarious situations that I locate the struggles by the academic unions in Africa. The only qualitative exceptions are the leading universities in South Africa. The QS Online Ranking of World Universities, the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities and the Times Higher Education World Universities Ranking are key university ranking bodies. In all these global outlets, South African universities rank higher than all other African universities. South Africa accounts for about two-thirds of Africa's overall expenditure in development

and research. South African investment in knowledge production, through the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the South African Research Chairs Initiative (SARCHI) by the Department of Education as well as the Department of Science and Technology, is the highest in Africa. In Nigeria, the pressure to publish in the top-rated international journals and the rise in the power of citation indexes have led to the demise of many local journals. As politically motivated expansion and proliferation of federal and state universities continue to erode the integrity of higher education, the overall quality of Nigeria's university system is increasingly critiqued. Many of the academic journals launched in the 1960s and 1970s have folded. Others have reduced in frequency. University presses are either dormant or have become only commercial presses (Mills et al. 2021; Mills and Branford 2022).

This crisis and its resultant struggles will continue for a while. Most of the issues that informed the strike in 2022 and previous strikes have remained unresolved. In particular, the FGN's failure to pay the outstanding salaries of university lecturers over several months in 2022, together with its refusal to depoliticise and reconstitute the governing councils of federal and state universities, might end up escalating and worsening the ongoing conflict cycle. These are currently instigating another round of industrial strikes. The government's management of the crisis and its responses to it continue to undermine future struggles for academic freedom, students' post-graduation employment, the integrity and quality of education, university autonomy and wage increments. The current government (elected on 29 May 2023 and due to be in power until 29 May 2027) is trying to clamp down and push back against struggles in higher education. It is pressurising ASUU to sign an undertaking not to proceed with further strikes as a condition for paying four of the outstanding eight months' unpaid salaries. ASUU has rejected this offer: it says '*Aluta continua*'.

Notes

1. For NGO and policy accounts, see UNESCO (2011, 2018); UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank (2021); World Bank (2022).
2. In this precarious situation, marked by famine and other ominous signs of infant mortalities, higher education and university education are both undeliverable.
3. As of December 2024, there are 50 federal, 60 state-owned and 148 private universities in Nigeria: 258 universities in total. ASUU's opposition to the FGN's continued proliferation of state universities is hinged on the government's failure to fund and maintain the existing universities. The union claims that such non-committal of lack of action by the government worsens the national educational crisis in Nigeria's public universities.
4. Attendance at statutory meetings of any kind – college, council, departmental boards, faculty and senate – or at examinations, inaugural and substantive lectures and teaching, is forbidden during a total strike.
5. The first university in Nigeria was established as University College Ibadan in 1948. This began as an affiliate institution of the University of London. It became an autonomous degree-awarding institution in 1962 and was renamed the University of Ibadan. The same year saw the establishment of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria; University of Ife – renamed on 12 May 1987 as Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife; University of Lagos; and University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

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6. This statement was in response to ASUU's scathing opposition to Abacha's bid to become a civilian president in Nigeria's most controversial and expensive transition programme. This process was ended by Abacha's sudden death on 8 June 1998.
7. On the latest action by the government in this endeavour, see Yakubu (2024).
8. At Ambrose Alli University, 10 academics died during the 2022 strike, which the Branch Chair of ASUU, Cyril Onogbosele, blamed on unpaid salaries (Egbejule 2022). On the details of the 21 deaths at the University of Calabar, see Agbakwuru (2022); Tolu-Kolawole (2023).

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