

Demise of the Social Contract - Covid-19, Fridays For Future, and the EndSARS Protest

The COVID-19 Pandemic

One lesson that nations the world over have had to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic is that certain parts of their populations are more vulnerable than others. The ageing societies typical of the Global North have had to devote much effort to shielding their senior citizens and those with underlying health conditions from possible contact with the virus. The science seems to suggest that the under-60s have less of a chance of succumbing to the disease. The same pattern has been in evidence in the Global South in countries such as Nigeria, where the death toll has been particularly pronounced among the country's elders. Among many governments specifically in the Global North much of the effort to contain the spread of the virus has gone into protecting the elder citizens by expecting or compelling younger citizens to temporarily forgo some of their civil rights (e.g., freedom of movement, employment, pursuit of enterprise, etc.).

What the virus has, in other words, brought back into the limelight is the degree to which government and/or the social fabric relies on what the political philosophers called the "social contract". Individuals give up specific rights/liberties and allow the government to choose for them in exchange for 'benefits', e.g. protection of their other rights. In the classic construction, the individuals accord the government the right to rule over them through law. John Rawls in his famous "Theory of Justice" argued as follows: If we all put ourselves in what he calls the "original position" (where we are shrouded in what he terms a "veil of ignorance" and cannot therefore know whether we personally might not gain more or less from a specific right) then there is no notion of privilege and to protect yourself you have to protect everyone else.

In that light, we would choose the following concept of justice for our society: We would all have equal rights to basic liberties in line with a similar system of liberty for all and, more importantly for the discussion here, all social and economic inequalities would be structured such that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. Now, if one group consciously disadvantages itself in order to advantage the other group, it would only be 'just' for this to be based on a horizontal trade-off. In other words, the latter group would need to 'repay the favour'.

If we look at the COVID-19 pandemic, what it illustrates is the importance to construe the social contract for a 'just' society' for ourselves not in terms of a horizontal structure, but a

vertical one. This is innate in the “veil of ignorance” Rawls postulates, as theoretically speaking we don’t know our age and are forced to argue and act on behalf of the weakest amongst us because, randomly chosen, it might be us. The vertical social contract is one agreed between different generations. Such a social contract already exists covertly as the underpinning for most pension systems. I pay into a state pension system now from which I will benefit at a time when the next generation is working to pay the taxes that keep that pension system afloat. It likewise exists within families in rural communities where the parents have a sufficient number of children if only for the sole reason that they need to ensure there are enough people who will take care of them once they are physically incapacitated and no longer able to work.

The question in the COVID-19 context is whether governments take the vertical social contract into account when expecting the younger generation to give up going to school or sports, or leisure time pursuits in order to protect the generation of the elderly. If they did, then there would be more discussion of the anticipated trade-off that will be forthcoming.

Fridays For Future

This notion of a vertical contract that runs ‘downwards’ as it is transgenerational is structurally similar to the arguments put forward by the “Fridays For Future” (3F) movement. Personified by the person of Greta Thunberg, 3F is a campaign by school pupils and young people insisting that the future that is endangered by a ‘business as usual’ approach that does not try and stop global warming/climate change is ‘their’ future. In other words, it does not belong to those who reap the main benefits from the “business as usual” approach now, namely, the older generation. If we go back to Rawls’ notion of a contract underpinning justice, then 3F is saying if we put ourselves in the position of those young people, and we have to if society is just, then we, too, would do our utmost to prevent climate change. For them, further along the ineluctable path of Time’s Arrow, climate change may be a matter of life and death unless we alter our habits of exploiting natural resources now.

In fact, if we look at 3F from the vantage point of the COVID-19 pandemic we could imagine a scenario in which the two opposing ends of the age spectrum rebalance the otherwise respectively skewed social contract. The elder sections of the population who have been advantaged by the lockdowns are in many countries the section of the electorate least predisposed to vote for the ‘radical’ changes necessary to at least reduce the impact of climate change – I write ‘reduce’ as with each month that passes so climate change becomes a one-way street of irreversible planetary damage, or so the scientists insist.

Now, the main 3F groups are precisely those swathes of the population that have most had to change their behavioural patterns during lockdowns – no parties, no hanging out, no football, no new job entry opportunities, in part no exams, and thus, no qualification, no immediate social or economic future, etc. The trade-off would logically seem to be that coming out of lockdown for the second wave will be ‘payback’ time: In return for the one singular natural resource of their lives having been protected, the older generation will vote to protect the natural resources (nature, the globe) to enable the young generation to have the prospects of enjoying that singular resource much later in time.

