

No Justice, No Peace, No Education: An Exploration of the Nigerian Student Leader

Contribution to the April 1978 Crisis

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Introduction

The announcement of a 46 naira (\$73)¹ increase in university lodging fees sparked what some Nigerian historians consider one of the greatest political crises of the 1975-79 Mohammad and Obasanjo military governments.² In April 1978, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) led one of the biggest, most violent student protests in Nigeria's history. While 1978 was by no means the first time students were at odds with the Nigerian government, it was the first time the student leaders of the Union, or the leaders of any formal organization for that matter, had managed to mobilize over 10,000 people nationwide to march on their side.³ Present in the crowd of 3,000 that formed outside the University of Ife was former student Evelyn Obioha. Forty-three years later, when asked about the strategic efficiency of protests in 1978, Mrs. Obiaha remarked that “the 1978 crisis is the mother of all student protests in Nigeria... protests are an effective strategy but the federal government failed to meet our demands”. According to her, 1978 was the first of many examples of the Nigerian government neglecting the “united voices of youth and justice”.⁴

Mrs. Obioha is part of a generation of Nigerians that came of age during the 1970s military regimes. When the Biafran war ended in 1970⁵ General Yakubu Gowon was serving as head of state, and sought to “reconstruct” and “rehabilitate” the country.⁶ A spectacular, oil-fueled, economic upturn greatly aided his efforts. Eager to modernize, the government invested their

¹U.S Department of the Treasury, Treasury Reporting Rates of Exchange As of March 31 1978, Bureau of Government Financial Operations, March 1978. 3 Exchange Rates as of March 1978 \$1= 0.623 Naira

²J.D OJO, “The Constitutional Aspects of April 1978 Students' Demonstrations in the Nigerian Universities. A Critical Analysis.” *Philippine Political Science Journal*, 0115-4451. , 6, no. 0115 (January 12, 1980): 8–21.

³Daily Times Reporters, “Students Start Class Boycott”, *Daily Times*, April 18 1978, Front Page

⁴Evelyn Ufoma, *Evelyn Ufuoma Response to April 1978 Protests Questionnaire*, November 29th 2021

⁵The Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, was a civil war fought between the Nigerian Government and the secessionist Republic of Biafra from 1967-1970

⁶Yakubu Gowon, “The Dawn of National Reconciliation”, Gowon's Victory Message to the Nation, Broadcast from Lagos, 15 January 1970 (Accessed August 2021)

new fortune in infrastructure, industry, and social projects like education, art, and culture.⁷ Young Nigerians, particularly those in urban and wealthy areas, witnessed the country's rapid development. The military leaders Murtala Muhammad and Olusegun Obasanjo, who succeeded Gowon after he was ousted in a coup in 1975, continued these social and infrastructural improvements.

Before his death in February 1976,⁸ General Muhammad invested significant portions of the increased government revenue in education; 15-20% of the national budget went to the education sector.⁹ Then, serving as the sole head of state, Obasanjo introduced the Universal Primary Education Program that made primary education free and compulsory.¹⁰ A year later, in 1977, the federal government abolished university tuition fees in an attempt to increase enrollment and access to institutions of higher learning.¹¹ University students now had access to free, "excellent education"¹² and only had to pay a small price for new and improved facilities. That was, until the government announced an increase in the price of university boarding.

In 1977, the Nigerian government faced an economic crisis as the price of oil fell.¹³ Public expenditure cutbacks resulted in a rise in the costs of healthcare, transportation, and food.¹⁴ University tuition however remained completely free and the fee increases pertained only to food and accomodation. Why then did the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) organize protests across universities nationwide and involving members of the general public over a \$73

⁷Robert.H Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: The Political Basis of Agricultural Policies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981. 13-14

⁸Murtala Muhammad was assassinated in an attempted coup in February 1976. For more reading see Dele Yusuf, "Nigeria: The Story of Murtala Muhammad Who Ruled With Immediate Effect", *The Africa Report* (2019)

⁹Ibukun, W. Olusola. "Financial Allocations to Education in Nigeria, 1962-80." *The Journal of Negro Education* 57, no. 1 (1988): 106–16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2295280>.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹F. Ojo, *Nigerian Universities and High-Level Manpower Development*, University Press, Lagos. 1983

¹²Ufoma, *Evelyn Ufuoma Response to April 1978 Protests Questionnaire*

¹³P. Sayre Schatz, "Nigeria's Petro-Political Fluctuation." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 11, no. 1/2 (1981): 35–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1166232>. 35

¹⁴Daily Times Nigeria, May 1977- 78

increase in semesterly boarding costs? Former university students interviewed as part of this research shared the view that the fee increases were “arbitrary”, “unnecessary” and “unfair”.¹⁵ They remember the protests as the first time Nigerian students “stood united with one voice” against a government described as “corrupt” and “greedy”.¹⁶ The NUNS student leaders were right to organize people to march in support of this “just cause”.

However, what exactly this “cause” was remains unclear. According to the former university students, the demonstrations were against the fee increases. When the leaders of the national student union met with the government to negotiate the changes in university financing, however, their leaders demanded that the Minister of Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali, institute a policy that guaranteed free and compulsory education at all levels. When he refused, the NUNS’ national president, Segun Okeowo, and his peers, planned a mass demonstration intent on forcing the government to accept their demand. As the crowd grew outside the University of Lagos on the first day of protests, April 17th, violent police intervention resulted in several injuries and one fatality—a student, Akintunde Ojo, was killed.

Colonel Ali’s response to the violence was described as “callous” and the following day, protests resumed. This time, the crowd chanted “Ali Must Go”, calling for the resignation of the Minister of Education, in addition to the demand for free education at all levels.¹⁷ Mayhem continued to unfold outside university campuses throughout the country until April 21st when the government called for school closures. NUNS primary leaders such as Mr. Okeowo and Mr. Olufemi Olufagba, the NUNS’ secretary general, were arrested in connection to the demonstrations. School resumed in early May and the fee increases went on as planned.

¹⁵Edekin Imoukhuede, *Edekin Imoukhuede Response to Survey on April 1978 Protests*, November 28, 2021

¹⁶Ufoma, *Evelyn Ufuoma Response to April 1978 Protests Questionnaire*

¹⁷Some scholars refer to the protests as the “Ali Must Go” protests. This thesis refers to them as the 1978 student protests because the demand “Ali Must Go” was only adopted on the second day of protests

The memory of the violence that occurred outside university campuses overshadows the roles the student leaders played. How exactly they successfully mobilized thousands of people in an era that predates widespread connectivity is rarely analyzed. Even more significant is the question of why, despite their immense success in mobilizing, did they fail to stop the changes in university financing from being instituted? The goal of this research is to answer these questions by examining the specific contributions of the leaders of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) to the outbreak and execution of the 1978 student protests. Distinguishing the actions of upper and lower-level Union leaders helps explain some of the outcomes of the conflict. The chapters that follow illustrate how the NUNS' upper leadership was more fixated on using the protests to display their social outreach and political power to the government than they were on protecting the immediate interests of poor university students. By proving the extent of their support and drawing upon the popular demand for free education, their organization could have a long-term impact on national policy. Lower level NUNS members, on the other hand, were more concerned with protecting the immediate interests of low-income students. The Union leaders' focus on using the demonstrations to become more central to decision making in the education sector undermined their ability to secure the interests of the students they represented.

The 2020 protests against police violence in Nigeria and the 2021 riots in South-Africa reinvigorated interest in the history of African youth protests.¹⁸ Although the May 1968 protests in France typically dominate discussions on student activism in the twentieth century,¹⁹ scholars of sub-saharan Africa recognize distinct characteristics of youth protests in Africa post independence. Political scientist Lisa Mueller identifies three waves of protests in African

¹⁸Samuel Nelson, “#ENDSARS and Ali Must Go”, *Odunews*, October 26 2020

¹⁹Kate Keller, *Fifty Years Later, France is Still Debating the Legacy of Its 1968 Protests*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 4 2018

history.²⁰ The first wave, lasting roughly from the 1940s to the 1960s, is covered extensively by historians such as Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Elizabeth Schmidt who highlight the roles students, peasants, and labor unions played in the fight against colonial rule.²¹

The second wave, beginning in the late 70s, came to full fruition in the 90s as students, workers, and religious leaders throughout the continent, pressured autocratic leaders to facilitate transitions to multiparty democracy.²² Democratic backsliding and unequal economic growth fueled the popular discontent that birthed the third wave of protests beginning in the 2010s.²³

Shared trends across the continent mean that scholars who have studied the second wave of protests (late 70s to 90s), including the 1978 student protests in Nigeria, have analyzed them in a structural and comparative way. John Nkinyangi points out the “violent and predictable” government reactions to student activism in Nigeria (1978), Sierra Leone (1980), and Madagascar (1986). He praises the Nigerian student leaders' mobilization attempts and argues that in all three cases, the student complaints “encompassed both educational concerns and more broadly based social and economic issues”.²⁴ Historian Randi Balsvik also mentions the combination of student concerns and larger societal concerns in his exploration of the “endemic” of university student unrest in West Africa.²⁵ He explains how state authorities often instigated student action by failing to provide them with adequate resources, then when students challenged the declining in education quality, their complaints were met with violence.²⁶

²⁰Lisa Mueller, *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. doi:10.1017/9781108529143.

²¹See: Cheryl Johnson-Odim, Nina Emma Mba *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*, University of Illinois Press.(1997) or Elizabeth Schmidt, “Top Down or Bottom Up? Nationalist Mobilization Reconsidered, with Special Reference to Guinea (French West Africa)” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 110, Issue 4, October 2005, Pages 975–1014

²²Mueller, *Political Protest in Contemporary Africa*. Introduction

²³Ibid.

²⁴John A. Nkinyangi, “Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (1991): 157–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3447250>.

²⁵R. Balsvik, “Student Protest—University and State in Africa 1960–1995”, *Forum for Development Studies*, 25(2), pp.301-325. 304

²⁶Ibid, 305.

While the arguments and evidence provided by these two scholars provides information on the immediate context of the protests, the comparative nature of their works means that they do so in a relatively limited way. Their accounts of student protests in Nigeria specifically are typically short.

Historical studies by Kola Olugbade and Bukola Akintola however, deal exclusively with the history of student activism in Nigeria. Olugbade for example, sheds light on the links between anti-colonial, nationalist protests, and the “radical progressive thought” sustained in universities after independence.²⁷ He argues that by promoting the defiance of British colonial leaders, the government inadvertently started a tradition of youth anti-government dissent.²⁸ This is an argument also put forward by Peter Ekeh in his well known article Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa.²⁹ Bukola Akintola’s research explores the long term causes and effects of a variety of student protests in Nigeria. Referencing the April 1978 protests, she asserts that the government's use of violence in these protests was an indication of the state’s uneasiness about the spread of dissatisfaction and the disruption of society.³⁰

Both Olugbade and Akintola generalize about the factors influencing student protests in Nigeria rather than focusing on the 1978 student protests. This may be because in subsequent years there were similar student protests; the 1986 protests in Ahmadu Bello University for example was a protest to commemorate the students killed during the 1978 protests.

Furthermore, student protests in the form of strikes and boycotts were much more common after

²⁷K. Olugbade, “Nigerian Students and Political Mobilisation.” *Journal of social development in Africa* 5, no. 1 (n.d.): 39–59.

²⁸Ibid, 41.

²⁹Peter P. Ekeh, “Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement.” *Africa*, 103-104. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429502538-7>

³⁰Bukola Akintola, “The Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Mobilization in Nigeria”, in Wale Adebawale (Eds.) *Encountering the Nigerian State*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2010: 99-118

1980 meaning the histories of specific student protests may have been of lesser importance to historians of Nigerian education.³¹

These historians who study the protests comparatively are all minimally critical of the student leaders. They tend to position their work from the perspective of the government, highlighting the mistakes and failures of the military regimes. By contrast, sociologist Ladun Anise, who studied the 1978 protests soon after they happened, is critical of both the student leaders and government officials. Anise's article on the protests, one of the most detailed publications to deal with the events, argues that the student leaders deliberately attracted public attention and support in order to distinguish themselves from historic student protests in the country.³² According to Anise, the student leaders did not think through the viability of their demands and instead prioritized headlines and fame. Offering a critique of the government response, Anise positions it in the wider context of the Nigerian government's pattern of instituting contradictory policies and confronting problems with those policies as they arose.³³

Going beyond a structural and comparative analysis of the protests and expanding on Anise's dual critical approach, this thesis explores how the student leaders themselves contributed to the crisis. Rather than treating the National Union of Nigerian Students as a unified group who were the victims of bad government policy, this thesis highlights internal disagreements within the Union by proving that the Union's primary leaders prioritized growing the organization's power and support. Focused on this goal, they reinforced the criticisms of the government put forward by students and non-students, convincing these groups to join their march. These mobilization efforts overshadowed the concerns of the lower-level, often poorer union members who wanted to focus solely on negotiating with the specifics of the fee increases with the government. The

³¹Ibid.

