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## CHASTISED WITH WHIPS OR SCORPIONS: AN APPRAISAL OF NIGERIAN FUEL SUBSIDY REMOVAL IN THE LIGHT OF REHOBOAM'S ULTIMATUM

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined the notorious ultimatum issued by Rehoboam to his subjects at a time of socio-economic crisis during the pre-exilic Israelite kingdom. It observed that this ultimatum led to a divided Israelite kingdom because a vast majority of the people were disappointed and dissatisfied with the leadership style Rehoboam intended to adopt, which was reflected in his ultimatum. Employing the reader-response hermeneutical approach, this paper likened Rehoboam's ultimatum to the recent handling of the issue of fuel subsidy in Nigeria at a time of severe economic recession with the concomitant suffering this situation unleashed on the poor masses. The discovery of this paper is that the poor masses were made to pay for the sins of those who have selfishly enjoyed privileged leadership position over the years. The poor masses were the ones called upon to make a greater part of the sacrifices Nigeria needed to get out of recession because fuel subsidy removal revealed a paradigm of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The paper therefore recommends that there is need for equity in the apportioning of privileges and responsibilities in the Nigerian polity. Those who have taken or received so much should be made to return or give back so much also and not vice versa. This paper also recommends that the poor masses should not take laws into their hands but should seek their redress patiently and peacefully for the wellbeing of the entire Nigerian society.

**Keywords:** Recession, Fuel Subsidy, Corruption, Ruling Class, Poor Masses

### **Introduction**

This paper investigated the wisdom behind the infamous ultimatum issued by Rehoboam to his subjects in pre-exilic Israelite kingdom. The motive behind the suggestion of this notorious ultimatum to Rehoboam by Rehoboam's younger counsellors was explored. This paper queried the wisdom in adopting intimidation instead of dialogue at a time of national crisis when the subjects pleaded for reduction of their suffering. The challenges facing Rehoboam and his subjects were likened to the challenges facing the Nigerian federal government and the poor masses at the brink of sudden severe recession over the issue of fuel subsidy. In order to tackle these challenges this paper noted that the Nigerian federal government did not heed to the cry of the poor masses to lighten their burden by retaining the fuel subsidy that was introduced for their succour, which some in privileged positions of

leadership have hijacked to enhance their living conditions at the detriment of the poor masses over the years. Instead, the cry to retain fuel subsidy led to an official endorsement of its removal. This paper surveyed the reactions of the Nigerian people over the decision to remove fuel subsidy. It observed that while some people, especially those in privileged leadership positions hailed it as a wise counsel, many others, especially those on the side of the poor masses cried foul with the dictum. Following these discoveries, this paper noted that there are some replica between Rehoboam's ultimatum on forced labour in ancient Israel and Buhari's dictum on fuel subsidy in twenty first century Nigerian society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

1 Kings 12 opens with the story of Rehoboam the son of Solomon making a trip into the northern territory of Israel to be installed as 'king of Israel', although he was already recognised as king in Jerusalem. In this passage, the word Israel refers to the ten northern tribes and not to the larger unity that David had forged out of the remnants of Saul's kingdom and his own tribe Judah (Anderson 235). At the gathering northern tribes showcased their dissatisfaction with Solomon's reign, which they portrayed as draconian, selfish and oppressive. So before they could acclaim Rehoboam as their king, the northern tribes demanded a conditional kingship. They demanded that their yoke be lightened. In response to this pertinent request, Rehoboam sought the advice of older counsellors as well as younger counsellors. In the end, he shunned the counsel of the older counsellors and adopted the advice of the younger 'progressive' counsellors. Rehoboam viewed Israel's request as impertinence and an insult to his royal prerogatives (Black, 1987, 122). His response to the Israelite demands were:

my father made your yoke heavy I will make it even heavier; my father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions (1 Kings 12.14)

This was the match that set off the canons of secession. The community of the northern tribes exploded. The call to revolution was sounded. The cry gave birth to nostalgia for the olden days of tribal independence:

What portions have we in David?

We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.

To your tents, O Israel!

Look now to your own house, David. (1 Kings 12.16)

The search beam of many renowned biblical scholars (e.g. Anderson, 1975ed, Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, Bright 1997ed, May, 1987ed, et al) have been to unravel the multi layered political, geographical, and socio-economic landscape that made it possible for the sudden collapse of the united Israelite kingdom. These scholars and their associates express great surprise that the empire of Solomon, fortified with the best military equipment of the day and policed by the king's officers, should collapse almost overnight (Anderson, 1975ed, 236). They point out that what led to the collapse was more geographical, political and socio-economical than the mere sentimental outcry, which Rehoboam's ultimatum produced. They opine that Rehoboam already had bigger threats around him. Egypt was encroaching on their borders in the south and west and there was need to protect these areas from these enemies so Rehoboam channelled his resources to this end while his detractors

like Jeroboam used the opportunity to incite the northern tribes against him and achieve his aim of ruling part of the kingdom.