#EndSARS and the intergenerational social contract

Now there is an obvious parallel I would suggest between the 3F movement and the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The 3F member fears a future that is uninhabitable; the #EndSARS member fears a future where she or he may be abducted or even murdered for no reason. Over and above that, both are the victims of a failed social contract.

Let us look at the basic statistics in the Nigerian case, ten years ago, according to the report Nigeria: The Next Generation published by the British Council, the statistical split in the population was as follows:

“Today, over 40% of Nigerians are under fifteen, while 3% are over retirement age. That means there is only slightly more than one adult of working age available to take care of each dependent in the population, a ratio that worsened after independence and is now barely higher than it was in 1960.”

Since we are discussing those who can participate in a hypothetical ‘vertical social contract’, let us only consider those members of the population who are past the age of majority and, therefore, can register to vote. In the 2019 presidential elections there were potentially 84,004,084 persons registered to vote. Of that number, more than 15 million were first-time voters. Indeed, young voters formed a majority, as more than half of the registered voters – 51.11 percent – were aged between 18 and 35. Assuming a birth rate of 2.5 percent, that percentage will have risen further. By the same token, the 36-50-year-olds (the age bracket traditionally regarded as the most productive in the economy) accounted for only 29.97 percent of the votes. In other words, only 18.92 percent of the electorate were aged over 50 years.

It is an indisputable fact that among the young people, there are pronounced differences in

interests/outlook now visible between those in the geographical South of the country, and those in the Middle Belt and North. Those in the South have tended to go out on the street in protest, those in the North have not. Some pundits suggested this was because the SARS force was not seen negatively in the North. The argument would seem specious as young people in the North encounter insecurity that is more dramatic than in the South and the percentage of them unemployed or underemployed is worse. One might therefore conjecture that the difference can be attributed to socio-psychological reasons. Young people in the North, it should be recollected, voted overwhelmingly for President Buhari in the 2015 election and to a lesser degree in 2019, presumably placing their hopes in his promises for change. It is only logical that they are now psychologically unable to accept that his government may have failed them, even if their lived reality says it has. Instead, they are forced inwardly to deny the fact; the alternative would be to admit their hopes and faith was misplaced. Such disillusionment would be strongly to the detriment of their short-term psychological balance. While in the long run such an acceptance of reality and rejection of denial is a good thing for the maturation of the mind, the consequences of such an inner loss for socio-political stability are potentially awful.

In terms of the thought exercise on the vertical social contract being undertaken here, those differences are of no import and we shall simply subsume both groups of young people under the category of the #EndSARS age-group. In economic terms, as regards the over 50-year-olds we can assume that it is the section of the current population which benefited (if any large swath of the population did) from the sale of Nigerian natural resources (oil) in the past. In the absence of efficient national infrastructure and functional health and education systems having been put in place using that revenue, the #EndSARS age group is not benefiting materially from the oil money, although that revenue is a national asset and, therefore, likewise owned by them. Indeed, in terms of the figures for unemployment and underemployment, they are suffering more than any other age group in the workforce. So over and above the fact that both 3F and #EndSARS have made masterful use of the social media, there is a true structural parallel between the 3F group and the #EndSARS group - both face uncertain futures owing to the way natural resources have been exploited by a prior generation. And in both cases governments have tried to ignore the two groups' respective demands or denounce them as misguided or unrealistic.

In the case of the #EndSARS group, the exclusion of the one (majority) group by a minority elder age-group is replicated in the political space. In this domain, to take one example, the "political over-50s" in the geopolitical North, namely the Northern governors, seek to constrain the freedoms of the under-25s: in this instance: their freedom of expression in the

social media and their freedom of assembly based on communication through the social media. As with the economy, here, too, the situation is skewed against the younger generation. In other words, in terms of political economy, Nigeria's 'vertical social contract' has apparently failed completely. Governance has ignored the intergenerational matrices

If we construe politicians as representatives of the electorates, then the majority being represented is the #EndSARS generation. In such a situation, is it not strange that protest was required before the politicians decided to 'seek a dialogue' with the #EndSARS generation? They were, after all, supposed to have been representing them and, therefore, to be cognizant of the interests of that majority from the first day they entered into office. Indeed, in light of the above contractarian definition of justice, surely it is payback time for the younger generation in Nigeria. At present, in this context political leadership would seem unable to realize that it is emphatically jeopardizing the social contract by not devoting all its efforts to supporting that majority of the population. It hardly bears stating that in the absence of a social contract there is rarely social peace.