³²Ladun Anise, "Confrontation Politics and Crisis Management: Nigerian University Students and Public Policy: A Social Commentary." *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 9, no. 1/2 (1979): 73–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1166946>.

³³Ibid.

main primary sources used to support this argument are newspaper articles from 1977-78, published NUNS press statements and posters, books and essays written by former student leaders, official government reports regarding the protests, and finally, interviews I conducted with former students from 1978 who were involved in the protests.

Newspapers were chosen as reliable sources that reflect public opinion at the time. In the absence of widespread national television, newspapers were a way to communicate multiple perspectives. Over 200 scanned copies of pages from three major Nigerian newspapers in 1978, collected from the National Archives in Ibadan Nigeria, illustrate the views of the government, students, and the general public. The “independent” newspaper, the *Nigerian Tribune*, occasionally received government endorsement and were slightly less critical of the military regime and typically less progressive than their main competitors the *Daily Times*. Whereas articles from both the *Daily Times* and the *Nigerian Tribune* reported heavily on events affecting the southern states in the country, the *New Nigerian*, a state newspaper headquartered in Kaduna, covered events in the northern states. NUNS statements are published in all three of these newspapers as well as in books and essays written by former NUNS leaders. For example, the former public relations officer for Ahmadu Bello University, Umaru Sani, published a history of student unionism in Nigeria. As for the official government statements, they were generally published in newspapers, but scanned copies of speeches, announcements, and inquiries were also available in the National Archives.

The lack of access to the diaries and personal records of the student leaders led me to conduct interviews with 15 former 1978 university students who said they played an “active role” in the protests in order to get a better understanding of the mindsets of students in general at the time. The interviewees were graduates of the Universities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Ife, the cities that had some of the biggest demonstrations in 1978. Despite their roles in the protests, these former

students are not necessarily representative of all their peers in 1978. They would go on to graduate with degrees in medicine, law, and engineering, achieving “relative success” in their respective fields unlike some of their low-income peers.³⁴ Yet in April 1978, they supported the leaders National Union of Nigerian Students when they argued that a 46 naira fee increase posed a threat to their education and future.³⁵

To understand this large reaction to the fee increases, the first chapter of this thesis provides background on Nigeria’s economic context in 1978 and looks at what expectations of education and its financing were set prior to April 1978. Examining the reactions of poor students, relatively wealthy students, regular Nigerian non-students, and the NUNS, to the changes in university financing, the chapter analyzes the sources of grievance the student leaders were eventually able to draw on for their demonstration. The second chapter then provides an overview of the structure of the NUNS and focuses on the goals the NUNS’ chief leaders had that motivated them to organize the protests. It shows how their goals of flexing their political power and achieving historical distinction influenced the actions they took in the months before the protests and during the demonstrations. By amplifying existing grievances and concerns, the student leaders were able to maximize turnout to the protests, but they also, in some cases, contributed to the violence that broke out on the first and second day of protest.

The third chapter focuses on internal disagreements within the Union in the months before the protests by focusing on the contributions of lower-level NUNS members. It explores the links between class and power in the NUNS showing how, in contrast to the NUNS’ primary leaders, the poorer, lower -level members of the National Union of Nigerian Students were more concerned with securing the immediate interests of poor university students than expanding the Union’s political power. The failure of the NUNS to prevent the changes in university financing

³⁴Dr. Koya Kunle, *Zoom Interview with Dr. Kunle Koya on April 1978 Protests*, December 29th 2021

³⁵Ufoma, *Zoom Interview with Evelyn Ufoma on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*

from being instituted can be attributed in part to the sidelining of these material concerns in favor of pursuing the more popular demand for free education in order to achieve long-term national impact.

In 2020, as the #ENDSARS protests against police brutality and abuse broke out in Nigeria, a journalist remarked that “young people are an indefatigable force against neglectful governments”.³⁶ However, there is typically a reluctance to criticize actions they take in progressive circles, not just in Nigeria, but in the world at large. The 1978 student protests are a clear example of how poor student leadership may undermine the political power young people potentially hold. Young Nigerians and Africans should learn from and understand historical protests and perspectives in order to avoid repeating their mistakes and to emulate their steps to success. 2020 proved that young Nigerians have more influence than they previously understood. It is vital that we use this power assiduously and to the benefit of all when attempting to contribute to positive change in the country.

³⁶Zachariah Mampilly, *The Promise of Africa's Youth Bulge*, Foreign Affairs, July 7 2021. (Accessed March 18 2022) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2021-07-07/promise-africas-youth-bulge>

Chapter 1: No Justice

Sources of grievance prior to April 1978

“We were having the time of our lives”, Dr. Kunle Koya recalled when asked about his university experience prior to April of 1978. A medical student in the University of Ibadan, Dr. Koya used the word “groovy” to describe life as a young person in the mid-70s in Nigeria during the country’s oil boom.³⁷ More students than ever before had access to institutions of higher learning, for free. Nonye Udegbonam, another student at the University of Ibadan in 1978, who came from a village outside the city of Ibadan, described her university as “a dream world” citing the numerous “luxuries” she previously never had access to.³⁸ Despite their fond recollections of their college years, Kunle and Nonye were part of thousands of students who took to the streets to protest the increase in fees the federal military government imposed on university students in January 1978 to keep this “groovy” “dream world” alive.

Given their satisfaction with their education, why did students resent the fee increases and other changes in university financing? This chapter explores some of the sources of grievance prior to the outbreak of the protests in April 1978 with a particular focus on the general reception of the changes to university financing. It looks at possible reasons people may have had to protest and overall hopes to answer the question, why were the fee increases thought of as unjust? It considers four broad groups: students from poor families, students from relatively wealthy backgrounds, working class non-students, and finally the NUNS leaders. Overall, people were generally frustrated with the government for their sharp scaling back of public expenditures after promoting social development projects such as subsidized education for the poor.

³⁷Koya, *Zoom Interview with Dr. Kunle Koya on April 1978 Protests*

³⁸Nonye Udegbonam, “Revenues Universities Could Tap”, *Daily Times*, March 22 1978. 24

Bait and Switch: Poor Student Grievances

The military regimes in 1970s Nigeria, led by Gowon (1966-75) and Muhammad/Obsanjo (1975-79) promoted free education in the country as a guaranteed right that would be supported by the increased government revenue. Their underestimation of the popularity of the policy and their overreliance on oil revenue meant that they cut back education funding which ultimately left students and the general public feeling betrayed. Rural students and students from poor backgrounds, who registered in universities based on the promise that their education would be paid for, felt left behind when the government announced in January 1978 an increase in accommodation fees that these poor students could not afford. Even worse, the federal government was transferring the responsibility of loans and scholarships to local governments (who generally had less funds). Students from poor families were left wanting when the government switched on their policy and promise of free education.

In 1966, the Nigerian federal economic development plan envisaged a growth in university student enrollment from 10,000 in 1970 to 17,000 in 1974.³⁹ By 1976, there were 47,000 students enrolled in tertiary institutions.⁴⁰ The discrepancy in the numbers is explained by the dramatic increase in government revenue and spending following the oil boom of the early 1970s. The military regimes of Murtula Muhammad and Obasanjo (1975-79) benefited from a tremendous influx of oil revenue that had increased 350 percent between 1973 and 1974 when oil prices skyrocketed.⁴¹ The Nigerian government's oil revenues quintupled in nine months and their budget surplus jumped tenfold in the 1973-74 fiscal year.⁴² The increased revenues permitted

³⁹Martin Kolinsky. "The Growth of Nigerian Universities 1948-1980: The British Share" Vol. 23, No. 1 (n.d.), 46

⁴⁰National Universities Commission, *Report of the Academic Planning Group* (Lagos: NUC, 1976), 200; Higher education in the 70s and beyond, 34.

⁴¹The Library of Congress, *Nigeria The Obasanjo Regime, 1976-79 - Flags, Maps, Economy, Geography, Climate, Natural Resources, Current Issues, International Agreements, Population, Social Statistics, Political System*. Accessed January 20, 2022.

https://workmall.com/wfb2001/nigeria/nigeria_history_the_obasanjo_regime_1976_79.html

⁴²P.Sayre Schatz, "Nigeria's Petro-Political Fluctuation". 35

escalated government expenditures which generated domestic prosperity. There was extensive investment in infrastructure, and the government's investments in industry made possible a rise in income, especially for people living in urban areas.⁴³ The Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree of 1972 further encouraged the growth of urban wealth by protecting indigenous businesses owners from foreign industrial competition.⁴⁴ Although the increased revenue made many social developments possible, the economy came to be dominated by oil to the detriment of agricultural, rural populations.

Hoping to develop the country as a whole and bridge the gap between rural and urban standards of living, the Muhammad and Obasanjo military regime invested part of the surplus in the education sector. In September of 1976, they launched a Universal Primary Education (UPE) program promising free, compulsory primary education. The socio-political purposes of the program were to correct the imbalances in the nation including male, southern, and urban dominance over economic and educational opportunities.⁴⁵ Shortly after announcing UPE, they also abolished tuition costs for university students.⁴⁶ Additionally, tuition in secondary schools was heavily subsidized for those who needed it.⁴⁷ The federal government argued that they saw education as an instrument for realizing rapid national development and for achieving social change.⁴⁸

They seemed determined to sustain efforts aimed at providing free educational opportunities for the masses and actively encouraged young adults, particularly those living in northern and rural areas, to enroll in university. According to the “Third Nation Development Plan”, drafted

⁴³The Library of Congress, *Nigeria The Obasanjo Regime*

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵Marg, Csapo. “Universal Primary Education in Nigeria: Its Problems and Implications.” *African Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (1983): 91–106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/524612>. 92

⁴⁶E. J. Chuta, “Free Education in Nigeria: Socioeconomic Implications and Emerging Issues.” *Comparative Education Review* 30, no. 4 (1986): 523–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1188364>. 525

⁴⁷Ibid

⁴⁸Csapo, “Universal Primary Education in Nigeria.”

by the Ministry of Economic Development, the objectives of the university education program were “to expand facilities for education aimed at equalizing individual access to education throughout the country...to consolidate and develop the nation’s system of education in response to the economy’s manpower needs”.⁴⁹ In pursuit of these objectives, the government constructed four new universities, improved facilities and infrastructure in existing universities, and encouraged university admissions teams to be less restrictive in their admissions requirements. Their efforts proved to be successful as enrollment in university increased significantly by 70 percent.⁵⁰ The rapid increase can be attributed to the increased availability of scholarships. Many Nigerians viewed education as a guarantor of success.⁵¹ As such, as soon as the obstacle of financing was removed, enrollment soared. This period, as Alex Gboyega and Yinka Atoyebi noted “marked the decisive turning point when university education became available to the masses in Nigeria”.⁵²

According to Nigerian economist, S.E. Aleyideino, the increased public expenditure in education and education programs unfortunately lacked the careful planning and empirical data needed to understand what the actual cost of free education would be at various levels.⁵³ The growth of government expenditures came to surpass the greatly augmented revenues because the leaders significantly underestimated the costs of the major programs and changes they sought to make. For example, though it was estimated that UPE would cost the government 17 million naira by 1982, by 1978 it already cost 78 million naira.⁵⁴ The initial increase in spending and development also created pervasive public pressures for even more benefits from the government

⁴⁹Federal Ministry of Economic Development, *Third National Development Plan 1975-1980*, 237.

⁵⁰National Universities Commission, *Report of the Academic Planning Group*. 40

⁵¹Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement.” 100-102

⁵²Alex Gboyega and Yinka Atoyebi. *The Role of Universities in the Transformation of Societies: The Nigerian Case Study*. Lagos, 10 October 2005. 23

⁵³S. E. Aleyideino, *Quantitative and Qualitative Factors in Primary Education: Some Cost Implications*, Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University, February (1984)

⁵⁴Schatz, “Nigeria’s Petro-Political Fluctuation.” 36

further eroding revenues. The budget surplus of 3,012 million naira in 1974 quickly turned into a deficit of 1,832 million naira in 1978.⁵⁵ Following an alarming growth in budget and balance of payment deficits, domestic price levels soared. The government embraced a series of severe restrictive measures to correct the deficit including curtailing government spending, increasing taxes, and tighter monetary policies from 1977. Specific projects, such as investment in university infrastructure and education, were too costly economically and politically to cut back so the government instituted fee increases to make up the increased costs of running these programs. This was the context in which the National University Commission announced an increase in feeding and accommodation costs at the university level and the decentralization of loans and scholarships for poor students. Several university students at the time cited these changes in financing as their primary reason for joining organized protests against the military government in April of 1978.