Using these arguments, these scholars point out that politically, king Shishak of Egypt had an interest to divide the united kingdom of Israel in order to make it more vulnerable. This will enable him encroach into their territory while they are busy fighting each other. Jeroboam had the ambition of getting into power and becoming the king of the northern kingdom of Israel thereby carving a kingdom for himself. Shishak saw his ambition as a good tool to achieve his aim and exploited it (Anderson, 1975ed. 234-240; Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, 149-159). Geographically, the Israelite kingdom was a confederate of many tribes who were united by David's conquest. David worked hard to maintain this unity against all odds. With the establishment of dynasty and the high handedness and extravagance of Solomon, the people had to rethink the whole idea behind their unity, whether it is a fact or fiction.

On the socio-economic level, the argument is that many of the people, especially those from the northern tribes were dissatisfied with the socio-economic structure of the Kingdom, which changed during the time of Solomon. Unlike the time of David, when equity prevailed irrespective of where you are coming from, they have not benefitted much from Solomon's government. They have only worked too hard under unscrupulous task masters, whose tasks were to ensure that the oppressive status quo thrived. The socio-economic structure reflects the Nigerian popular proverb – *monkey de work, baboon de chop*. They could not close their eyes any longer.

With the above pattern of argument, little emphases have been given to Rehoboam's ultimatum and the impact it could have on the people. Many biblical scholars (e.g Anderson, Finkelstein, Silberman, May, etc), using historical-critical approach, do not make a strong case that such unwise threat from Rehoboam could lead to such revolution overnight. Because of this, Rehoboam's ultimatum was merely mentioned and glossed over, while the search beam focuses more on the political, geographical and socio-economic reasons for the divided kingdom of Israel.

Further, these scholars have not bothered to apply this biblical text to similar situations facing people in their various localities outside the periscope of biblical times. In view of this deficiency, this paper will focus directly on Rehoboam's ultimatum. The approach to be employed is the reader-response approach, which allows a biblical text to have multiple applications within the socio political, cultural and economic situations of the reader (Bright, 1997ed, 42-43; Wenham David and Steve Walton, 2001, 90-92; Bray, Gerald, 1996, 480-490). This approach allows the scholar to discover what the author intended to say and then move on to applying this text to a different situation beyond the times and culture of both the author and the original recipients of the text. Explaining this approach, Palmer (2013), pointed out that the application of the text might differ from culture to culture. It is in this light that this paper takes a biblical text that is situate in the pre-exilic period of Israel and applied it to a twenty first century situation in Nigeria. The main trust of this paper is to investigate if Rehoboam's ultimatum on forced labour in Israel could be likened to Buhari's endorsement of fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria, which occurred in May 2016.

### **The Motives and Rascality Underlying Rehoboam's Ultimatum**

Rehoboam's quick response to his rejection by the people was to suppress the northern tribes. He quickly and indiscreetly sent Adoniram, the task master in charge of forced labour, to bring the situation under control. Adoniram was stoned to death instantly. It was then that the king realised that there was fire on the mountain. He made haste and jumped into his chariot and fled to Jerusalem. Still fuming with anger and ego to exercise control, Rehoboam planned to attack the northern tribes in order to bring them under his control by force. Only the oracle of prophet Shemia (1 kings 12.22-24) saved Rehoboam from enacting an ugly civil war.

The actions of Rehoboam raise some pertinent questions. One wonders why Rehoboam decided to increase the burden of a people who were already groaning under the burden his father, Solomon, had imposed on them. The burden was widely acclaimed by the elders who served under Solomon. Hence, they advised Rehoboam to treat the request of the northern tribes with caution and answer them gently. These older courtiers felt that it was time for a change and for the nation to begin to follow the path of justice than intimidation and cruelty against their own people. These older courtiers saw the situation as a good opportunity for dialogue, which could lead to a more meaningful and willing contribution of the northern tribes. After all, all they requested for is for their load to be lightened, not to be removed.

One wonders why Rehoboam could not utilize the opportunity for dialogue, which the northern tribes offered him. Instead of dialogue, he was more poised to using his military might against his own people. Scholars agree that Rehoboam had a military might that could crush any rebellion from the northern tribes, but this failed within the given circumstance. This points to the fact that it is difficult for a regime to work against the wishes and wellbeing of the greater majority of their people and hope put them under control with military might for a long time. Such military action may not always succeed.

Rehoboam was unwilling to listen to the pertinent cry of his people and rather saw it as an affront on his royal privileges. This is because Rehoboam was surrounded by younger courtiers who were unwilling to give up luxuries and privileges unjustly extorted from the northern tribes and sent to the king's court in Jerusalem. Rehoboam failed to realise that the counsel of this courtiers was for their selfish aggrandisement. They did not wish their allocations and privileges cut down. They wanted to continue to enjoy their privileges albeit at the detriment of the greater majority of the people. Such people advised Rehoboam to insist on the victimisation and exploitation of his people. They wanted to perpetuate the tradition of exploitation, with the hope that there is always a ready force to panel the people into submission. But this time they misfired. The northern tribes were able to see through their ruse and hence took the path of self determinism.

