

# ACTIVISM AND BELLEISM: THE IMPLICATION FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL EMANCIPATION IN NIGERIA, A STUDY OF THE IJAW YOUTH COUNCIL (IYC).

Michael-Olomu, Oyintonyo<sup>1</sup> & Abejirinde Ayodele Adedeji<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria*  
[michaelolomuoo@fuotuoke.edu.ng](mailto:michaelolomuoo@fuotuoke.edu.ng)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5846-6995>

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, Nigeria*  
[abejirindeayodele@fuotuoke.edu.ng](mailto:abejirindeayodele@fuotuoke.edu.ng)

## Abstract

*The dearth of good governance in Nigeria has resulted in the proliferation of social activism throughout the country, which is primarily manifested through youth organisations or associations with socio-cultural leanings. The purpose of this study is to examine activism and Belleism and their implications for sociopolitical emancipation in Nigeria, with focus on the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). The study interrogates activism in the Niger Delta to ascertain the factors stifling effective social action in the region despite the proliferation of ethnic youth activists and agitators ostensibly seeking positive change for the people. It contends that, rather than being a vehicle for achieving societal altruism, many activists in the region increasingly use activism as a tool for the pursuit of their personal upward socio-political and economic mobility. Participants consisted of members of the IYC and other Ijaw youths. The study uses Robert K. Merton's Anomie theory (1910-2003) as a framework. This study relied on both primary and secondary sources for its data. The study offered a reliable and robust measure of activism and Belleism. The findings show that activism is undoubtedly a political tool used by youth activists to promote Belleism and stomach infrastructure. The paper recommends that activists should use international best practices in advocacy and campaigns for social and political change rather than sacrificing justice for Belleism.*

**Keywords:** Activism, Activist, Belleism, Stomach infrastructure and emancipation.

**DOI:** 10.7176/RHSS/14-2-03

**Publication date:** March 31<sup>st</sup> 2024

## Introduction

The significant demand for the liberation and reorganization of Nigeria's political, economic, and social structure is widely acknowledged. Activists, known for championing justice, accountability, and fairness, are motivated to actively engage and intervene in various social institutions to address societal challenges and steer them towards a more beneficial state for humanity. As a result, this movement has gained considerable momentum. For the past twenty years of uninterrupted democratic rule in Nigeria, the socio-political space has experienced diverse challenges ranging from bad leadership, sustainable governance, environmental pollution etc. The issue of political emancipation may not be engineered by the masses without finding dissatisfaction in the existing structure as it is difficult to deny the broad changes that have swept over Nigeria in the last three decades (Amao & Amaeshi, 2018). Transitioning from periods of notorious military dictatorship in the late 1990s to becoming one of Africa's most resilient democracies within a span of twenty years, the nation has achieved significant advancements as well as democratic challenges along the way (Achebe, 2015).

Interestingly, the challenges that Nigeria faces today represents structural historical facts that can be traced to the country's independence period. Consequently, since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has been plagued by leadership conflicts and a pervasive culture of corruption, characterised by the misuse of public resources for self-gain or other undisclosed motives by those involved. This act has contributed immensely to sucking the nation of its strength and has caused perpetual decline in her economic development, and thus posed a huge challenge and threat to the stability and development of the country.

One clear response to the challenges caused by the absence of good governance in Nigeria is the proliferation of social activism across the country that is mostly expressed through youth organisations or associations with socio-cultural leanings. Okey (2007) asserts that nowadays, young people express their concern for their communities through community services, social activism that manifests around issues such as the environment, joblessness, infrastructural decay, unfavorable policies and political instability. It is further observed that students overwhelmingly consider political activism as an effective way of solving important issues both in their local communities and around the nation (Okey, 2007). Activists are advocates who intervene in society and strive to correct any form of social ill bedeviling an erstwhile peaceful socio-political environment. However, despite the diverse views aired by countless activists in Nigeria, the country is still faced by an onslaught of socio-political discrepancies that threaten to reduce what is left of the system to shambles. Activists in Nigeria operate within Nigerian society and are influenced by current standards. As a result, rather than becoming agents of constructive change, activists have also evolved into politicians and, in some circumstances, become part of the problems they were supposed to fix. In light of the preceding, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role of Belleism, which the work cites as a primary reason of the role transition of activists in Nigeria, using the IYC as an example. But before delving any further into this study, it is pertinent to address a few research questions, namely: 1. what does Belleism mean and how is it related to activism? 2. What is the history of activism in Nigeria? 3. To what extent can we have a transparent and accountable activism by youths in Nigeria? 4. How

does Belleism and stomach infrastructure necessitate a paradigm shift in activism by youths? 5. Is the Ijaw Youth Council model of activism or a reflection of belleism?

## Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

### Conceptual Framework

Belleism is a concept coined from the word ‘belly’ which connotes stomach. In this paper, the word belleism simply represents stomach infrastructure. Stomach infrastructure was taxonomized in African politics and it signifies corrupt practices among others. Although not an entirely new political phenomenon in Nigeria, the term was popularised by Peter Ayodele Fayose, to mean addressing the immediate short term needs of the citizens of a state (Adindu, 2015). It refers to addressing the hues and cries of the people for some time over unpaid salaries, groaning situation over an economic crunch, unemployment, underemployment and poor funding of schools, which can be readdressed through a new agricultural, employment and sustainable development scheme that would make life more meaningful (Olusegun, 2016). As he stated that having roads where there is no money to eat let alone buying of cars for the road is meaningless (Afolabi, Oluwasuji, & Esan, 2019). Aborisade (2015) opined that it is a new metaphor for satisfying electorates; it refers to the practice of the electorate asking to be paid upfront the dividends of democracy in material term. Stomach infrastructure is a reality projected by the Nigerian politicians on the vulnerable electorate who, for poverty, are encouraged to mortgage their fundamental right of freedom to choose who governs them in exchange for immediate gratification (Onwuka, 2022). However, in the context of this paper, belleism is viewed slightly differently as captured in Figure 1.1 below.