While the history of the protests is not exclusively an economic one, it is important to understand the socio-economic context in which the students took to the streets. The policy inconsistency on the part of the government was one source of grievance for the students protesting. Notably, the government's abolition of university tuition in 1976 created the expectation that university would be free and accessible to anyone desiring tertiary education. Government officials also frequently expressed a commitment to making education widely available after the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1976. However, less than a year after Obasanjo, the military leader at the time, gave a speech extolling the benefits of free public education and university tuition, the federal government de-subsidized accommodation

⁵⁵Ibid.

fees causing an increase in costs that made university virtually unaffordable particularly for the rural and poor students.⁵⁶

The National University Commission's executive secretary, Jibrin Aminu, attempted to explain the rationale behind the fee increases. Firstly, he pointed to the decrease in oil revenues as the reason "university financing had begun to deteriorate". He also reiterated the arguments given by the military leader, Obasanjo, that the increased university expenditure posed a threat to the Universal Primary Education scheme and that the government was "not so rich after all and needed to economize".⁵⁷ According to the Ministry of Education, of the 10 million students registered in primary schools, 93% would not be able to attend without government support. Of the 2.6 million students in secondary schools, 82% were on some form of government aid. There were approximately 50,000 students enrolled in universities; 27% or 13,500 of them received federal loans to cover costs outside of tuition.⁵⁸ The government aimed to save money and "economize" education spending by charging university students more since in contrast to the other levels of schooling, the majority of university students could afford the increases.

For the poor students receiving federal aid however, the increases posed a real threat to their ability to stay in school. Particularly frustrating was that the increase was announced in January of 1978 *during* the ongoing semester. A student entering university in 1976 enjoyed free tuition, improved facilities, infrastructure, and instruction quality. The same student, in 1978 would see a two hundred percent increase in accommodation costs virtually overnight. The cost of food rose from 0.50 naira to 1.50 naira a day and the cost of accommodation rose to 90 naira a semester (a number higher than the amount students paid before free tuition was introduced).⁵⁹ In total

⁵⁶Gbenga Okunade, "Counterpoint: Why Off Campus System for Students?" in *Daily Times*, April 8 1978

⁵⁷Jibrin, Aminu, "Why We Revised Varsity Fees" in *Daily Times*, March 11 1978.

⁵⁸Statistics Unit, *Student Enrollment in Nigeria 1970-83*, Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria, December 1977

⁵⁹In 1976, semesterly lodging fees were 45 naira per term for a double room. For more reading on the details of the increase see: Kolinsky, "The Growth of Nigerian Universities 1948-1980: The British Share"

students would pay 558 naira per school year for feeding and accommodation.⁶⁰ The average annual income for families living in rural areas was 300 naira.⁶¹

In response to a question about how rural and poor students should handle the increases, Aminu suggested in a press conference that they simply live at home and commute to campus.⁶² A student, Sebastian Osuoha of the University of Ife argued that Aminu “did not show the least concern for the cost of transportation to and from lecture rooms for rural students... Housing is already one of the major social problems facing all Nigerians. The promise of free tuition and reasonable accommodation informed our decisions to attend”.⁶³ Students argued that it was impractical to suggest that those who could not afford the higher fees simply live off campus considering that the cost of living off campus may in some cases be just as high when you consider transportation and convenience. Additionally, they recognized the government’s inconsistency noting that “free tuition” and “reasonable accommodation” were factors in their decision to attend university in the first place. Students who enrolled because of the promise of free education were now expected to pay even more than they would have paid prior to the introduction of free tuition. The cost of accommodation alone was 120 naira above the annual income per capita income for people living in rural areas.⁶⁴

Another significant change to university and schooling financing that contributed to general outrage in the weeks before April 1978 was the decentralization of the loan and scholarship system. In December of 1977, a month before the announcement of the fee increases, the government announced that they were considering transferring the responsibility of the allocation of loans and scholarships for indigent students to local governments. The rationale

⁶⁰Thompson Oyatu, “Students to pay more”, *Nigerian Tribune*, January 29 1978

⁶¹Sylvester Osaji, “Nationwide Economic Statistics”, *Daily Times*, 1977. 11

⁶²Jibrin Aminu, “Why We Revised Varsity Fees”, *Daily Times*, Tuesday, April 11, 1978

⁶³Sebastian Osuoha, “Varsities are no Ivory Towers”, *Daily Times*, April 8 1978. 15

⁶⁴Osaji, “Nationwide Economic Statistics”

behind this was that “state governments are closer to the homes and families of such students so they can best ascertain their needs”.⁶⁵ The federal government began giving out scholarships and loans to low income students in 1972 under Gowon’s military regime as part of the mass education efforts. When in December of 1977, Obasanjo announced at the University of Ife that the federal government may soon stop providing these loans and scholarships, reports from newspapers and student journals suggest that there was little support for this decision.

University students took to newspapers to express their discontent in an attempt to persuade the government against the decentralization of the loan and scholarship system. Some students from the University of Ife pushed back on Obasanjo’s claim that “even if every inch of Nigeria’s land contained oil, it would not be enough to cope with the financial commitments of education”.⁶⁶ The students urged the federal government to restructure its financing and establish “an effective machinery for the recovery of the loans”.⁶⁷ Though they do not elaborate on what the “effective machinery” would be, their statements show that they were unconvinced that the federal government could not realistically manage the loans.

Other students attempted to dissuade the government from the decentralization of loans by highlighting the threat this policy could have on poor students. A student from the University of Ibadan, wrote in to the *Daily Times* arguing that state governments did not have “the capacity to meet the needs of the students” and that “the poorest states and their children will be left behind if this policy is allowed to proceed”.⁶⁸ A student from the University of Ife who described herself as coming from a “poor home” argued in the *Daily Times* that the suspension of federal aid would be “tantamount to making us [other students from poor homes] graduate penniless and in

⁶⁵Dr. Olu Onagoruwa, “Aid to States on Education”, *Daily Times*, April 2 1978. 14

⁶⁶Student Affairs University of Ife, “Please Don’t Stop Loans”, published in *Nigerian Tribune*, March 1978. Front Page

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Adeoye Falade “Reverse Loan Policy”, *Daily Times*, January 2 1978. 14

enormous debt”.⁶⁹ The student argued that “the instability of state government funds” meant that poor students would be in a “precarious financial position”. She also pointed to the disparity in state government funds, noting that some states had more money than others which would mean some would be able to send more students to school and this could exacerbate ethnic tensions.⁷⁰

The students failed to persuade the government against enacting the policy. Shortly after the National University Commission announced the fee increases, the Ministry of Education announced that they would be decentralizing the loan and scholarship system. A former university student who described themselves as “low income” recalls feeling a “genuine sense of fear”.⁷¹ Students from poor families were concerned that they would have to risk taking on loans to cover the increased costs of accommodation or drop out of school. A student in their final year at the University of Lagos stated that the government that had promised them “free education as an avenue to success was now actively setting up obstacles when we were so close to the finish line”.⁷² Poor students who could not afford the increased costs feared for the future of their education.

In short, in January of 1978, students from low income families were left to ascertain how they would deal with the changes in university financing. That the changes were announced during the semester as well meant that several students from poor and rural homes had little time to plan how they would finance these increased costs. They went into university expecting that most aspects of their education would be financed and taken care of by the government. Now not only were they being told that they would have to pay more for accommodation, the finances they relied on would now come from a less reliable source. This sense of betrayal was one of the key sources of grievance amongst the student population in 1978.

⁶⁹A. Ojemen, “Wobble Educational Policy”, *Nigerian Tribune*, December 1978. 8

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Adewale Thompson, “The Nigerian Students”, *Nigerian Tribune*, April 2 1978. 12

⁷²Ibid.

Dissatisfaction Amongst Wealthy Students

While the increased fees were likely to particularly affect students from rural areas, students from cities and towns also felt they had grounds for grievance. Students from urban areas and those from relatively wealthy families made up the majority of students in universities in 1978.^{73 74} For most university students, the decentralization of the loan system was inconsequential to their education and they could afford the increase in accommodation fees.⁷⁵ However, these students recognized the value of education in general and were unconvinced with the government's justifications for the fee increases. Some students argued that the increases were unnecessary changes and that the government was simply exploiting them. Additionally, for the students unhappy with their experience in university thus far, the fee increases were unlikely to change things substantially so it seemed unfair and unjust to ask them to pay more. In general, wealthy students were dissatisfied with the fee increases because they felt the government was trying to deliberately exploit university students.

Even though by 1978 there was a deficit in the federal budget, there still seemed to be an understanding in certain universities that funding and financing was widely available. So when asked to pay more, students felt the increased fees were unnecessary given that, as they understood, the government had the money to finance improvements in feeding and accommodation themselves.⁷⁶ This sentiment was particularly strong in students in universities that saw significant increases in infrastructure investment since 1975. Students in universities in cities like Lagos and Ibadan, who saw an expansion of existing facilities as well the construction of new academic buildings, argued that the fee increase was unfair because the government was in a financial position to support its students.

⁷³Chukwuma Odi, "Varsity Student Stats", *Daily Times*, Saturday, April 8 1978. 4

⁷⁴Office of the President, *Student Records*, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, December 1977. 4

⁷⁵Oyeniyi Akanda, "Free Education: How Far?", *Nigerian Tribune*, April 30 1978. 2

⁷⁶Koya, *Zoom Interview with Dr. Kunle Koya on April 1978 Protests*

When interviewed as part of this research, several former students from the University of Ibadan and the University of Lagos argued that the fee increases were uncalled for because there was funding available to support universities. One student recalls “the Nigerian Nation was in a position to finance these programs so the increase in fees did not make sense”.⁷⁷ The student argued that “the influx of oil revenue meant people were coming from abroad” to see their “new, state of the art campus” in Ibadan.⁷⁸ According to another student, the government had the ability to manage the demand for food and accommodation because “the country was undergoing rapid development during the period” and argued that “they [the government] spent lavishly on libraries no one asked for and now expected us to pay for it”.⁷⁹ For these students, it may have been difficult to reconcile the previous improvements in the nation’s economy as a whole and the improvements in their own campuses with the sudden significant increase in fees.

Furthermore, these students described their schooling experience prior to the fee increases as being more than satisfactory. Consequently, they described the increases as “unnecessary” or “unfair” because they were fine with the status quo and saw no reasonable cause for change. One former student remarked that there was “already excellent education, decent accommodation, and good and affordable meals”.⁸⁰ Considering that their experience was already “quite satisfactory”, there was no reason to pay more. According to the student, “government greed” was behind the fee increases. “They thought we were from wealthy families so they tried to extract money from us”.⁸¹ For a student in the University of Lagos or the University of Ibadan, college life had seen big improvements in the years prior with no extra costs. Satisfied with the

⁷⁷Fowode Olatokunbo, *Interview with Olatokunbo Fowode on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*, December 28th 2021

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Imoukhuede, *Zoom Interview with Edekin Imoukhuede on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*, December 28th 2021

⁸⁰Ufoma, *Zoom Interview with Evelyn Ufoma on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*

⁸¹Ibid.

way things were, some students in these universities were angry because they believed the government had the money to support university life, therefore the fee increases were unjust and exploitative.

On the other hand, there were students who were dissatisfied with their university experience who had alternative reasons for resenting the increase in fees. For these students, the increase seemed unjust because it was not guaranteed to improve their living conditions; they would essentially be paying more for the same unsatisfactory experience. While this opinion was shared by some students in schools in large metropolitan areas like Ibadan and Lagos, students in Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in the northern state of Kaduna, were also unhappy with the increase in fees given their university standards.

In the newspaper, *New Nigerian*, students wrote in condemning the announcement of the fee increases and questioning the government's decisions. An article written by a student by the name of Aminu. A from Ahmadu Bello University illustrates this opinion. Aminu writes "the problems we face in our university cannot be solved overnight. We will not see improvements in our hostels overnight. So why should we somehow come up with this extra money overnight?"⁸² Here, Aminu is referring to the fact that the fee increases were announced during the semester making it more difficult for students to meet the requirement. Furthermore, because they felt they were unlikely to see any tangible benefits of the increases immediately, it seemed unfair that they should pay more for the same standard of living. Another student from Ahmadu Bello University, who published their article anonymously, commented "Am I expected to pay more for toilets without running water?"⁸³ condemning the living conditions in student accommodation. For these students, the increase was unfair because it would not necessarily lead to immediate improvements in their university experience.