If Rehoboam refused to protect their interests, they must rise to defend themselves and this they did. Shemia had insight and foresight in this matter more than both Rehoboam and his younger courtiers could perceive. It is this insight and foresight that made him to advice Rehoboam not to go into war with the northern tribes, that the Lord had a hand in this (1kings 12.22-24). This could imply that the Lord is on the side of the oppressed. The Lord had seen the oppression of the northern kingdom from the time Solomon began his reign as king. The Lord has given the northern tribes some relief from the oppression of the descendants of David who now were acting contrary to the precedence set by their father David. This is bound to have far-reaching impact on the survival of both Judah and Israel

### **Plea for Reduction of Unofficial Fuel Hike Transcends into Official Fuel Hike**

Polling results in 2015 April elections showed that majority of Nigerians voted Muhammadu Buhari to take over the mantle of leadership as the president of Nigeria. The polls showed that his change mantra was welcome by majority of the people who hoped that life will become easier. The hope was anchored on Buhari's promise that goods and services will become more affordable and available to ordinary Nigerians citizens as the country wages war on corruption at all levels. So the change of government in 2015 came with plenty of expectations from the Nigerian people. However by the end of 2015, the sense of despair was all pervading as the problems on the ground seemed to have overwhelmed the government. The most telling signs that the government was failing from its promise to make life easier for ordinary Nigerians was the pitiful sight of citizens who were spending nights in fuel stations in December 2015 due to severe shortages of the product (Dori, 2017). To worsen matters, many workers spent a bleak Christmas and New Year without their salary. 'No money' became a refrain one heard in all interactions. People were getting impatient. They hoped that something should be done quickly to alleviate the situation. Nigerians looked upon the President and his courtiers to solve the problem of fuel shortages and arbitrary hike in the prices of petrol and allied products by dealers to the detriment of the ordinary citizens. Many hoped that New Year would bring the long expected change, at least in the fuel sector.

But as the year 2016 unfolded, life became even more desperate for the ordinary citizens as the Nigerian currency, the Naira, went into a free fall leading to a steep rise in prices all round. Economic reports showed that inflation hit eleven years high within a space of few months. Many people hailed the new tempo on the war on corruption, particularly the monies said to have been recovered that could be utilized for the provision of infrastructure. Many Nigerians also hailed the increased tempo in the war on the insurgency in the North East. Unfortunately while the presidency showcases his success in the above areas, life increasingly became more difficult, people despaired and even analysts that thought the new government would lead Nigeria to an Eldorado started having a second thought (Adebayo, 2016). The long queues in fuels stations have stiffened up. The arbitrary hike in the prices of fuel was becoming a norm. Task force sent out by relevant federal and state government agencies to force petrol stations to stop fuel hike failed. People groaned the more.

As the fuel palaver worsened, the cry of the Nigerian people was unanimous from all geo-political zones, tribes and religious affiliations. The unanimous cry was 'lighten our burden and we will be good citizens of this country.' This cry did not fall on deaf ears as the President frantically sought the counsel of his courtiers and other Nigerian people. The expectation of many people was that the Nigerian government should follow the trend of falling pump price of petrol in the international market following the drop in the prize of crude oil to its lowest levels. If this trend is followed, then Nigerian government should reduce the pump price of petrol for its citizens. On the contrary to this expectation, Nigerians were told by Buhari that they had to pay more for fuel. This automatically led to an increase in prices of food and other basic commodities, thereby aggravating the suffering of the poor masses.

Buhari did not act alone. There were strong indications that the courtiers of the president counselled that the price of fuel be increased from 86.50 naira to 145.00 naira, a 67% increase amidst economic hardship. This was done by removing the long cherished fuel

subsidy that held the pump price of petrol and some allied products on check. This was exactly what the ordinary citizens did not expect. Many of the citizens felt that such counsel is like the counsel given to Rehoboam by his younger courtiers who counselled him to increase the yoke and burdens of his subjects instead of lightening them as pleaded by them. For many Nigerians, the action showed that their plea on the President to save them from arbitrary fuel hike actually led to the official consolidation of fuel hike. This brought disappointment and misery and left many Nigerians disillusioned and wondering why things happened this way. Many were ready for a show down.

### **Chastised with Whips or Scorpions: Hailing the Counsel for the Increment in Fuel Price**

Many Nigerians have queried whether the counsel to increase the pump price of petrol by 67% which was adopted by the President in May 2016 was a good counsel. Many have also queried whether President Muhammadu Buhari was wise in accepting such counsel. Has the President, whom the Nigerian people looked forward to, to lighten their burdens, turned back on his promises and rather increased their burdens? Many Nigerians have spoken in favour and against this dictum of removal of fuel subsidy leading to the hike in fuel price.

Those on the side of the president argue that the decision to remove subsidy leading to increase in price for fuel is for the good and wellbeing of the Nigerian people. For example, Osita Okechukwu, an APC chieftain of the South East caucus of the party, defended the wisdom of Buhari in increasing the pump price of petrol. While addressing the APC Zonal Women Summit in Enugu few days after the fuel subsidy removal, he stated that the new pump price introduced has the prospect of cutting down waste in the nearest future and also to make fuel available. Defending the new pump price he stated:

My Dear Compatriots, you must agree with me that what made Mr. President to accept fuel price hike in the midst of abject poverty in the land, despair and despondency; is nothing but the crunchy and dire financial situation - where it is difficult for local, state and federal governments to pay salaries.

We all know that this is a president who never placed personal gains over public good and who will never squander our commonwealth. The true position is that the dwindling oil price and recent militant attack on oil installations have gravely rendered Federal Government cash strapped (Onyeji, 2016).

While applauding President Buhari for approving the fuel hike in spite of its current adverse economic impact on the Nigerian people, he blamed the previous administration as the root cause of the current economic maladies and their adverse effect on Nigerian people.