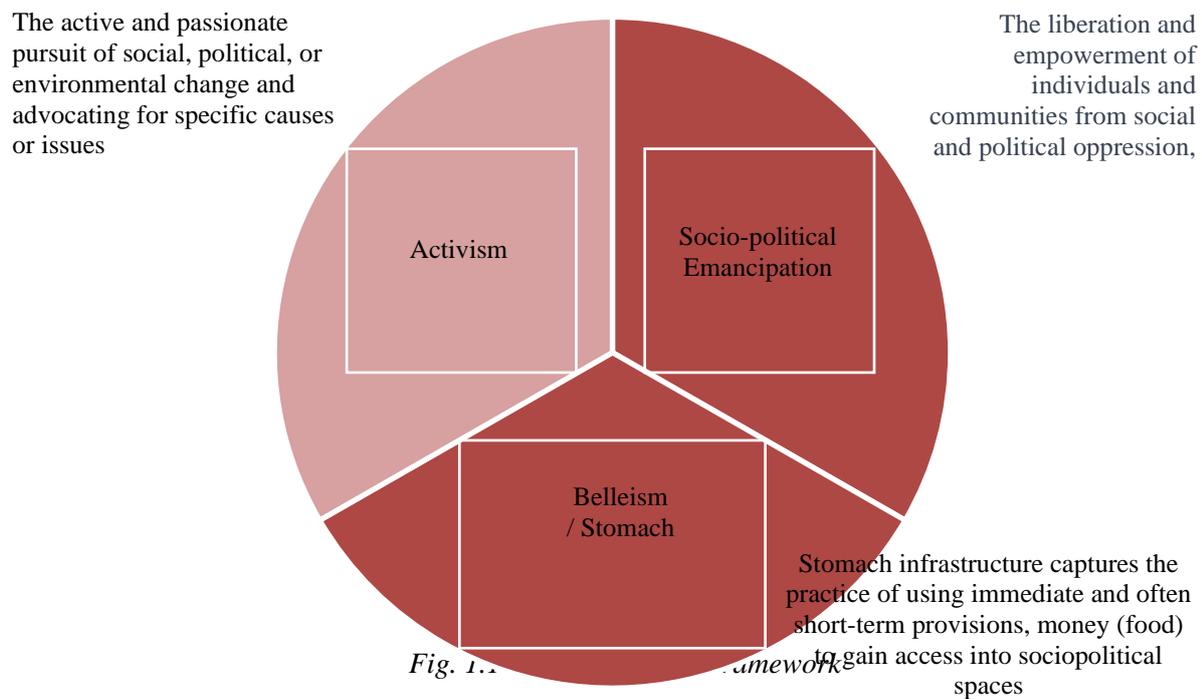


Fig. 1.1 Conceptual Framework

The Figure shows the link between activism and belleism especially based on the logic that youths who engage in activism in Nigeria tend to do so for their stomach's sake especially through sociopolitical gratification. Therefore, activists compromise their core responsibility of advocating for truth and addressing societal problems for short-term gains, using activism as a means to secure political positions and awards. In doing so, they may become beholden to the powerful entities supporting them, leading to a decline from genuine activism to becoming mere puppets, prioritizing personal benefits over the pursuit of meaningful change.

In Nigeria activism appears to be a vague activity, you can hardly define what actually constitutes activism or what it takes to become an activist. This is why despite some decent efforts; we are still struggling to bring out significant and impacting relevance out of our different non-governmental struggles to change the course of events in this country. Although, activism generally encompasses any action aimed at instigating social or political change, for the purpose of analyzing the Nigerian context, we will narrow it down to activities employed by individuals expressing disagreement with the government or its actions. The absence of a clear framework for activism has resulted in almost any form of anti-government activity, regardless of its significance, being labeled as activism in contemporary times. This is the reason why the boundaries between partisanship, opposition, advocacy, struggle, criticism, character assassination, abuse, irresponsibility and even treason is very blurred and indistinctive.

The conflicting methods of carrying out these acts of activism are even more unclear, confusing and indistinguishable. This perhaps may be partly responsible for the reason why government find it so easy to declare groups as terrorists and dissenting voices as enemies. As clearly seen in the case of Omoyele Sowore, a political activist and also formerly the presidential candidate of the African Action Congress (AAC) in the 2019 elections, who was arrested prior to his "revolution now march" protest, which aim was to call on Nigerians across the six geopolitical zones to come out in their numbers to protest against what he termed bad governance and worsening insecurity in the land (Ezinwa, 2019).

We cannot deny the fact that the position of activism in our society today is more of an avenue to get fame, relevance and money rather than the desired change it appears to be yearning for. The patriotism and sincerity required to change a country is simply lacking in our brand of activism. This is why everyone with a substantial following on social circles, no matter how ignorant or uninformed will quickly declare himself an activist (comrade) and begin to see his opinion as an authority which attracts strong rebuke when challenged.

It is also glaringly clear that many of our so-called critics are using activism as a platform to make inroads into politics especially when the conventional way of doing so is dotted with so many barriers which they don't have the financial and political power to overcome. So many of them can be seen vying for political offices after rising to fame with their self-acclaimed activism and dissenting out at the system by tagging it corrupt and unfair, when they are not given the positions vied for. This is why we see many so-called activist accepting positions in governments that are clearly at variance to what they claim to stand for. It is also not unconnected with why so many of these activists failed in government when called to serve. For these reasons, we see activism working and leading to change of regimes in many continents including Africa, while it is close to insignificant down here in Nigeria as a result of the notion of "belleism" which has eaten up the mindset of most political activists.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To further analyze and get a clearer view of the notion of belleism that has wormed its way into the political activism of today, Robert K. Merton's (1910-2003) anomie theory is adopted as the framework. The theory basically assumes that in society, there are culturally approved goals, as well as culturally approved means to achieve these goals. Society falls into a state of anomie (a state of lawlessness), when the means to achieve these goals that all desire are blocked and made unavailable to a group of individuals or the masses. These individuals that are deprived of these means end up seeking for other ways to adapt to the society wherein they find themselves. Merton identified five methods of adaptation, which are; conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. All these methods include; accepting, rejecting or creating other means to achieve the desired goals of society. Of the five (5) methods, the method of innovation which happens to entail a strong drive or desire for the culturally approved goals, but due to the inability to access the means necessary to realize these goals, individuals create or come up with other means, not necessarily approved by society to achieve their goals, is what this paper will narrowly focus on.