⁸²Aminu A. "Comment on Varsity Fee Increase", *New Nigerian*, Saturday 22 April 1978, Kaduna, Nigeria

⁸³Editorial Opinion, "Comment on Varsity Fee Increase", *New Nigerian*, Saturday 22 April 1978, Kaduna, Nigeria

Some students in the University of Ibadan also shared this view. A group of students recalled the “extreme inconvenience” of having to share a room built for two with five people. They noted that the increase in fees would not necessarily mean their rooming situation would improve.⁸⁴ Students would group together because of the limited housing space available in some city universities. The increase in accommodation fees would not mean an improvement in living standards; for some it would mean a decrease as more people would need to occupy a room to meet the augmented costs.

For the majority of university students in 1978, even though the changes to university education financing did not directly threaten their ability to go to/afford school, they were unhappy with the government’s decisions and felt aggrieved by the changes in university financing. As they understood it, the government did have the money to finance university accommodation and wealthy university students were being unfairly exploited.



Figure 1: Students in a room for 5 with no furniture in University of Ibadan.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Olayinka Longe, *Interview with Olayinka Longe a on April 1978 Protests*, conducted virtually on Zoom, December 29th 2021

⁸⁵“UnIbandan Students” circa November 1977. Mike Photo Studio, Gelatin Silver Print, printed 1977, Gift of the Photographer

The General Public's Existing Perceptions of Elitism

The “general public” here refers to the majority of Nigerians who were not enrolled in universities nor had children enrolled in universities. Although newspaper reports suggest that initially most Nigerians were not particularly concerned about the changes in university financing, ample evidence points to there being widespread discontent with the public spending cuts overall. Multiple sectors were affected by the fall in oil prices and the 1978 budget deficit; at the same time, several individuals and corporations were becoming increasingly rich. As rumors spread of the “government turning a blind eye to rampant corruption”⁸⁶, criticisms of the government’s “elitist policies” became popular.^{87 88} As such, while there was insignificant public outrage regarding the fee increases specifically, there were grievances about what people perceived as elitist practices of the government. The changes in university financing were part of the general public’s discontent over the government’s public spending cuts and contributed to existing perceptions of elitism in government policy.

Historian John A. Nkinyangi in discussing violent protests in Sub Saharan Africa, recognizes “the alleged elitist policies of the Federal Government” as one of the key reasons for the outbreak of the 1978 protests in Nigeria.⁸⁹ The restrictive fiscal policies the government introduced in 1977 especially affected the agriculture, health, and transport sectors. Even though 70% of the country had jobs in related to agriculture, the sector saw a 1 million naira reduction in spending allocation⁹⁰ and an increase in taxes which contributed to average wages in agriculture falling 55% in 1978.⁹¹ Wages were frozen in the public health and transport sector from

⁸⁶Muba Onipede, “Corrupt Practices”, *Daily Times*, February 5 1978. 23

⁸⁷Hyacinth, Anucha, “The Impact of Oil and Gas Production On the Nigerian Economy: A Rural Sector Debate”, *International Business and Economics Research Journal*, Volume no 5, February 2006

⁸⁸Michael M. Ogbeidi, “Political Leadership and Corruption in Nigeria Since 1960: A Socio-Economic Analysis,” 1980, 25

⁸⁹Nkinyangi, “Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa.” 168

⁹⁰From 19 million naira to 20 million naira

⁹¹S. Osaji, “1978-1978 Budget: An Appraisal”, *Daily Times*, March 14 1978. 15

December 1977 to March of 1978 as part of the effort to curtail government spending and amidst accusations of corruption in the federal ministries of both sectors.⁹² A health-worker and correspondent for the *Daily Times*, arguing against “elitism in government”, stated that “the government is punishing us for the few who enriched themselves at our expense”.⁹³ In this context, criticisms of the government officials were common, with opinion pieces in newspapers regularly referring to them as “criminals”.⁹⁴

The changes in university financing would come to be understood as a further unfair and elitist government practice. Newspaper articles show that although several Nigerians did not have children in universities at the time, many parents intended on eventually sending their children to university after the introduction of free education. According to a poll done by the *Nigerian Tribune* reporters, 60% of Nigerians felt that university education was vital to success⁹⁵. The newspaper’s column “WHAT THE PEOPLE SAY”, featured short articles written by journalists sometimes based on quotes from people who could not write in to the newspaper and people who were traditionally underrepresented in the media. Articles in the column reflected the widespread popularity of the Universal Primary Education scheme and support for the abolition of tuition fees at the university level. Education was viewed as a “stable avenue to a better life” for the poor in the country.⁹⁶ Therefore, when the government instituted changes in university financing that only the wealthy could afford, people interpreted it as another elitist policy resulting from public spending cuts. After the announcement of the fee increases in January, an opinion piece in the *Nigerian Tribune* remarked that “poor university students have now joined the ranks of everyday workers who have been hurt by elitism and bad planning”.⁹⁷ The general public would

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³A. T Ahmed, “Health Workers Debate Strike Actions”, *Daily Times*, December 8 1977. 5

⁹⁴Dr Olu Onagoruwa,, “Government Can’t Be A Lawless Leviathan”, *Daily Times*, March 9 1978. 9

⁹⁵Akinwale Ayeni, “Nigerians and Education”, *Nigerian Tribune*, February 12 1978. 4

⁹⁶Akinwale Ayeni, “WHAT THE PEOPLE SAY: Save Education!”, *Nigerian Tribune* February 15 1978. 4

⁹⁷Oyeniyi Akanda, “Students Paying More”, *Nigerian Tribune*, January 30, 1978. 15

participate in the protests not against the fee increases, but against elitist policies and frustrations over public spending cuts.

Lack of Student Input

Although university students in general were outraged by the changes in university financing, one specific group of students had their own particular reason to resent these changes. The leaders of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) rejected the fee increases because, they argued, it was unjust for such significant changes to take place without their consultation. Statements and press releases from NUNS leaders show that they were infuriated by the fact that they were effectively snubbed in the decision making process that led to these changes.

After an “emergency” convention in February 1978 in Calabar, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) published a statement in the *Daily Times* titled “WE SHALL NOT PAY” berating the decision to increase fees made by the National University Commission. In the statement, signed by the president of the NUNS, Segun Okeowo, they asserted that:

“The educational policies of the nation are confusing, contradictory, unprogressive and oppressive. The NUNS views the situation as an attempt to deny Nigerians of their inalienable right to education. The failure to include NUNS leaders in this discussion is most insulting.”⁹⁸ Evidently the NUNS leaders were unhappy with the changes and offended that they had been excluded from the decision making process. Okeowo had just been awarded a seat on the Constituent Assembly, the political body responsible for drafting laws in preparation for the transition to civil rule.⁹⁹ Therefore, even though there were opportunities to consult the student leaders, they were not involved in discussions on the changes. The leaders of the NUNS were

⁹⁸NUNS Public Enlightenment Bureau of National Union of Nigerian Students, “WE SHALL NOT PAY” published in *Nigerian Tribune*, February 24 1978. 14

⁹⁹Nigerian Tribune Reporters, “Student Leader on Constituent Assembly”, *Nigerian Tribune*, September 6 1977. 4

aggrieved because they felt that the government undermined their authority by not including them in this decision.

Other NUNS leaders made the argument that the lack of student consultation was proof of the “unjust” nature of the fee increases and decentralization of the loan system. An NUNS member from the University of Lagos said to a reporter from the *Nigerian Tribune* a day after the convention in Calabar: “the NUNS rightly rejected the proposed increase in fees. Why were the students’ representatives not party to the decision to review fees? We will be taking action to correct this injustice”.¹⁰⁰ According to the NUNS leaders, by failing to include student representatives in decisions pertaining to the lives of students, the government acted unjustly. Considering they do not cite a legal agreement or framework, it is reasonable to assume that they were referring to a moral or social injustice rather than a direct legal one. Some NUNS leaders believed that the changes in university financing could not be justified because they had been instituted without student input therefore they could not be in the best interests of the students.¹⁰¹

It is important to note that with the exception of the NUNS leaders, none of the quotes from students, parents of students, or teachers in this chapter mention the intention to protest, mobilize, or “take action”. Low income university students faced bankruptcy. Students from wealthy backgrounds were unhappy with what they felt were unnecessary changes. For the general public, Nigerians without students in university, the fee increases and loan policy would come to be understood as additional elitist practices brought on by public expenditure reforms. Finally, the student leaders felt their authority was undermined when the changes in financing were announced without any student input. All these groups were angry that the government had

¹⁰⁰Femi Mapaderun, quoted in “Student Union Attacks Increase in Varsity Fees”, *Nigerian Tribune*, March 1978. 15

¹⁰¹Ibid.

promised and promoted free education and national development and now seemed to not only be going back on their promises but promoting policies that could actively harm poor people.¹⁰²

Being aggrieved by the actions of the government however does not always translate into protests or organized action. People may be unhappy with the decisions their governments make but that does not mean that they take to the streets. The students from poor families had the most reason to resent the changes in financing yet the NUNS leaders were one of the only groups to speak of taking action or going to “any length” to ensure their voices were heard. One might argue that being a formal organization and the direct representatives of students in government, they were the only ones to speak of taking action because they were the only ones capable of taking action. Why though, were protests the chosen mode of “action”? What motivations or incentives did the NUNS leaders have to mobilize people to march on the streets for their cause?

¹⁰²Nkinyangi “Student Protests in Sub-Saharan Africa.”164

Chapter 2: No Peace

Exploring NUNS Mobilization Incentives and Activity

“The atmosphere was electric” said Dele Gbadamosi when asked to describe the mood at the University of Lagos on April 17th 1978. The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) had organized mass demonstrations in multiple university towns in Nigeria. According to Gbadamosi, the students were “fueled by the belief that they were engaged in a just cause”.¹⁰³ Thousands joined crowds in Lagos, Benin, Ile-Ife, Ibadan, Nsukka, and Zaria. 15,000 people are estimated to have joined the protests nationwide.¹⁰⁴ The biggest protest in Nigerian history at the time was held over an increase in accommodation fees and changes to the federal scholarship scheme. The NUNS argued that these changes to university financing were a threat to national prosperity. They challenged the government in the media and demanded that education be made free and compulsory at all levels. Their ultimate challenge to the government came in the form of mass demonstrations throughout the country from April 17 to April 21 in 1978.

This chapter is concerned with exploring exactly what motivated the student leaders to organize the protests. It will briefly cover the structure and history of the National Union then it considers what purpose the protests served, what goals the Union’s upper leadership had based on their activity from January 1978, when the fee increases were announced, to April 17th to 21st 1978, the days of the demonstrations. Overall, the student leaders’ actions show that they were determined to use this moment to secure their long-term political influence in the education sector. Instead of limiting their focus to the fee increases in universities, which only affected the minority of university students receiving federal aid, they shifted their attention to the demand for free education at all levels, a widely popular policy that would impact the whole nation.

¹⁰³Dele Gbadamosi, *Interview with Dele Gbadamosi on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*, December 29th 2021

¹⁰⁴Daily Times Reporters, “University Boycott”, *Daily Times*, April 25 1978. Front Page

Successfully forcing the government to implement this policy would show that the NUNS could play a major role in national decision-making. When the government rejected their ultimatum demanding free education, the NUNS leaders refused to negotiate and organized protests, because they were set on forcing the government to do exactly what they asked. Drawing on the existing grievances of students and non-students by amplifying their criticisms in the media, their protests gave thousands of people an opportunity to express their frustrations with the unpopular economic policies. The protests would make clear how much social support they had and serve as a warning to the government of the consequences of undermining their authority. Flexing their organization's potential influence would make it more likely that the government included their voices in future decisions. Members of the NUNS' upper leadership aimed to use these demonstrations to display their political power and make history while doing so.