There are others who defend Buhari's decision to increase price of fuel, but blame his decision on the pressure he received from his courtiers. The above opinion is represented in the statement credited to one of Buhari's officials who stated as follows in anonymity:

The Minister of State for Petroleum, Ibe Kachikwu and state governors prevailed on President Muhammadu Buhari to hike fuel price from N86.50 to N145 per litre .... Buhari, who was concerned about the effect of fuel price hike on the average Nigerian, had strongly resisted the proposal by

Kachikwu for several months but "succumbed reluctantly this month when he (Buhari) was presented with the stark reality of the dropping oil earnings and foreign reserves situation."

Apart from this, "pressure from state governors whose allocation from FAAC has been dropping was also a significant factor that swayed the president. ... Buhari would not have agreed to the new fuel pricing regime if he had not been presented with the compelling evidence that Nigeria's declining foreign earnings from oil would be further devastated unless independent oil marketers and other interested entities are encouraged to import fuel (Wakili, 2016).

The above explanation has been echoed by the president, through his minister of information, Lai Mohammed, that the main reason for the subsidy removal and concomitant hike in the price of petrol was the downward trend in the economic earnings of Nigeria. This is echoed in the words of Lai Mohammed as follows: 'The current problem is not really about subsidy removal ... It is about the fact that Nigeria is broke. Pure and simple' (Kperogi, 2016).

The common point raised by those who support Buhari in adopting the counsel of his courtiers to increase the fuel price by removing fuel subsidy is that it is a wise decision. Even though this decision runs contrary to the cries of many Nigerian citizens who were groaning under economic hardship, it will eventually yield positive results. The fuel hike will eventually lead to the reduction of the burdens on the poor masses. For such people, Buhari has not acted according to the wisdom of Rehoboam who adopted to increase the burden of his people rather than reduce them as well as threatened to chastise them with scorpions instead of whips.

### **Chastised with Whips or Scorpions: Opposing the Counsel for the Increment in Fuel Price**

There are many Nigerian people who opine that Buhari, by increasing fuel price has chastised the people with scorpions. For example the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) Zonal Coordinator of Ibadan, Professor Segun Ajiboye described the increment in the pump price of petrol by the President Muhammadu Buhari-led government as a 'terror policy' (Ogunyemi, et al, 2016). Ajiboye, while addressing a crowd of anti-subsidy removal protesters stated that the pain of Nigerians in the past one year had become unbearable and required a mass anti-terror movement to check it. Also addressing a rally against fuel hike and preparation for nationwide strike action by the labour union, the National Labour Congress (NLC) state chairman, Comrade Waheed Olojede asked Nigerians not to see the strike as a labour struggle alone but a joint movement to check anti-masses policies (Ogunyemi, et al, 2016). In many states across the country ASUU and other affiliate labour unions of the NLC made good their threats as they staged what they called sensitization rally across major streets.

In Kano, a group of activists, Kano Civil Society Forum, protested the increment of petrol price, describing it as an 'inhuman and anti-masses policy'. The protesters who stormed the Kano office of Media Trust Limited, carried placards with inscriptions, "Kachikwu must go", "Removal of subsidy is callous", and "No food for the poor in Ramadan." Speaking on behalf of the protesters, Musa Bashir, the Secretary-General of the group, said they were

opposing the increment because of the pains it would inflict on the poor masses (Ogunyemi, et al, 2016).

If one goes by the description of those who opposed the counsel for increase in the pump price of petrol as ‘terror policy’ that required mass ‘anti-terror movement’ to check it; ‘inhuman and anti-masses policy’, ‘callous policy’ that would ‘inflict pain on the masses’, then this policy could be likened to Rehoboam’s ultimatum. President Buhari could be said to be scourging his poor citizens with scorpions since in the midst of their pains, he endorses a policy that aggravates their pains. But these negative descriptions of this policy appear more sentimental because they do not critically demonstrate the reason why this policy is a callous one. There is need for a more critical analysis of this policy to know whether it is actually a policy that was introduced for the wellbeing of the poor masses or whether it is for the selfish benefit of the ruling class.

Moving beyond sentimental and reactive comments, Kperogi (2016) presented an analysis of this policy to demonstrate that the policy is a selfish policy introduced by Buhari’s courtiers in order to protect their selfish interests. Kperogi stated that Nigeria has a concentric circle of privilege and subsidy regimes. At the heart of this circle are elected and appointed government officials, which include the president, vice president, ministers, numberless coterie of aides and hangers-on, and so on; members of the National Assembly and their aides; governors, their deputies, commissioners, members of state assemblies, etc.; and local council officials.

At the second layer of the circle are a whole host of private sector intermediaries, including fuel subsidy fraudsters who use their privilege to import fuel to dupe the country. They operate in cahoots with some highly placed government officials in the core circle to swindle the nation to pay for their privileges. The next layer is composed of middle-class elements of various stripes who are reasonably buffered from the blows of the political and intermediary classes and whose sympathies vacillate between the oppressors and the oppressed depending on their mood. At the peripheral layer of the circle are the masses, who perpetually bear the brunt of the misery inflicted upon them by people in the first two layers of the circle (Kperogi 2016). According to Kperogi, People in the first two layers of the circle have historically been jealously protective of their subsidies. They consume a disproportionate percentage of Nigeria’s resources. Only the remnants get to people at the lower end of the circle.