In Nigeria, politics has become a do or die affair, as most individuals believe that all the wealth of the country resides in the state power, and to become wealthy, one has to be a part of this state power, therefore politics becomes a culturally approved goal with the approved means being to participate in electoral activities of campaigning and elections. But due to the fact that the electoral process has become corrupted and is laced with malpractice, rigging and vote buying etc, it has now become a game that only the rich and connected can play, thereby barring the means from the poor masses, some people have adopted the method of innovation by creating other means to achieve this do or die political affair. This new means, in the context of this paper is 'activism' or political activism. By using activism to create brand awareness and acquire fame through which connections are formed, individuals are appointed or rise to political power, thus using the new means of activism to realize the cultural goal of a political position, and in so doing the original purpose of activism is forgotten and abandoned for the notion of belleism, using activism to rise to a political position to fill your belly. One scholar refers to this as the making of militia bourgeoisies which reflects a situation where conflict actors in the guise of fighting for self-determination in the Niger Delta region gradually make inroad into wealth through political and economic contracts (Raimi, 2018).

## Transparency and Accountability in Activism: The Right Way

Activism is not a secluded or hidden phenomenon; it is rather extroverted, and involved in the generation of public events (Svirsky, 2018). Most activists are well known for their enthusiasm to encourage others, mainly the public to engage in their propagandas; this is mainly done through posting of their practices as well as experiences through internet sites, the traditional method of distributing printed materials to the public or the more popular avenue of today's social media platform. The version of activism which is more prevalent today always seems to take the form of a paranoid reaction towards the world and its systems. Activism is not about leading or supporting struggles but about dwelling actively in the situation, investigating it with a view to the emergence of an alternative sociability Colectivo (as cited in Svirsky, 2018). Filming experiences to display to the public and spearheading protests to protect the rights of weakened groups, in order to gain sympathy or amass prizes is not enough. Rather there should be investigative research for alternative solutions to the problem, as protests inevitably results in sadness due to either loss of lives or destruction of properties.

Nigeria has a long history of activism. In the 1990s, organizations such as the Civil Liberties Organization and United Action for Democracy led the movement against military rule, mobilizing citizens to take a stand and organizing demonstrations in the streets. Labor unions have also been at the forefront of major changes, including on various economic and social policies such as government subsidies and labor regulations. Nigerian civil society has been actively pushing for democratic change and other reforms for generations. A new emerging wave of activism has been making its mark, however. Activism can take many forms, from boycotts and stay-aways to letter-writing campaigns, but protest is a tactical mainstay and its most visible form.

In Nigeria, annual counts of protests have surged from at most a few dozen from 2000 through 2012 to well over four hundred between 2013 and 2021 (World population Review, 2021). New demands have emerged as the driving force behind the numerous demonstrations, leading Nigerians to engage in collective action with a persistence and scale reminiscent of the mobilizations witnessed during the fight against military rule in the 1990s. Additionally, Nigerians have shown a clear inclination towards engaging in collective action endeavors as a means to address the issue of corruption. When asked to choose the most effective way to combat corruption, they indicate that they are far more inclined to support advocacy organizations, protests, political candidates who prioritize anticorruption, educational campaigns or other forms of collective action over reporting corruption to state institutions or simply tolerating it (Amenta et al 2010). Of note is the Twelve Day Revolution led by Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro in 1966, which also marked the beginning of the revolt in the Niger Delta Region. The revolution was a means to free the region from the oppression, underdevelopment and neglect it had suffered (Ipkorukpo, 2018).