The National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS)

The NUNS was founded in 1956 growing out of a larger West African Students Union that campaigned for the welfare of African students in British West Africa. Its founders considered the Union "the supreme body of student politics in Nigeria" stating that their main purpose was to "defend the interests of Nigerian students on the national stage".¹⁰⁵ The NUNS was structured in a way that mirrored the First Nigerian Republic.¹⁰⁶ ¹⁰⁷ Every university in the country had an NUNS division and by 1978 there were 13 member sub-unions all of which were relatively autonomous.¹⁰⁸ The presidents of each of the Unions were automatically part of the National

¹⁰⁵Henry Ejembi (National President 1974/75) "Handing over notes", NUNS 1975 Presidential Report, July 1975. 3

¹⁰⁶First Nigerian Republic 1963-1966. The Republic came to an end when military rule was declared following the outbreak of civil war

¹⁰⁷Former student leader Ebenezer Babatope argued that the structure mirrored the First Republic because it was supposed to prepare these students for a career in politics, for more reading see: Ebenezer Babatope, "*Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*", Ebino Publishers, Ikeja Lagos, 1991

¹⁰⁸Umaru Sani, *Dynamics of Student's Unionism in Nigeria*, Ahmadu Bello University, Kano 1979. 23

Union's Executive Council while the vice presidents of the member unions made up the parliament of the Union. The congress compromised all the members of the Union.¹⁰⁹

The "National President" was the highest ranked in the Union; they were elected from the Executive Council, the presidents from all member unions, on a bi-annual basis. The presidents and vice presidents of the member unions were the major links between their universities and the National Union; as such, whenever there were matters of "national student politics", the presidents and vice presidents were the "sole authorities" of policy and action.¹¹⁰ Primarily because of their universities' size, location, and political connections, the most powerful member unions were the Lagos, Ibadan, and Zaria unions. They were most powerful in the sense that the National Presidents came exclusively from these regions from 1956 to 1978.¹¹¹ Multiple leadership disputes from the year 1970 to 1975 led to the unofficial merging of the Executive Council and the NUNS parliament.¹¹² Both branches would meet together to discuss national issues in an annual convention which led to a distinction between the "upper leadership" of the National Union, made up the presidents and vice presidents of member unions, and the lower-level members who made up the Union's "Congress".¹¹³

Sustained disputes amongst the Executive Council and Parliament led to the creation of sub "offices" within upper leadership. These included the Secretary office, which handled the Union's "administrative decisions", the Public Enlightenment Bureau, which was responsible for representing the National Union in the press¹¹⁴, and the Treasurer Office, responsible for handling the Union's donations and financing. According to the former national president, Henry Ejembi, "some of the offices were originally created so that members of the executive branch

¹⁰⁹Ibid

¹¹⁰Sani "Chapter 4:Power Structure", *Dynamics of Student's Unionism in Nigeria*. 25

¹¹¹Ibid

¹¹²Ibid

¹¹³Ibid

¹¹⁴Newspapers, media, and television

would have formal leadership titles”.¹¹⁵ Rank amongst the Union’s congress, general members with no formal titles, was determined based on their university level.¹¹⁶ To formally join a university’s NUNS division, one had to be interviewed and accepted by its president and vice president.¹¹⁷

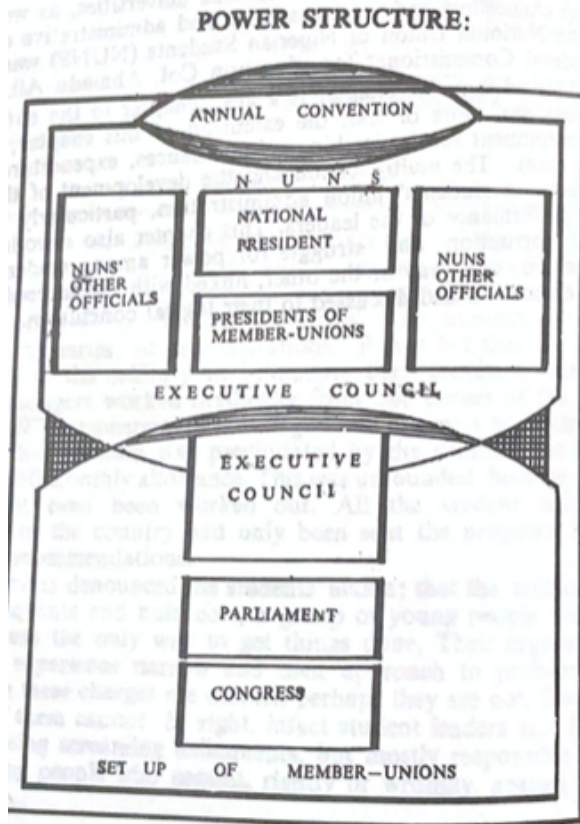


Figure 2: NUNS Power Structure. ¹¹⁸

As an organization, they never expressed allegiance to any one specific ideology. Although some of their members would frequently announce a “devotion to the masses and the common

¹¹⁵Henry Ejembi, “Reflections on the NUNS”, in Ebenezer Babatope, “*Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*. 23

¹¹⁶(first year, second year etc)

¹¹⁷Formally because every student was technically automatically part of the Union.

¹¹⁸“NUNS Power Structure”, illustration by Umaru Sani in Sani:“Chapter 4:Power Structure”, *Dynamics of Student’s Unionism in Nigeria*. 22

man” which might suggest socialist influences, the Union never explicitly expressed pro-Marxists or Communist views. The NUNS occasionally partnered with the Nigerian Socialist Group but they also sometimes received funding and support from private sector corporations and traditional royalty.¹¹⁹ ¹²⁰ Many of their members went on to work for private corporations or in the Nigerian government (who denounced socialism) after graduating.¹²¹ Most of their activities were restricted to their university campuses.¹²²

When they did venture into politics, they typically supported progressive policies. Their most successful intervention in national politics was in 1962 when the Union’s leaders organized demonstrations against British authorities attempting to set up military bases in newly independent Nigeria. The British annulment of these plans is largely attributed to the efforts of the NUNS.¹²³ The Nigerian political scientist, Kola Olugbade, described the NUNS members as “progressive nationalists” making the link between nationalism and anti-colonial struggle and “the tradition of radical student activism”.¹²⁴ Olugbade noted that many governments sought the support of the student leaders to “prove their legitimacy”.¹²⁵ The Obasanjo Military regime was no exception.

In September of 1977, they awarded the NUNS national president at the time, Segun Okeowo, a seat on the Constituent Assembly in Lagos. The Constituent Assembly in Nigeria during military rule met to debate and propose policies that would go into effect after the transition to military rule scheduled for 1979.¹²⁶ Mr. Okeowo, a third year student from the University of Lagos, was awarded the seat as part of an apparent effort to include student voices and youth

¹¹⁹Sani, “Chapter 4: Power Structure”, *Dynamics of Student’s Unionism in Nigeria*. 21

¹²⁰Daily Times Reporters, “Students Meet with Oba in Ibadan”, *Daily Times*, February 10th 1978. 5

¹²¹Office of the President, *Student Union notes*, University of Ibadan Ibadan, Nigeria, 1979

¹²²Ebenezer Babatope, “Foreword”, *Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*. 3

¹²³Ibid, 2.

¹²⁴Olugbade, “Nigerian Students and Political Mobilization”. 42

¹²⁵Ibid.

¹²⁶A plan was put in place for the Constituent Assembly to act more independently following the transition to civilian rule that was scheduled for 1979

representation in political matters.¹²⁷ However, despite the Military government's attempts to engage the student leaders, Mr. Okeowo and other members of the NUNS' Executive Council, including the Secretary General, Olufemi Olufagba, were heavily critical of the regime. Why did the NUNS leaders mobilize thousands of people to take to the streets to express their grievances?

Showcasing Social Influence

The Executive Council of the NUNS were motivated to organize protests because they wanted to intimidate and challenge the military government by flexing their political power. If they were able to show that they held considerable social influence, the government would be more likely to engage them in future political matters. Protests were the chosen mode to express the general discontent because they allowed the leaders of the Union to prove the extent of their support and showcase their political outreach. Demonstrations involving thousands of students and non-students directly behind the student leaders would poignantly show the extent of the students' influence and support more so than a petition or closed door negotiations. This method was a way for them to visibly stand out in their challenge to the government and if successful, could be a way for them to secure more long term goals and expand their political support.

Excluding the NUNS leaders from the decision making process behind the fee increases may have sent the message that they were not important enough to be consulted in political decisions. Segun Okeowo's seat on the constituent assembly and the NUNS more broadly, appeared mostly symbolic after the fee increase. Their role as an organization was to defend the interests of students in national politics so excluding them from the decision process humiliated the leaders of the Union's divisions and undermined their significance as an organization. The actions of the upper leadership in the months following the announcement of the changes in university

¹²⁷Sunday Adenekan, "NUNS President on Constituent Assembly", *Daily Times*, Lagos Nigeria, May 1977. 4

financing, and during the protests, prove that they aimed to show the government that they had significant political power and influence and deserved to be listened to.

The immediate reactions of the NUNS leaders suggested that they were open to taking somewhat extreme actions to get the government's attention. After the Chairman of the National University Commission, Jibril Aminu, announced the fee increases in January of 1978, the NUNS quickly released a response in the *Nigerian Tribune* stating that they were willing to "go to any length, by any means necessary" to challenge the fee increases.¹²⁸ The Union's secretary general, Olufemi Olufagba, remarked that "the government is only swimming in an ocean of illusion if they think we will accept this [the fee increases]". He went on to say that the purpose of student unions was to "renounce the inadequacies of government" and that the students would "make sure to show them [the government] that we are serious".¹²⁹ This stated purpose contrasts their general purpose recognized by their factions which was limited to the defense of student interests on the national stage. The leaders were prepared to take on a bigger, more political role and immediately determined to challenge the government with extreme actions if necessary.

Their first challenge was to adopt a popular policy as their primary demand; free education at all levels. After the implementation of the Universal Primary Education Scheme in 1976, primary education became free and compulsory.¹³⁰ In 1977, the government also made university tuition free, meaning that the only level of schooling that was not free was secondary school, however it was heavily subsidized for poor students. Although the 1978 student protests are often remembered as a protest against the fee increases, the NUNS leaders at the time were actually demanding that the government make "education be free and compulsory at all

¹²⁸NUNS Quote from "Students to Pay more", *Nigerian Tribune*, Lagos Nigeria, March 1978. 15

¹²⁹Olufemi Olufagba, "Press Conference Addressed by Mr Femi Olufagba", in *Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*

¹³⁰Primary education was free in state schools for more reading see Csapo, Marg. "Universal Primary Education in Nigeria: Its Problems and Implications."

levels”¹³¹, a policy that was extremely popular in the 70s.¹³² In February 1978, after the announcement of the fee increases, the NUNS parliament called an emergency meeting in Calabar where they drafted their demands and prepared a plan of action. Submitting a demand that was broadly desired would significantly increase the support they had in the public increasing their bargaining power with the government.

In their official statement of action, they argued that the government was enacting “elitist policies that will inevitably deepen and widen the yawning gap between rich and poor”.¹³³ The leaders implied in their statement that the changes in university financing would not only affect university students at the time, it would affect the country in general because it would perpetuate increased elitism in schools and negatively impact the poor in the long run. By not focusing solely on the fee increases and scholarship decentralization, the NUNS rebranded an issue that only significantly impacted the tiny population of university students receiving federal aid¹³⁴ as an issue that would challenge the prosperity of the whole nation because they wanted to show that their organization could successfully influence national policy.

Anticipating potential conflict, the government invited the student leaders to negotiate their demands in March of 1978. The NUNS’ blanket refusal to negotiate any of their demands is evidence of their determination to showcase their political power. Select members of upper leadership, (including Segun Okeowo, the Union’s president, and Olufemi Olufagba, its secretary general) were invited to meet with prominent members of the military government indicating that the government took their demands seriously or at least considered them worth discussing

¹³¹NUNS Public Enlightenment Bureau, *OUR STANCE*, Published in *Daily Times*, March 18th 1978. 15

¹³²UPE was a popular policy for multiparty governments, or governments transitioning to multiparty governments in Africa. For more reading see Stasavage, David. “The Role of Democracy in Uganda's Move to Universal Primary Education.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 53–73. doi:10.1017/S0022278X04000618.

¹³³NUNS Public Enlightenment Bureau, *Circular Demands*, Calabar Cross Rivers State, March 1978

¹³⁴According to the Statistics Unit of the Ministry of Education there were approximately 14,000 receiving federal aid which translates to 0.002% of the country in 1978. (Data from the World Bank Estimates a population of 70 million) Nigeria's Population via World Bank Stats

with. The students met twice with the Minister of Education, Colonel Ahmadu Ali, who suggested that the fee increase be temporary and not persist into the 1978/79 academic year, a proposal the student leaders declined because their demands for free education were non-negotiable.¹³⁵

They were also invited to meet with the head of the National University Commission (NUC), the committee directly responsible for the fee increases. The student leaders declined this meeting on the grounds that the NUC was “not eminent enough to negotiate with them” and that they had already “consulted with all the worthy consultables”.¹³⁶ Reserving their time for the “worthy consultables” and declining to meet with the branch of government responsible for the fee increases points to their readiness to take on a bigger role in politics through only engaging with the highest government officials. Furthermore, their persistent refusal to negotiate shows that they were intent on, as they initially stated, going to “any length” to achieve their demands.¹³⁷ Not negotiating was in itself a display of political power as the student leaders proved that they were in a position to force the government to do what they asked. Their reportedly “stubborn confrontational attitude”¹³⁸ during the negotiation meetings was proof of their dedication to their goal.