Kperogi analysed the truth behind Lai Mohamed’s submission that the real issue is not about the subsidy but that Nigeria is broke. Kperogi used his analyses to buttress his argument that the subsidy removal is a selfish policy, which the ruling class introduced in order ensure that there is enough money and resources at their disposal. This they can use to maximise their wealth and wellbeing at the expense of the masses. In this regard Kperogi stated as follows:

When you hear "Nigeria is broke," it means the subsidies that finance the inordinately lavish lifestyles of people at the core of the concentric circle of subsidy regime are financially threatened. It means, in essence, that remnants that keep the masses in check in the form of salaries are drying up, which might instigate revolt. So what to do? *Tax the poor to pay the poor; rip them off to fund the remnants that keep them in check!* That's why only the poor are called upon to "sacrifice" in moments of economic distress (p. 3) (my italics)

Kperogi further justified his position that those in leadership positions maintain a lavish lifestyle at the expense of the poor by citing some instances

This isn't abstract, conspiratorial theorising; it's real. We have all read the leaked memo by Lai Mohammed asking the National Broadcasting Commission to give him a loan of over N13 million to go on a junket to China. It was his third such request to an organisation that hasn't paid its security guards for months. Former Abia State governor Orji Uzor Kalu also recently told newsmen that the terrible state of our economy is a consequence of the irresponsible self-indulgence of state governors. "Most of the governors... don't even live in their states, honestly. If you look at the books very well, in each trip they make, they will take travelling allowance of N35 million," ... Kalu should know he was one of them. In less than one week after assuming power, Kogi State governor Yahaya Bello, "Premium Times recent investigation showed, approved N250 million for himself as "security vote" and another N148 million to "furnish" and "renovate" his office, yet Kogi State workers haven't been paid their salaries for months.

These anecdotes aren't unique; they are replicated all over Nigeria, including at the federal level. Workers in most states are owed salaries for months on end in spite of federal bailout money they received. Now we are being told states won't be able to pay salaries if pump price of petrol isn't jerked up. What salaries? (p.4).

In his submission, Kperogi pointed out that there was no need to increase the pump price of fuel if those in leadership position were willing to identify with the poor masses by cutting down their lavish lifestyle. He states as follows:

If only the toads ensconced in the inner sanctum of the concentric circle of subsidy regime give up just a little bit of their privileges, there would be no need for the steep fuel price increase being rammed down the throats of people already condemned to the margins of society (p.4).

### **Antecedents of the Nigerian Fuel Subsidy Regime**

Kperogi's analysis opens up various issues that is enclosed within the regime of fuel subsidy in Nigeria. This analyses queries fundamentally the wisdom of Buhari in accepting the advice of his courtiers that fuel subsidy be removed at a time of recession. This was a time when the masses suddenly experienced abject poverty, economic insecurity and instability and cried for help from their leaders, majority of whom live in affluence and clothed with many economic privileges.

It is important to remember that Nigeria started subsidizing its petroleum industry in the late 1970's after the state-owned company, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), had planned to unify the price of crude oil in accordance with the global market. But then-incumbent president, Olusegun Obasanjo, said average Nigerians would not be able to afford a gallon of petrol at the pump. Instead, President Obasanjo introduced subsidy plan to keep the price of petrol low (Muntaga, in Omolade, 2016).

The above shows that the original motive for the introduction of subsidy was to help poor Nigerians live a better life. But along the line there was a deviation from the good motives

for the introduction of fuel subsidy. Ibe Kachikwu, current minister of state for petroleum, while making a case for the removal of fuel subsidy, stated unequivocally that a large volume of petroleum products is diverted by corrupt senior government officials. Kachikwu said these officials connive with marketers and transport owners to divert already subsidized fuel from depots to neighbouring West African countries including Cameroon, Chad, Togo and Benin. He further stated that few months into 2016, Nigeria spent an excess of \$5 billion (4.3 billion euros) on keeping fuel subsidies (Kachikwu, in Mugabi, 2016).

The above submission is a clear indication that the process of subsidizing the petroleum industry was corrupt and hugely inefficient. Unfortunately, those at the centre of this cycle of corruption are those in highly placed government positions who should protect the interest of Nation and that of the poor masses. Because of their wicked activities, fuel subsidy regime no longer alleviates the sufferings of low income earners nor end fuel scarcity. The scarcity leads to arbitrary increase of the price of fuel. So at the end of the day, the poor masses are forced to buy fuel at exorbitant prices rather than at the subsidised price. While Nigerian economy was suffering under subsidy fraud, the fall in the price of crude oil in the international market gave a bigger punch to the revenue of the country. This is because Nigeria's economy relies heavily on oil. But low oil prices at the international market thrust a huge blow on government earnings and rating agencies downgraded the economy. Under these challenges taking a drastic decision to stop fuel subsidy became necessary (Kachikwu, in Mugabi, 2016).