This is not to imply that every protest in Nigeria is triggered by a corruption scandal or demands for transparency and accountability. However, taken together, this broad proclivity towards collective actions to combat corruption, along with a recent surge in protest activity in Nigeria, a good example of which is the #ENDSARS# protest of October 2020, suggests that the foundation for a broader transparency and accountability movement may be emerging, but recently reverse is the case as most activist have imbibed the notion of "Belleism". The IYC is a noble movement founded with the goal of liberating the Ijaw ethnic group from exploitation, marginalisation, and exclusion from Nigeria's larger picture, while the oil and gas resources produced on its soil feed the country. Despite efforts by a few members to strengthen it, the organisation appears to have lost its purpose and status over time. This decline is mostly due to the hijacking and politicisation of the body by self-serving activists. Thus, IYC elections have become as hotly contested as state government elections, with all of the concomitant unpleasantness, resulting in the Council's polarisation and fractionalization following almost every election. Almost all recent IYC elections have produced competing Executives, each claiming to be the actual government, resulting in litigation and friction (Channels, 2013; Utebor, 2017, Dania, 2017; Ogunde, 2020; TNN, 2023). Many of those who struggle fiercely to enter into IYC positions do so because of the opportunities they envisage in advancing their personal sociopolitical and economic goal and not to serve the purpose of the Council. This attempt to seize the structures of a popular ethnic organisation for personal gain highlights Belleism its pervasive influence on activism in the Niger Delta because of their maniacal desire to acquire access to IYC positions, many young activists form partnerships with politicians at the state and federal levels, who utilise their immense financial clout to facilitate their election in exchange for their subservience once in power.

Thus, in Bayelsa, for example, while Ijaw youths under the umbrella of IYC have worked hard to prevent price increases on goods by owners of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), they almost never criticise or critique the actions of the state government, even in the face of obvious hardship or poor governance. This is not surprising given that there is a strong nexus between the IYC's elite recruitment process and its officials' capacity to act as an effective vehicle of social change and sociopolitical advancement by advising their benefactor's governments on how to improve service delivery.

These activists often avoid offending their governmental sources to office in order to be coopted into the mainstream government when the opportunity arises. Thus, some former IYC officials have been appointed to government positions or elected to parliament. This provides an incentive for others to pursue similar political career trajectories, thereby creating more opportunities for Belleism than activism.

## History and Evolution of Activism in Nigeria

Throughout Nigeria's historical evolution, activism has been a critical component of the political tools used in eliminating oppression and all forms of injustice. Prior to the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, there has been some form of unstructured activism targeted against historical traditional monarchs whose values and policies were oppressive (Erhagbe,2002). For

instance the Oyo empire was known for its principle of check and balance, that encourages the removal of an autocratic traditional ruler through activism which culminated the presentation of a calabash with a pigeon egg. This process symbolizes the banishment of a powerful traditional ruler through activism as initiated by the palace chiefs (Ajayi, 2002)

The rich history of activism in Nigeria cuts across the political spheres and industrial relation sector of the country (Agbash, et al 2020). The actions and inactions of various activist in Nigerian history has enabled the country to conquer the ills associated with colonialism, military dictatorship and oppressive democratic governments ( Mohammed, 2017). The contributions of prominent activists and nationalists, including Samuel Akinsanya, Ernest Ikoli, Dr. J. C. Vaughan, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, played a crucial role in facilitating Nigeria's decolonization process (Nzemke & Erhagbe, 2002). Also, reputable Nigerians such as Fumilayo Ransome Kuti, who co-founded the Abeokuta Women's Union in 1940 and led a women's protest against colonial taxation in 1946, and the Aba Women, whose activism sparked the famous Aba Women Riot of 1912 in response to the British colonial government's excessive tax regime, have also left significant imprints on the nation's history. Activism during the colonial Nigeria war targeted against the political oppression and economic exploitation that characterizes the British colonial regime After the demise of the colonial government and advent of self-government in 1960 activism in Nigeria went through some modification process as a result of the incompetence, corruption, oppression, and misrule that was typical of the first republic. Activism emanated from labour union and notable individuals like Fela Ransom Kuti, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe, all used their music talent and writing skill to challenge bad leadership as at then (Mohammed, 2017; Nwoko ,2009). The formation of trade union in Nigeria gave impetus to activism and its impact in checking oppressive governance in the country . Trade union afflicted such as the Trade Union Congress, Nigeria Labour Congress, Academic Staff Union of Universities, National Union of Teachers, Nigerian Medical Association, etc were formed both in the civil regime and the long military dictatorial regimes to address the dysfunctional governance system as it were (Girigiri,1999). Hence activism in Nigeria between (1979-1998) had to confront the totalitarian military junta, especially in the area of human right abuse, corruption, mismanagement, and bad governance (Agbashi et al,2020).