A former NUNS member made the argument that the union’s leaders were intent on protesting. Umaru Sani, a former public relations officer of the NUNS division of Ahmadu Bello University, criticized the actions of the 1978 student leaders noting that “they had planned their strategy for action which no amount of negotiation would have prevented them from executing”.¹³⁹ The NUNS’ Public Enlightenment Bureau however, announced in late March that

¹³⁵Thompson Oyatu, “Students Meet Ikpeme”, *Nigerian Tribune*, March 16 1978. 8

¹³⁶NUNS Public Enlightenment Bureau, *Circular Demands*

¹³⁷NUNS Quote from “Students to Pay more”, *Nigerian Tribune*, Lagos Nigeria, March 1978. 15

¹³⁸Sani, “Chapter 8: April 1978 Pinch”, *Dynamics of Student’s Unionism in Nigeria*. 82

¹³⁹*Ibid*, 86.

they had been “forced into “Operation Confrontation””.¹⁴⁰ Their ultimatum to the government would only prove effective if the student leaders showed they had the power and support of public opinion. Mass demonstrations rather than closed door negotiations would increase their visibility both in the public eye and in the perspective of the government; they would show that the students had the support of the public making it more likely that the government would recognize their legitimacy as an organization, accept their demands, and include them in future discussions.

The NUNS’ goal of flexing their political power helps explain some of the actions they took in the weeks before the protest and during the days of the protests. If they aimed to display their political outreach, then they would want to maximize turnout to the demonstrations. Ultimately, they were largely successful in doing so. Journalists reported over 6500 people participated in the march in University of Lagos on April 18th 1978. Crowds in the cities of Ibadan and Ile-Ife were estimated to have 3000 participants. Reports suggest that over 15,000 people participated in the demonstrations nationwide, making them the biggest organized protests in Nigerian history at the time.¹⁴¹ The NUNS leaders’ ability to include both students and non-students can be attributed to their ability to strategically use circumstance to their advantage. Given that university students were already on campus and readily available to partake in strike actions, all the NUNS had to do was encourage their peers to join. In the weeks before the first day of the protests, April 17th, they did this by echoing the fears and complaints of both the poor and wealthy students in the media.

For the poor students, the leaders of the NUNS organized a campaign designed to highlight all the ways in which the government was actively putting up “barriers to education and

¹⁴⁰NUNS Public Enlightenment Bureau, *Circular Demands*

¹⁴¹Daily Times Reporters, “Students Start Class Boycott”, *Daily Times*, April 18 1978, Front Page

opportunity”.¹⁴² Posters and pamphlets drew on the grievances of the poor students from rural areas by suggesting that university education was becoming “a luxurious commodity purchased only by the sons and daughters of the privileged few”.^{143 144} Reaffirming the concerns of the rural students by suggesting that the government was planning on limiting access to a right they previously had and enjoyed, would help include these students in the demonstrations because they would be given an outlet to express their frustrations.

The NUNS also included wealthier students by echoing and amplifying their criticisms of the government. They argued that the government did have the money to finance education and that they were deliberately neglecting the education sector. An opinion piece from an NUNS leader was titled, “Why must education be made the Judas of past national extravaganzas and squandermanias on jamborees of Festacs of festivals?”.¹⁴⁵ The student leader appears to suggest that the fee increases were caused by government overspending on “national extravaganzas” possibly referring to the increase in spending on federal infrastructure.¹⁴⁶ The “squandermanias” on “Festacs of festivals” refers to the elaborate African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos the year before in 1977. Similar to the wealthy university students explored in the previous chapter, this student may have found it hard to reconcile the swift change in tone from the government who went from funding large scale projects and making promises to increasing fees in several sectors. The somewhat comical sarcastic tone this question takes serves to ridicule the government for spending so elaborately and suggests that the spending happened at the expense of national education funding. Amplifying the criticisms of the majority of university

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³Daily Times Reporters, “Students Start Class Boycott”

¹⁴⁴Koya, *Zoom Interview with Dr. Kunle Koya on April 1978 Protests*

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶The Library of Congress, *Nigeria The Obasanjo Regime, 1976-79*

students would make it more likely that they would join the demonstrations, increasing overall turnout.

To further maximize turnout to the demonstrations, the student leaders took advantage of the discontent surrounding social spending cutbacks. The 1978 budget deficit resulted in abrupt reductions in public spending meaning that there had been changes in the financing of several other sectors including health and transport.¹⁴⁷ The NUNS' cause reflected the frustrations of all the Nigerians affected by the public spending cuts. When criticizing the government in the media, the Union's leaders made sure to use language that imitated the words of working class Nigerians, frequently referring to government officials as "corrupt" "idiots" "bandits", and "thieves".^{148 149} The demonstrations were an opportunity for anyone who was annoyed with the government to express their grievances.

In addition to mirroring the frustrations of many groups, the NUNS leaders took steps to ensure that as many people as possible joined their marches. The student leaders in the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife, set up tables at the gates of their campuses on the morning of April 17th. Some teachers in Lagos and Ibadan had canceled classes in solidarity with the students freeing up those available to attend.¹⁵⁰ One former student from Lagos recalls that the crowd outside her university was "easy to join" stating that "it was a group of students fighting for what was right".¹⁵¹ The student claimed that while they were fully supportive of the NUNS, it was relatively easy to inadvertently join the demonstrations because of where the crowd was located: directly in front of the gates such that anyone entering or exiting the university would have to go through the flock of students blocking the entrance.¹⁵² A former student from the university of

¹⁴⁷Osaji, "1978-1978 Budget: An Appraisal". 15

¹⁴⁸Onagoruwa, "Government Can't Be A Lawless Leviathan". 9

¹⁴⁹It is important to note that despite their criticisms, the union leaders never called for regime change.

¹⁵⁰Daily Times Reporters, "Battle Off The Campus", *Daily Times*, April 19th 1978. Front Page

¹⁵¹T. Adepoju, *Interview with Mrs. Adepoju on April 1978 Protests*, conducted virtually on Zoom, December 2021

¹⁵²Ibid.

Ibadan stated that the demonstrations had begun “so peacefully that the first few hours were a little boring”.¹⁵³ However as the day went on, the crowds grew in size and ferocity due to the efforts of the student leaders.

Further evidence that some student leaders aimed to flex their political power by maximizing turnout was that they actively recruited primary and secondary school students to join the demonstrations. Newspapers reported that on April 17th and 18th, student leaders in Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife, went directly to primary and secondary schools nearby their campuses and encouraged them to leave their classrooms and join the crowds forming at the universities. A *Daily Times* reporter noted that both the primary and secondary students “did not need much persuasion to leave their lectures to join the events”.¹⁵⁴ A secondary school student at the time, when interviewed about the protests admitted that their “impressionable young minds did not know what it [the protest] was all about back then” but they “joined the undergraduates in Lagos nonetheless”.¹⁵⁵ The inclusion of primary and secondary school students diversified the protests, shifting it from a university student issue to a student issue in general. Then as regular people (non-students) joined the crowds in the cities, the protests grew to reflect the discontent with national policies.

As the demonstrations expanded and intensified on April 17th, it became clear that the union’s leaders, the president and vice presidents of the divisions, had succeeded in their goal of showcasing their political influence. They had managed to use the general dissatisfaction amongst university students and the larger public to their advantage. They aimed to force the government to listen to them by showing them that they had the resources and ability to mobilize thousands of people in their support. Unfortunately, as the crowds approached the low thousands

¹⁵³Longe, *Interview with Olayinka Longe on April 1978 Protests*

¹⁵⁴Daily Times Reporters, “Battle Off The Campus”, *Daily Times*. Front Page

¹⁵⁵Adeola Agbo, *Interview with Adeola Agbo on April 1978 Protests*, conducted virtually on Zoom. December 2021

in the major cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife, police intervention resulted in tragic deaths and injuries in all three campuses on April 17th. The violence that ensued during the protests will be explored in the following section.

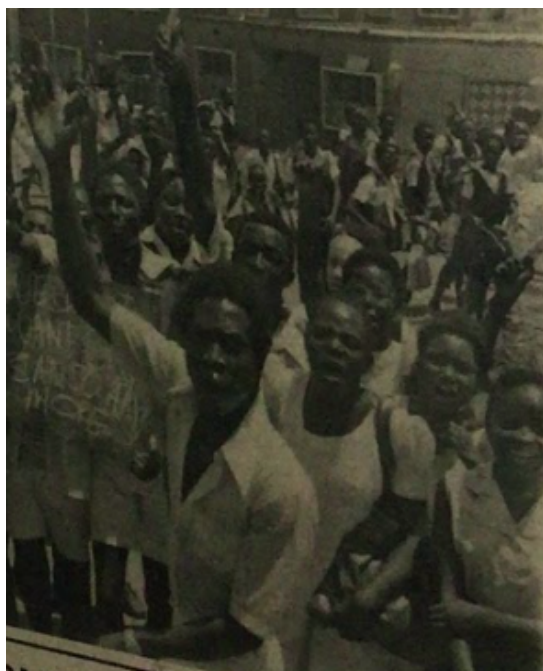


Figure 3: Secondary School Students Protesting in Ikeja Lagos, 1978.¹⁵⁶

Historical Distinction

It can be argued that in addition to wanting to showcase their organization's political power and influence, the top leaders of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) wanted to use these protests to achieve some level of notoriety. Various NUNS divisions would frequently organize strikes on their campuses involving some of their peers, leading some scholars to assert that "the student leaders are always on strike over one petty issue or another".¹⁵⁷ That the changes in university financing were on a national level and the fact that so many students, poor

¹⁵⁶"Pupils Protest", photograph by Taiye Ajayi, African Newspapers of Nigeria, printed in *Nigerian Tribune*, April 17 1978. 19

¹⁵⁷S.E Oyovbaire, "Students power in Nigeria" *Political Science Journal Zaria* Vol. 2 No. 1, 1977. 15

and wealthy alike, were against them, meant that they finally had a strong cause and a strong base that would support them taking to the streets. Additionally, they could use the national discontent to their advantage and get regular people to support them too. These demonstrations were an opportunity for them to leave a lasting impact in the history of Nigerian national student activism.

The Nigerian sociologist, Ladun Anise, made a similar claim, arguing that the NUNS' leadership wanted to distinguish themselves in historical memory.¹⁵⁸ Not only were they determined to illustrate their socio-political influence, they wanted to make headlines while doing so. Anise contested the government's rationale for the protests which stated that the student leaders were "motivated by external agitators".¹⁵⁹ The Minister of Education claimed after the protests that the NUNS was influenced by the political behaviors of European and American students.¹⁶⁰ She argues that the actions the student leaders took before and during the protests were more similar to other Nigerian and post-independence Sub Saharan African student protests than they were to European student protests. She asserts that "given the tradition of student unionism in Nigeria, a tradition that has perpetuated confrontation, reckless verbal militancy and sometimes unruly demagogic and youthful posturing, it was more likely the case that NUNS leaders were looking for a means of making a national impact that would stand out in the grand tradition of universal militant student unionism... Okeowo must have been determined to leave a national impact in his administration in this confrontational fashion without necessarily conspiring with external agitators".¹⁶¹ The student leaders, aware of their momentum

¹⁵⁸Anise, "Confrontation Politics and Crisis Management: Nigerian University Students and Public Policy." 78

¹⁵⁹Ibid.

¹⁶⁰Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Government Views on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Nigerian Universities Crisis, 1978*. Lagos July 1978. 6

¹⁶¹Anise, "Confrontation Politics and Crisis Management: Nigerian University Students and Public Policy: A Social Commentary." 75

at the time, wanted to take their place in the history of Nigerian student activism. This argument helps explain some actions they took during the protests.

Journalists reported that on April 17th and 18th, during the demonstrations in Lagos and Ibadan, NUNS leaders sought out market women to join their protests.¹⁶² ¹⁶³While it is possible that these student leaders were just trying to get as many people to join the march as possible, the inclusion of market women in the protests, and the fact that it was reported in the press was likely strategic because market women had typically played foundational roles in historical national protests. Reports from Ibadan state that, as crowds were beginning to form, Union representatives went to nearby markets and told them that they would “eventually feel the pinch of the school fees” in order to persuade them to join the march.¹⁶⁴

Nigerian historians recognize market women as symbols of the working class and progressive nation building efforts. For example, up to 10,000 market women joined the Abeokuta Women’s Union to protest against the ruling colonial chief in 1949 which resulted in his abdication shortly thereafter.¹⁶⁵ In 1929, market women staged a successful rebellion against colonial chiefs in Aba. Because of their historical significance in protesting against unfair colonial/government policies, the student leaders may have sought their support to improve their legitimacy. They would only “eventually” feel the effects of the increases because many of them did not have children attending university at the time, so it is likely that the fees in reality would not directly affect them. They were being included not because they were directly impacted by the fees, but because they held a symbolic significance and would help them stand out.