This is not the first time the issue of corruption was posited as a reason to end fuel subsidy. Godluck Jonathan, Buhari's predecessor, cited corruption as a basis for removal of fuel subsidy during his regime. But he failed to actualise this move because of the outcry of the people, both those in privileged positions and the poor masses. During Jonathan's administration, Ribadu committee was among several set up by the Minister of Petroleum Resources then, Diezani Alison-Madueke, following a week of nationwide strikes against the implementation of the removal of fuel subsidy as sanction by Jonathan in January 2012. The outcry led into a campaign against corruption in the oil sector. The report of this committee revealed how some Nigerian elites who were entrusted with privileged positions of authority selfishly engaged in massive sleaze and fraud, which consequently plunged the poor masses into under development (Ribadu, 2012).

These leaders, instead of working together and in solidarity for the wellbeing of the nation, and at the same time being content with the massive wealth and status that such positions offered them, they rather worked together to protect their selfish interests and plunged the masses into severe underdevelopment. Because of their activities, Goodluck Jonathan, decided to remove fuel subsidy in order to mop up revenue for the developmental projects in the country (Igwe, 2012). Jonathan was forced to abandon this campaign because many of those who served in leadership position during his administration opposed the move. Such also sensitised the poor masses to oppose the dictum. At that point Jonathan had to reverse dictum on the removal of fuel subsidy (Igwe, 2012).

From the above sordid incidence of corruption in the oil sector, which is the foremost source of revenue for development in Nigeria, one could say that the motives expressed by Goodluck Jonathan on the necessity for the removal of fuel subsidy seemed genuine and could have enhanced the development of the country if the revenue moped through the removal of fuel subsidy was judiciously applied for the development of the nation. But this

does not remove the fact that common underprivileged people were to be punished for the corruption of the elites in leadership positions and in the oil sector because successive government officials have not controlled the corruption of these elites and those entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring transparency in the oil sector. They were rather perceived as collaborators in this sordid economic misappropriation.

What the above incidence implies is that such Nigerian leaders during this time in review have failed in their responsibility of giving accountability to the people and hence could be indicted as culprits to underdevelopment of Nigeria. Their silence or complacency over the abuse of privileges by the elites in leadership positions and the oil sector could lead to the suspicion that they are benefitting from such corruption. Otherwise, one wonders why leaders who have no stake in such gross violation of positions of authority could remain silent for more than a decade and allow their citizens to suffer underdevelopment while at the same time they promise them that they are working tirelessly for the development of the nation and exhort them to put in their best and bear with the challenges of underdevelopment. This development shows that while those in less privileged position are encouraged to work hard for the wellbeing of the nation, those who occupy privileged positions use their privileged position to ravage the poor masses.

With the above in mind, one wonders why the removal of fuel subsidy, which failed due to massive protests from both the privileged and the underprivileged during Jonathan's regime, when Nigeria flourished with affluence, succeeded during the administration of Buhari when Nigeria suddenly slumped into severe recession. Why did the outcry and protests of the suffering masses fail to make Buhari and his courtiers return to the status quo as was the case during Jonathan's administration. The explanation may lie on the calibre of people who were pushing for the removal of the fuel subsidy. As noted above, they include The Minister of State for Petroleum, Ibe Kachikwu, state governors and many highly placed government officials and leaders in the oil sector. They all concertedly prevailed on President Muhammadu Buhari to hike fuel price from N86.50 to N145 per litre. By this it is clear that the situation has changed from what it was in 2012 during Jonathan's administration. During Jonathan's time, these calibres of people opposed the removal of fuel subsidy and enjoined the poor masses to stand against it.

We have learned that while Buhari was concerned about the effect of fuel price hike on the average Nigerian, and had strongly resisted the proposal by Kachikwu for several months he succumbed "succumbed reluctantly this month when he (Buhari) was presented with the stark reality of the dropping oil earnings and foreign reserves situation." (Wakili, 2016). We also learned that the governors became crusaders for the removal of fuel subsidy because their allocation from the federal allocation account (FAAC) has been dropping.

There is a chain reaction here, which could be explained in a layman's language. The price of crude oil dropped in the international market. With this development the country was no longer making as much profit as it used to make. By the time the federal government adds the cost of fuel subsidy to the reduced profit it is making from the international market, the money becomes even smaller. Since the entire money is now smaller, there is less money to share at the FACC. The states and the ministries that are sharing this money are uncomfortable with this trend. They thought of how to increase the money to be shared. Opportunity cost comes in. There is need to remove the things that are not very important from the shopping list. Fuel subsidy is identified as number one. After all, the president has

already vowed to remove fraud in the oil sector. If he achieves this, the cronies that benefit from it illegally will loose out. The poor masses for whom it was introduced in the first place will be the ones it will make a significant difference in their lives. So in order not to loose out from the inordinate affluence, which many leaders enjoyed during the years of boom in Nigerian oil regime, the governors and the other highly placed stake holders gang up to pressurise President Buhari to end the subsidy regime so that there will be more money available at their disposal.

It is important to note that majority of the present governors, legislators and highly placed government officials served directly or indirectly during the administration of Jonathan. Many of them decamped to Buhari's party when they discovered that Jonathan's party was drowning. They were gladly and robustly welcome and given slots in their new alignment. While serving during the administration of Jonathan, while the economy was still booming, they saw no need to remove subsidy and reinvest the revenue in the interest of the poor masses to prepare for the rainy day. Jonathan's motive to remove the subsidy was born out of the unwillingness of the governors, legislators and highly placed government officials to be transparent with the use application of funds meant for the development of the poor masses during the subsidy regime.