Activism on the part of labour union such as ASUU, civil society groups and notable social critic and human rights fighters such as Ken Saro-wiwa, Femi Falana, Beko Kuti were able to checkmate and reduce the excesses of the military government. Note, is the effort and achievements of (NADECO) in been able to force the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida, General Sani Abacha and General Abdulsalami Abubakar to transit Nigeria into democratic rule. Politicians and social critics who were actively involved in NADDECO such as PA Abraham Adesanya, Chief Alex Ekueme, Chief Bola Ige, Bola Ahmed Tinubu Shehu Sanni etc. Most of all these activists later moved on to join political parties and were actively involved in the democratic Processes that was ushered in civilian government in 1999 and till date (Akinremi, 2021).

However, activism under civilian dispensation have manifested in the form of labour union agitations designed to press home good governance and check hurtful economic policies such as hike in fuel price and human right abuses. For instance, the onetime Labour leader, Adams Oshiomole was famous for fighting the government on policies that could impoverish the workers. Besides, in recent times there has been an upsurge in activism against police brutality and human right abuse. The most popular that attracted global attention is the End-SAR protest. The social protest against police highhandedness drew a large population of youth across major cities and towns in Nigeria intended to draw the attention of government against the social ills of human rights abuse. It is worthy of note that the 2020 End-SAR protest led to the emergence of a new form of activism, tagged social media activism, in Nigeria.

### **Belleism and activism; A paradigm shift driven by stomach infrastructure**

Stomach infrastructure is a concept that crept into Nigeria's political lexicon as a building towards the 2014 governorship election in Ekiti State, when the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate Mr. Ayodele Fayose campaigned on the promise of the provision of food items and cash and eventually defeated the then incumbent APC governor Kayodele Fayemi. It is a political strategy deployed by politicians to prey on the vulnerability of fellow politicians and voters, especially during election by offering them food, money, and political position for patronage (Macdonald, 2023).

Advocates for stomach infrastructure are of the opinion that the government cannot be investing heavily on physical infrastructure when the stomach is empty. Hence, money politics and vote buying have taken the centre stage in Nigerian political activities (Ezinwanne, 2022). Belleism in the context of this paper is synonymous to the idea and politics of a stomach infrastructure; a phrase used to describe the importance of food and money politics or strategy in luring vulnerable voters, political opponents and apathetic citizens to do their biddings.

Furthermore, Belleism can be referred to as the political strategy deployed by politicians as a way of offering political opponents' contracts and monetary reward deployed to induce perceived opposition or political enemies (Sanni, 2019). In this case, activists through their criticism and protest against a dysfunctional and oppressive governance are tactically silenced when juicy offers are presented to them by corrupt politicians the short and long effect of adopting Belleism to cow vibrant activists in Nigeria is that good governance and accountability is compromised. (Macdonald, 2023). Besides the political paradigm shift into Belleism and stomach infrastructure has hampered the socioeconomic and sustainable development of communities and constitutes where this brand of politics is practiced (Tade, 2019). The stomach infrastructure strategy as manifested in Belleism is transient and undermines our democracy and cripples the functionality of the fourth estate of democracy which is the voice of a vibrant opposition.

A cursory look at Nigeria's political experiment reveals that quite a number of effective activist and activism had been bought over by successive governments through Belleism strategy. For instance, novelist Wole Soyinka who was Known to be an activist and social critique of General Ibrahim Babangida's regime, was eventually bought over when the then military Junta offers him a political post as the pioneering controller general of Nigeria Road Safety Commission (NRSC). Belleism and stomach infrastructure strategy was effectively deployed to cripple the activism in Wole Soyinka. Other notable activists that fell prey of political strategy of Belleism include the likes of former labour union leaders Adams Oshiomohole, Human rights lawyer Festus Kenyamo, the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) campaigner; Mrs. Amina Mohammed, and many more. At a point in time Senator Shehu Sanni, known for his courage to speak truth to power was incapacitated by the lure of Belleism. (Mohammed, 2017; Akezua, 2019). His journey to active politics as a senator representing Kaduna central severed his relationship with activism. The political largeness of being a Nigerian congress man kept him quiet throughout the first term of President Buhari's incompetent regime that was mired by human right abuses and disregard for the rule of law.