¹⁶²(women who trade in markets or on the sides of roads) for more reading see American Historical Association “Riot or Rebellion? The Women’s Market Rebellion of 1929 | AHA.” Accessed January 25, 2022. market women's rebellion of 1929

¹⁶³Oyebode Oyeleye, “Schools Closed”, *Nigerian Tribune*, April 18 1978. 9

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Cheryl Johnson-Odim,; Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*. Introduction

The violence during the protests came to be the single factor that helped distinguish these protests in history. This factor too was in part facilitated by some of the top Union leaders' actions. By the late afternoon of April 17th, in Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife, the demonstrations included university students, rich and poor, primary and secondary students, market women, and regular people from different walks of life peacefully protesting behind the student leaders. The size and diversity of the mobs contributed to the electric feeling that something important was happening.¹⁶⁶ Some student leaders, however, wanted more action. In Lagos, the NUNS president Segun Okeowo, and his counterparts, reportedly urged the crowd to leave the campus to go into the city and block roads, in defiance of police orders.¹⁶⁷ Law enforcement arrived on the scene as the mob made their way to the city streets. A former student present in the Lagos crowd recalled that the student leaders encouraged "taunting" of the police officers by yelling and refusing to return to their campuses.¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the officers responded to this with gunfire, hurting several students in the process, resulting in the fatal killing of one student, Akintunde Ojo.¹⁶⁹

Similar events unfolded at the University of Ibadan. The vice president of their union encouraged parts of the crowd to "destroy social assets", referring to nearby food stands and shops, in order to "deter police presence from the university".¹⁷⁰ A former student from Ibadan remembers things getting "out of control very quickly"; police came and started shooting to disperse the mob.¹⁷¹ That evening, after the crowds tapered off in the cities, the Minister of Education, Colonel Ali, gave a televised speech where according to a former university student, he "callously dismissed the violent response of law enforcement in Lagos and Ibadan".¹⁷²

¹⁶⁶Gbadamosi, *interview with Dele Gbadamosi on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*,

¹⁶⁷Adise Akinyele, "Ali Again!", *Nigerian Tribune*, April 18 1978. Front Page

¹⁶⁸Gbadamosi, *Interview with Dele Gbadamosi on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*

¹⁶⁹Sani, "Chapter 8: April 1978 Pinch", *Dynamics of Student's Unionism in Nigeria*. 85

¹⁷⁰Lucas Olaifa quote in "Pupils Protest", *Daily Times*, Lagos, Niger April 18th 1978, Front Page

¹⁷¹Olatokunbo, *Interview with Olatokunbo Fowode on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*,

¹⁷²Babatope, "Chapter 12: 1978- Bloodshed at Noon: 'Ali Must go'", *Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*. 171

Students were even more enraged as this was additional evidence that their government cared little about their well-being. The next day, April 18th, crowds formed again outside university gates in Lagos, Ibadan, and Ile-Ife with an additional demand, “Ali must go!” they chanted, calling for the Minister of Education to resign. In Ile-Ife, students encouraged by their Union’s leader, set fire to nearby shops claiming they were trying to get the attention of government officials¹⁷³

The union leaders in Ahmadu Bello University in the northern city of Zaria had the day before, on April 17th, managed to execute modest, and peaceful protests. However, on April 18th, their campus became the deadliest of all. The NUNS president in Zaria was said to have spread a rumor that five students and a professor had been “gunned down and killed by police at the University of Lagos on April 17th”.¹⁷⁴ Ibrahim Biu, a former student from Ahmadu Bello University reflecting on the crisis said “this was the information that actually set the fire of the crisis burning” as other students were outraged by the news.¹⁷⁵ This rumor led to the outbreak of chaos outside the university’s campus with students burning police officer cars. Like in Lagos and Ibadan, the police responded with ammunition, shooting and killing eight students.¹⁷⁶ At the end of the third day of protests, there were nine casualties and hundreds of injuries nationwide.

The consensus amongst students, journalists, and even government officials was that the violent response of the police was completely unjustified. The Supreme Military Court¹⁷⁷, deemed the actions of the police unlawful leading to multiple police arrests.¹⁷⁸ However, multiple NUNS division presidents, including the national president, Segun Okeowo, were also arrested

¹⁷³Olaifa, “Pupils Protest”

¹⁷⁴Sani, *Dynamics of Student’s Unionism in Nigeria*. 81

¹⁷⁵Ibrahim Biu, “Student Protests” in *New Nigerian*, April 25th 1978

¹⁷⁶Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Government Views on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Nigerian Universities Crisis, 1978*. 7

¹⁷⁷Essentially the Supreme Court officials appointed during the period of military rule

¹⁷⁸Ministry of Information, *Supreme Military Court Findings on April 1978 Crisis*, Ibadan Nigeria, September 1978

for their roles in inciting the crowds they led. A professor from the University of Ife, Professor Ojetunji Aboyade, who had originally supported the student union by canceling classes on the first day of protests, condemned their leaders' actions in court testimony. Professor Ojetunji argued that by energizing the crowds and defying police orders to stay within the walls of their campuses, "the student leaders endangered the lives of all those they were supposed to be leading".¹⁷⁹

Significantly, it was almost exclusively members of the NUNS' executive council that encouraged disobedience by directing the mobs off their campuses and egging on the "disturbance of public peace".¹⁸⁰ This could be because they were the only ones with enough authority to direct the crowds to take action but they were also fully aware that violence makes headlines. There's no official record of the NUNS leaders planning to use violence as a strategy, in fact as the next chapter will show, some student leaders explicitly discouraged any kind of turbulence during the organization of protests. The top leaders spurring on their crowds can be explained by the argument that they wanted some kind of reaction, in the press or from the government. If their goal was to distinguish themselves in the history of radical student unionism, the violence that ensued from April 17th to April 20th 1978, certainly helped them achieve that.

Overall, the Union's upper leadership wanted to use these protests to secure their place at the table. They wanted to show that their social support should translate into political power. The leaders of the various NUNS divisions took actions from January to April that proved that they could have a significant social and historical impact. Demanding free education would allow

¹⁷⁹Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Government Views on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Nigerian Universities Crisis, 1978*. 7

¹⁸⁰Sani, *Dynamics of Student's Unionism in Nigeria*. 84

them to have a long-term impact on national policy and increase support for their organization. Presenting the government with an ultimatum points to their determination to force them to execute their wishes. The student leaders mobilized students and non-students to their side by amplifying existing criticisms of the military government and giving these groups an avenue to express their frustrations. The NUNS' leaders showed that they had significant social influence and they managed to distinguish themselves in history by mobilizing thousands of people and inciting them to get the government's attention in order to have their demands listened to and executed. The question still remains though, despite gathering immense public support and making headlines, why did they fail to achieve any of their demands? Specifically, why did the changes in university financing persist despite all their effort?

Chapter 3: No Education

The writing off of Material Concerns

“Count us out!” said Damola Delano, a member of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) division in the University of Lagos who was part of a group of students that disassociated themselves from the demonstrations against the government on April 17th 1978. The group of students in Lagos called themselves the “Committee of Elderstatesmen” because as they told the *Daily Times*, they were the only NUNS members that “behave like adults” and recognized that “strike actions have never produced positive results in this country”.¹⁸¹ There were students in different universities who were against the demonstrations. Particularly significant are the NUNS members who contested the strategic efficiency of protests. The students who were less enthusiastic about the demonstrations present a contrast to the NUNS’ main leaders in that they were typically lower level members of the union, often from poor and rural backgrounds themselves. The actions of these students in the months before and during the protests prove that there were internal divisions in the union. Some students in the union challenged the government based solely on a strong material concern for the educational and financial future of poor university students. The primary goal for NUNS members who were motivated by a concern for poor students was to negotiate with the government to either reverse the fee increases or to ensure that financial protections for poor students were guaranteed so their education could continue uninterrupted.

This chapter will examine the goals and motivations of NUNS members who did not participate in or entirely condone the protests. It will consider the apparent disagreements within the union with regard to the demand for free education and its negotiability. The union’s leaders became so preoccupied with organizing a large demonstration that would leave a lasting national

¹⁸¹Damola Delano, “Against Boycott”, *Daily Times*, April 17 1978. Front Page

impact that they disregarded the suggestions of poorer, lower level members who were more concerned with firmly securing the interests of poor university students. The student leaders are remembered for their success in mobilizing thousands of people, however this success may have undermined their ability to achieve their demands, leaving some poor students in 1978 with no education.

Internal Disagreements on Strategy

When the National University Commission announced the changes in university financing in January, the consensus amongst members of the NUNS divisions was that it was unreasonable. Multiple union members wrote to newspapers denouncing the fee increases including a self-identified indigent student from the University of Ife, Bayo Adenekan. He had recently joined his university's NUNS division to create opportunities for students like himself from small villages "who need education to shield ourselves from the grips of poverty".¹⁸² Another new NUNS member from the University of Lagos, John Ikirodah, argued in the *Daily Times* that the federal government was in a better position than local governments to correct the "dangerous gap between the poor and rich in the country" because of the discrepancies in the funds the various states possessed. Like the student from Ile-Ife, Ikirodah noted that he came from a poor family from a village in Ondo state. He goes on to praise the government for their implementation of the Universal Primary Education scheme and encourages the government to "restructure its budget to finance university education for us poor".¹⁸³ Like their union's leaders, these students recognized the potentially harmful effects of fee increases and contested the decision. There was agreement across the national union that some sort of solution needed to be reached.

¹⁸²Bayo Adenekan, "Bad Planning Kills our Education", *Nigerian Tribune*, Sunday March 26 1978. 4

¹⁸³John Ikirodah, "Causes and Cure of Students Unrest in Nigeria", *Nigerian Tribune*, Saturday March 16 1978. 3

Evidence suggests that there were disagreements within the NUNS about what this solution should be. After the union's upper leadership (made up of the presidents and vice presidents of the various divisions) called an "emergency meeting" in February of 1978 to prepare a response and plan of action in response to the announcement of the fee increases, they drafted a list of demands. Their central demand for education to be "free and compulsory at all levels" was contested by some students for two main reasons. Firstly, some students were concerned that free, *compulsory*, education would actually harm poor families in the long run. Secondly, some argued that the demand was unreasonable given the country's financial situation and that it overshadowed the pressing problems the fee increases posed to poor students.

NUNS members who argued that free and compulsory education would harm poor families in the long run pointed out how regressive the policy was. A first year NUNS student from the University of Ibadan, Wale Ayeni, wrote in the *Nigerian Tribune* that redirecting public funds to his "peers who grew up in super comfortable situations" would mean denying their "less fortunate brothers" like himself "adequate financial assistance".¹⁸⁴ This student alludes to the fact that over 70% of university students at the time were not receiving federal aid, meaning the majority of them could afford to go on their own and making university free might come at the expense of poorer youths who could not afford to pay the taxes that would come with this policy.¹⁸⁵ Another student who responded to Ayeni's article a week later added that many people his age needed to work as soon as possible to provide for their families. According to the student "university education is itself a luxury... nobody has thought of how government can come to the poor who take apprenticeships at a young age because they cannot afford to not earn money".¹⁸⁶ These students highlight that although the demand for free education was popular,

¹⁸⁴Wale Ayeni, "Questioning Free Education", *Nigerian Tribune*, April 2 1978. 9

¹⁸⁵Statistics Unit, *Student Enrollment in Nigeria 1970-83*, Federal Ministry of Education, Lagos, Nigeria, December 1977

¹⁸⁶Sunday Oyeyemi, "Response to Ayeni", *Nigerian Tribune*, April 10 1978. 8

there were practical limitations to the policy. Free education at all levels would mean the students who could afford to spare the money and time to attend university would be rewarded potentially at the expense of their peers.

Other NUNS members are on record challenging this demand for being somewhat unreasonable. G. O. Muhammad, who had recently joined the Ahmadu Bello University NUNS division in December, wrote to his union's president contesting the demand for free education. In his letter, he pointed to a study from 1976 which showed that despite the popularity of the policy, 60% of university students actually did not favor free education because they worried it would "cheapen the quality of their schooling".¹⁸⁷ He then asked "is this really what we need right now?".¹⁸⁸ An NUNS student from Lagos expressed a similar idea in the *Daily Times* arguing that "our priority should be the poor students".¹⁸⁹ The concerns of these lower level union members, who questioned the demand for free education were drowned out by the widespread popularity of the policy.