As noted by Kachiwu, there have been massive fraud in the subsidy regime and the people at the centre of this fraud are the governors and other highly placed government officials who connive with unscrupulous marketers to rob the wealth of the nation. With the turn of events, it was becoming clear that this fraud may no longer thrive easily. So a new course has to be devised. This new course was, in the words of Kperogi '*Tax the poor to pay the poor; rip them off to fund the remnants that keep them in check*' (Kperogi, 2016) (*my italics*).

Politics is a game of number. Unlike in many western countries were that number include both the privileged and those who are not privileged, in Nigerian setting, the numbers that normally count in issues like this are those who are in privileges positions of leadership. We are told that Buhari had to sacrifice his plight for the masses in order to appease the ruling class that now clamoured for the subsidy removal which they vehemently rejected during the administration of Jonathan.

#### **Nigerian Fuel Subsidy Removal: A Reflection of Rehoboam's Ultimatum**

Following the ongoing discourse on the removal of fuel subsidy during Buhari's administration, this paper takes the position that this decision is a replica of Rehoboam's ultimatum in some ways. Firstly, Rehoboam's ultimatum came at a time majority of people were experiencing severe hardship. The northern tribes, which were a vast majority during the united Israelite kingdom, were groaning under the forced labour imposed on them by King Solomon and his courtiers. A situation that was becoming unbearable. Since Rehoboam was a new king who is just taking over from his father Solomon, under the Israelite monarchical kingship, it was important for the northern tribes to draw his attention to their plight in order to curry his sympathy. They had a plea and made a commitment to service - lighten the hard labour and heavy load on us and we will serve you. Rehoboam had to consult his courtiers in order to produce an answer. And he answered them according to the advice of his courtiers.

Buhari on his part inherited an administration where majority of the people felt oppressed by the ruling class during the past decades of oil boom. They pleaded that their yoke to be

reduced. The yoke was sustained by the ruling class through corruption that made it difficult for the poor masses to benefit from the dividends of the abundant oil that has earned huge amounts of revenue for the country over the years. Buhari's promise, during his presidential campaign, to reduce systemic corruption and make the living conditions of the poor masses better gave hope to the people. A major yoke, which the poor masses pleaded with Buhari to remove, was the issue of arbitrary fuel hike and unavailability of fuel. This situation worsened by the end of 2015, just few months into Buhari's administration. To deal with this issue, Buhari sought the advice of his courtiers. Their advice was remove fuel subsidy and increase pump price of fuel. Buhari, like Rehoboam acted according to the advice of his courtiers.

Secondly, Rehoboam's ultimatum was against the wishes and the longing of the poor masses to have a king that would reduce their suffering. His response was that their suffering will continue and increase. In the same vein, Buhari's ultimatum was against the longing of the poor masses who were suffering under the effect of arbitrary hike in fuel and its unavailability. Buhari's endorsement of the removal of fuel subsidy implied an official endorsement of the fuel hike as a pre-requisite for making it available to the poor masses. This concomitantly increased the yoke and burden of the masses.

Thirdly, Rehoboam's ultimatum was borne out of the selfishness of his younger courtiers. These courtiers believed that it was their turn to enjoy the dividends of forced labour on the people. The young courtiers looked forward to benefitting from the reign of Rehoboam just as the older courtiers benefited from the reign of Solomon whom they served directly. For such young courtiers, it was a mark of inconsistency and cowardice for the older courtiers to shy away from age long oppressive tradition, which they have benefited from, during the time of Solomon. The flamboyant lifestyle, which Solomon and those who ruled with him enjoyed, could not have been possible if the forced labour was not in place. The roles the forced labour played were, first, to produce and sustain the riches of the kingdom. Secondly, it was used to sustain the loyalty of the people and ensure that they do not revolt.

In the same vein, Buhari's ultimatum was born out of the selfishness of many of the governors, legislatures and highly placed government officials who were worried that paying for the subsidy to alleviate the suffering of the poor masses implied less money at their disposal. Many evidence point to the fact that most money which have been at the disposal of a good number of these governors and their officials were not used to make life better for the people during the previous administration. So far, there are no strong indications that there will be a change in attitude by the ruling class during Buhari's administration.

If many governors and many others in leadership positions owed their workers' salaries for several months and paid no attention to the wellbeing of the suffering masses during a period they received more money from the FAAC, it does not require a prophet to predict that the situation will be worse when they receive less allocation from the FAAC. If the regime of non payment of workers' salaries continues unchecked, it may aggravate the sordid plight of the suffering masses. If this is not checked, there could be a massive revolt, which may negatively affect the ruling class. So in order to protect their interests, those in leadership positions as governors, legislators and highly placed government officials ensured that Buhari implemented their advice, which will ensure that more money is left at their disposal.

Fourthly, Rehoboam's ultimatum was not originally his idea. It was an idea impressed on him by his courtiers. Rehoboam cannot rule alone, there must be some people around him who will help him administer his vast kingdom. In order to succeed, he is bound to listen to them and carry them along while making critical decisions. In most cases he is bound to carry out their mandate as if it was his and take responsibility of the outcome of such decisions – whether good or bad. If the outcome is pleasant, he rejoices with his courtiers over their triumph. But if it goes awry, he will seek another solution together with his trusted courtiers. No leader possesses an ultimate wisdom or infallibility.

In the same vein, removal of fuel subsidy and the concomitant increase in the pump price of fuel was not originally Buhari's idea; in fact he has vehemently opposed this idea in the past during the administration of Jonathan, his predecessor. There is clear evidence that the idea originated from Buhari's courtiers. Buhari's courtiers here include the minister for petroleum, the federal executive council, the governors, legislators and many other stake holders who hold high offices. They appear to be concerted in their voice for the removal of the fuel subsidy, so that more money will be available to them to enable them carry out their duties.

Fifthly, Rehobam's ultimatum led to a revolt from the angry masses who passed a vote of no confidence on Rehoboam and chose an alternative leader who will pay attention to their wishes. This led to a divided kingdom. The vast majority identified as the northern tribes abandoned Rehoboam, while the tribe of Judah condoned Rehoboam's rascality because they risk losing the dynasty God has graciously given to the house of David, which is a gracious gift to the tribe of Judah. In the same vein, Buhari's ultimatum on fuel subsidy irked the masses. Many labour organisations threatened to go on an indefinite strike until the ultimatum was reversed. But unlike in Rehoboam's case, the strike actions was short-lived. People are still grumbling, but Buhari and his courtiers are working hard to convince the suffering masses that the decision will eventually lead to the wellbeing of many of the suffering masses. Time will tell whether this rhetoric is for real.

### **Recommendations**

Following the discussions above, it becomes clear that Buhari's decision to endorse fuel subsidy removal has a resemblance with Rehoboam's ultimatum. Hence, the following recommendations are made:

- Leaders should understand and appreciate the fact that in a democratic setting, people are given more opportunity to state their views. The views of the suffering masses should have been considered before endorsing the removal of fuel subsidy. When cases like this arise in the future, democratic apparatus should be used to checkmate autocracy at all levels of Nigerian government in order to avoid abuse of power.
- Political elites who employ connivance in perpetrating underdevelopment in Nigeria should not be allowed to succeed. This could be done by ensuring that the common good of the Nigerian people is put first before the selfish economic

interests of leaders who divert money that is marked for the provision of amenities for the masses to their personal use.

- The Nigerian government should institute strong apparatus that activate the accountability of those in privileged positions of leadership while they are still in office. This should be applied by removing certain immunity clause that prevents certain probe being launched against certain highly placed public office holders while they are still in office. This could make leaders to be more cautious, responsible and accountable.
- The more money that will be made available to leaders for governance due to the removal of fuel subsidy should be adequately accounted for.
- Since it is evident that the socio-economic quagmire experienced by the masses is a consequence of the corruption of many of their leaders - both past and present, it is important that after public office holders leave office their activities need to be re-examined within the provisions of the law. When this is done properly, it will engender the culture of accountability, thereby encouraging judicious use of resources for good governance.
- Now that those in leadership positions have won the day by removing fuel subsidy, it is important that they placate the angry masses by using the money accruing from the subsidy removal to provide amenities that will alleviate the suffering of the masses. The creative energies of the people need to be harnessed and encouraged through the provision of enabling environment for work and business.
- The angry masses should be patient with their leaders and not take laws into their hands as this could lead to unnecessary loss of lives and amenities without yielding good results.

### **Conclusion**

Many people have queried the wisdom in Buhari's decision to endorse the removal of fuel subsidy, which aggravated the suffering of the masses. Hence, this decision has been likened to Rehoboam's ultimatum which led to a divided kingdom in Israel. Such wished that a revolution that will make Buhari and the ruling class rescind their anti-mass policy be carried out. But many people who smear Buhari's name because of the hardship, which the removal of fuel subsidy inflicted on the masses fail to realise that it was not Buhari's idea to remove fuel subsidy. In fact he resisted the idea, having faulted it during Jonathan's administration. His courtiers who act as his advisors had strong reasons which they presented to the President to make him agree with them. The pressure and reasons seemed compelling. Buhari, fearing being alienated by the same people if he failed to comply with their dictum, succumbed and retracted his promise to wipe away the tears of suffering Nigerians.

One wonders why Buhari was unable to insist on retaining the fuel subsidy by calling on the host of ministers, federal executive council, governors, legislatures, highly placed

government officials and a cognate of oil marketers to make the ultimate sacrifices, which they ask the poor masses to make. Perhaps the real fear is that if Buhari insisted on having his way according to the wishes of his poor masses, the host of his courtiers could abandon him and make the nation ungovernable. If this becomes the case, given the Nigerian political, socio-economic, ethnic and religious landscape, which is highly sentimental and self-centred, will the masses stand in solidarity with Buhari if the retaining of the subsidy did not solve Nigerian socio-economic problems. Is it not possible that the masses could also abandon Buhari if after retaining the fuel subsidy, the socio-economic problems continues to escalate? By then, Buhari would have been a loser at both ends; abandoned by both his courtiers as well as the masses. Perhaps this is where the wisdom in Buhari's decision to follow the advice of his courtiers and not the outcry of the masses lies. There could be positive results from this decision only if the ruling class, having won the day, use the resources at their disposal to alleviate the suffering of the poor masses rather than continuing the tradition of looting resources that should have been used to provide amenities for the common good of both the rich and the poor.

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