There were also disagreements on the negotiability of the demand. In March, when the NUNS' executive council was invited to negotiate with the Minister of Education, Colonel Ali, the president and vice president of the University of Nsukka NUNS division said they were willing to accept the fee increases if rural or poor students were guaranteed work on their campuses to meet the increased costs.¹⁹⁰ The University of Nsukka located in the south-east of Nigeria, the region of the country where most of the civil war had been fought, had a greater number of poor students than other campuses¹⁹¹. Their leaders may have been conflict and

¹⁸⁷Moji Oyeyemi, *Opinion Poll on Free Education*, University of Ife, Ife 1976. 4

¹⁸⁸G.O Muhammad, "Do We Want Education To Be Free?", Letter To Adamu M. Waziri, Student Union Zaria, April 10 1978

¹⁸⁹Derin Balogun, "Problems in Universities", *Daily Times*, March 1978. 15

¹⁹⁰Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Government Views on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Nigerian Universities Crisis*, 1978. 6

¹⁹¹About 50% of students in the University Nsukka were receiving federal loans in 1978 according to the Statistics Unit, *Student Enrollment in Nigeria 1970-83*, Federal Ministry of Education

protest averse because of this and were more focused on achieving something for the students they represented rather than nothing. When asked about the protests a year later, the Nsukka vice president recalled that he favored the proposal to negotiate with the Federal Government on the subject of the rise in fees. “Once boycotts start, it is unlikely that anything will be achieved,” said the vice president.¹⁹²

The Nsukka vice president’s views were reiterated by more moderate students in other NUNS divisions. Meeting notes from the University of Lagos NUNS note that first year students that had just joined the union who were receiving federal aid said that they were willing to accept the changes in university financing if there were specific caveats and plans put in place to support students from “indigent backgrounds”.¹⁹³ Similarly, according to a *Nigerian Tribune* reporter “junior members” of the NUNS division in the University of Ibadan had expressed hope that negotiations with the government would lead to “a win for some if not all”.¹⁹⁴ It would seem then that in contrast to the statements Mr. Okeowo (the president of the NUNS) and Mr. Olufagba (the secretary general of the NUNS) made to the press that their demands were non-negotiable, some students were open to finding workable solutions. They were more willing to achieve a small win for the students they represented than they were to risk gaining nothing from a failed protest.

In April, after the negotiations failed and the NUNS’ Public Enlightenment Bureau announced their intention to protest by organizing mass demonstrations, some members of the NUNS openly criticized the strategy and tried to encourage caution. For example, the Committee of Elder Statesmen in the University of Lagos were a small group of students, led by some NUNS members in their first and second years as well as some older students in their early

¹⁹²Students’ Union Nsukka, *Nwazurike Interview with Registrar*, University of Nsukka, Enugu Nigeria, June 1979

¹⁹³Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Government Views on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Nigerian Universities Crisis, 1978*. 6

¹⁹⁴Daily Times Reporters, “Students Start Class Boycott”, *Daily Times*. Front Page

thirties that banded together to oppose the demonstrations. The group told reporters that the NUNS leaders were “acting like children” and that “the issue of increase in fees is more complex than they [NUNS leaders] make themselves to believe without appreciating the other party’s views”.¹⁹⁵ O.A Fabgemi, a spokesperson for the group, said instead of protesting, “the NUNS needs to work with the federal government to clearly formulate a policy that will help indigent students”.¹⁹⁶ These students appear to be more open to compromise with the government as long as solutions are put in place for poor students.

Similarly, in the University of Ile-Ife and in Ahmadu Bello University, some student leaders specifically denounced violence in the protests because they thought it would make them less efficient and less likely to achieve their aim of helping people. On the 16th of April 1978, the student union in Ile-Ife called an emergency meeting to discuss the “NUNS directive” in relation to the demonstrations scheduled for the next day. The students agreed that “the demonstration should remain small and not involve violence or the destruction of public property” because violence would “weaken” their cause.¹⁹⁷ It seems that the union agreed prior to the protests to have a relatively small demonstration and refrain from violence. Likewise, three students from the student union in Ahmadu Bello University, met with their Registrar on April 17th 1978 to express their concern that “if too many students embarked on boycotts, the situation might get out of hand”.¹⁹⁸ These students also wanted to restrict the size of the protests to limit the likelihood of violence.

The more moderate union members were drowned out as most of them were lower level members with less influence over the planning and organizing of the protests. On April 17th, as the demonstrations began in Lagos, Ibadan and Ile-Ife and the crowds doubled, then tripled in

¹⁹⁵Daily Times Reporters, “Students Start Class Boycott”, *Daily Times*, Lagos Nigeria, April 18 1978. 9

¹⁹⁶Sani, “Chapter 8: April 1978 Pinch”, *Dynamics of Student’s Unionism in Nigeria*

¹⁹⁷Babatope, “Chapter 12: 1978- Bloodshed at Noon: ‘Ali Must go’”, *Student Power In Nigeria (1956-1980)*. 170

¹⁹⁸NUNS ABU, “Take Care with Protest”, *New Nigerian*, Kaduna Nigeria, April 15th 1978. 6

size, some NUNS members were essentially protesting the protests by not attending the marches. They sat in their rooms as the events unfolded minutes away from them.¹⁹⁹ By evening time, when word had spread that the police had intervened, injured several, and killed a student, the response of the passive students was mixed. Some doubled down on their view that the demonstrations were inevitably going to be rowdy and inefficient, while others, outraged by the response from law enforcement and the government, joined the march the next day on April 18th.²⁰⁰ Despite the initial efforts of the junior and more moderate student leaders who encouraged caution and attempted to discourage people from joining the demonstrations, crowds grew in size and intensity in the early evening of April 17th and even more so on the 18th after violent police intervention.

The crowds outside the University of Lagos began to dwindle after the third day of protest, April 19th. Towards the end of April, the National Union of Nigerian Students was disbanded and outlawed by the government. On May 4th, the president of the union Segun Okeowo was arrested for his role in inciting violence during the demonstrations.²⁰¹ By May 10th, classes had resumed in Lagos, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, and Zaria, the campuses most involved in the protests.²⁰² The changes in university financing went ahead as planned without any plans put in place for indigent students. Once again, strike actions had failed to produce positive results in the country. There was a decline in student enrollment in the September 1978 session.²⁰³ The demonstrations had only delayed the changes and compromised the prospects for poor students to have policies put in place to protect their interests.

¹⁹⁹Imoukhuede, *Zoom Interview with Edekin Imoukhuede on April 1978 Protests conducted virtually on Zoom*

²⁰⁰Oyebode Oyeleye, "Schools Closed", *Nigerian Tribune*. 9

²⁰¹Leke Adeseri, "Okeowo Detained", *Nigerian Tribune*. May 4 1978. Front Page

²⁰²Daily Times Reporters, "Classes Resume in UniIbadan", *Daily Times*, May 10 1978. 12

²⁰³According to the Ministry of Education's Statistics Unit, enrollment for the 1979/80 session fell by 3% and the number of students registered on federal aid dropped by 4000.



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Figure 4: University of Ife NUNS members meet with the Governor of Ondo state to negotiate demands

²⁰⁴NUNS members meet with Military Governor Ikpeme in his Office, photograph by Lucas Olaifa, “Students Meet with Ikpeme”, *Nigerian Tribune*, March 16 1978. 12

Conclusion

By December 1978, talk of the protests had tapered off in the news. The former NUNS secretary general, Olufemi Olufagba, however, was yet to move on. In what seemed like an attempt to defend his reputation, he argued that the Union's failure to secure a reversal of the fee increases was entirely attributed to the "militant government's refusal to see reason".²⁰⁵ Years later in 2014, a representative of the "militant government" Colonel Ahmadu Ali spoke at the funeral of the former NUNS president Segun Okeowo where he praised the NUNS' organization efforts in 1978 but condemned their inability to "see reason at the time."²⁰⁶ Both sides seem to recognize that the student leaders had succeeded in mobilizing a significant number of people, making history with their protests but were unable to reach an agreement that would help the students they represented.

Historians who have considered these protests in their studies typically point to the military regime's low tolerance for disorder and the "disruption of peace" to explain the discrepancy between the student leaders' success in mobilizing people and their failure to achieve their demands.²⁰⁷ However, distinguishing the members of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) by their positions in the organization helps explain their motivations and highlights how they also contributed to the April 1978 student crisis. The Union's leaders, like Olufemi Olufagba, aware of their power and attention in the months leading up to April, were led away from compromise.

Like their peers, they believed the changes in university financing to be unjust. However, unlike their peers, they were also insulted that the changes had been instituted without their input

²⁰⁵Femi Olufagba may be possibly referencing the phrase "militant students" used to describe student protesters to describe the military government. Olufagba Femi, "No Outside Influence!", *Nigerian Tribune*, December 1978

²⁰⁶Duad Olatunji, "Ex-student unionist, Segun Okeowo of Ali-Must Go Dies at 73", *Vanguard News*, January 29 2014

²⁰⁷Akintola, Bukola. "The Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Mobilization in Nigeria"

and they sought to rectify these injustices by challenging the government in a major way. While the lower-level NUNS members wanted to restrict their challenge to the government to the issues concerning the immediate interests of poor university students, the Union's executive council focused on a broader demand. Demanding the government implement free education at all levels would show that the Union's political influence was not restricted to the walls of their campuses. When negotiations failed, The NUNS' leaders drew on the grievances of students, rich and poor, and the general public. They successfully mobilized people from these groups by echoing their language in the press, acting as a voice for all those who were unhappy with the changes in university financing and government spending cutbacks in general.

The lower-level NUNS members, many of whom came from poor backgrounds, had questioned the efficiency and necessity of protests. Aware of the risks associated with taking to the streets, they considered and favored negotiation. They warned their leaders to put the poor *students* at the center of their confrontation and not the poor in Nigeria at large. They prioritized the small and fairly certain gain that would come from working with the government to find ways to protect poor students over the larger benefit of free education at all levels that would only happen as a result of the government acquiescing after witnessing the demonstrations. Dismissing the concerns of lower-level, poorer NUNS members, and prioritizing larger, long-term gains in the power of the organization, allowed the primary leaders of the Union to effectively organize thousands of people in their support but undermined their ability to protect the interests of poor students.

While the goals and motivations of the NUNS leaders can be reasonably inferred from the actions they took in the lead up to and outbreak of the demonstrations, access to the diaries and personal records of the Union's members would make their motivations more explicit and

certain. Nevertheless, the perspectives of the former university students who participated in the protests provide insight into the mindsets of students in general at the time. The students used these demonstrations to react to what they saw as an injustice. What is significant however, is that nearly all of the former students interviewed recall that the purpose of the demonstrations was to show the government how unfair they felt the changes in university financing were.²⁰⁸ In reality, the NUNS leaders had been given a chance to negotiate the terms of the fee increases but doubled down on the demand for free education. So the protesters in fact took to the streets in defense of free and compulsory education at all levels. The student leader's dedication to this substantial, wide-reaching demand, led them to protest. A longer project would also consider the short term effects of the protests, looking deeper into the ways poor students were impacted.

The Union's internal discussions and the articles written by lower-level members, underscore the importance of class and positionality in the NUNS in 1978. Further studies on the histories of protests and mobilization in African countries might benefit from finding ways to distinguish the contributions of the organizations and individuals involved rather than treating them as a single unit with shared goals. The connections between protests, class politics, and power mean that there are often higher and more immediate stakes for poor participants in government confrontation. The 1978 student protests in Nigeria show that young people in positions of power may be more willing to take risks during government confrontations but that these actions may occur at the expense of those they are supposed to be representing. It would be worth exploring class differences in other African protests to see if they reveal similar trends.

The governments of developing countries are aware of the power of protests and collective action. They may be open to negotiation but they may also respond to it with violence. Reckless violent police responses need to be more strongly condemned and powerfully discouraged by

²⁰⁸T. Adepoju, *Interview with Mrs. Adepoju on April 1978 Protests*

government officials, a point made by the former president of the NUNS himself, Segun Okeowo. Released from prison in July 1978, Okeowo went on to pursue a career as an educationist, serving as the principal of several secondary schools and a consultant for the Nigerian Union of Teachers. In 1986, when a student gathering in Ahmadu Bello University to commemorate the students killed during the 1978 crisis became rowdy, the police once again responded with extreme violence resulting in the death of five students. Okeowo, who was appointed as a member of the panel of inquiry into the 1986 conflict, pointed out that the 1978 student crisis had established a “precedent of violent police responses to student activism that cannot continue”.²⁰⁹

Remarkably, years later, Okeowo also offered criticisms of youth-led protest activity. In a speech he gave during his retirement from his position as chairman of Ogun state’s Teaching Services Commission in 2011, he offered a word of caution to Nigeria’s youth. Though he praised the efforts of student activists then and now, he encouraged them to be open to “re-strategizing to find solutions”. Informed by a career overseeing several university student protests, he warned young people not to “strike at every opportunity and expect heaven and earth”.²¹⁰ The allure of the power that comes with protests as a response to injustice need not compromise the leaders’ ability to find and enact solutions to the benefit of those who need it most.

²⁰⁹A. S. Mohammed. “The Aftermath of the Ahmadu Bello University Students’ Crisis of May 1986.” *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 37 (1986): 97–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005821>.

²¹⁰Segun Okeowo, “Student Leader Retires at 70”, *Vanguard*, September 18 2011

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