The negative effects of Belleism and stomach infrastructure is no doubt affecting the vibrancy of activism in Nigeria. The functional role of activism as the forth eye of democracy and good governance is been undermined severely (Chukuemeka, 2009). Platforms for activism such as The Nigerian labour congress which has been actively involved in querying government policies that bothers on fuel price like, exploitative privatization policies, and commercialization of public assets has been lately compromised by Belleism. The recently outgone Labour union leader comrade Ayuba Wabba was known to be a stooge of APC the ruling party, and a kitchen cabinet of the former president, Muhammadu Buhari. It is a known fact the former NLC leader had huge slots of political appointments in numerous federal ministries and parastatals (Ezinwanne, 2022). This explains why NLC under his tenure was greatly undermined and largely ineffective. The natural role of the Nigerian Labour congress as an activist became non-functional. The previous government misrule as manifested in nepotism, insecurity, corruption, policy somersault, bad monetary policies, etc. went unchecked (Sanni, 2022). At the end, the citizens and the economy became the victim of the bad leadership resulting from absence of robust activism. Belleism, in the long run is the bane of social-economic development and good governance in Nigeria and by extension developing countries of Africa.

#### **The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) Model: Political Activism or Belleism**

The Ijaws (Izon-otu) are the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, and the 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the federation, with a population of over seven million (Okolo, Apkokighe & Igbokwe, 2014). Ijaw clusters exist in six of the federation's thirty-six states, including Ondo, Edo, Akwa-Ibom, Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa. Since 1998, the Niger Delta region, also known as Nigeria's oil belt, has seen an ongoing and widespread ethnic and regional fight for self-determination. This area has been a hotspot for violent clashes between local ethnic communities and the Nigerian state, as well as oil firms involved in oil extraction and exploitation in the region (Osaghe, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye & Okhonmina, 2007).

On December 11, 1998, hundreds of youths from around the Niger Delta, all of whom were Ijaw, assembled in Kaiama to form the Ijaw Youth Council. The IYC, a new influential organisation created by Oronto Douglas, Asume Osuoka, and others, had brought together youths from all over Ijaw country in a peaceful but forceful opposition to the region's exploitative actions by oil firms and the federal government (Okonta 2006). Its goal is to coordinate the Ijaw people's struggle for self-determination and justice. The IYC was established to confront the acute impoverishment, terrible public health conditions created by the ecological destruction problem, exclusion from resource management, and socio-political discontent arising from the activities of the federal government and multinational oil corporations in Ijaw territories. According to Argenti (cited in Osaghe et al., 2007), youths make society by acting as a political force, as sources of resistance and resilience and as ritual or even supernatural agents and generators of morality and healing through masquerade and play. The Niger Delta struggle has been shaped by the sacrifices and contributions of remarkable youth leaders of the past who continue to be revered today, including figures like Major Isaac Jasper Boro, who spearheaded the twelve-day revolution alongside his comrades, and Ken Saro-Wiwa, who led the movement for the survival of the Ogoni people. The question that stands to be answered then is 'where are the Adaka Boro's and the Saro-Wiwa's of the IYC today? How far have the IYC gone in fulfilling the Kaiama declaration of 1998? And finally, can the IYC leaders of today be called political activists? Or have they withdrawn into 'belleism'.

Glowacki and Von Reuden (2015) refer to leaders as individuals who are given differential influence within a group over the establishment of goals, logistics of coordination, monitoring of effort, or reward and punishment. Ken Saro-Wiwa's powerful rhetoric, for example, told stories through the process of mobilizing grievances particularly about the historical neglect and marginalization of the Ogoni group about their past, their present and their future, what was to be feared, and struggled against (Messick, 2005). Not all IYC leaders have the genuine interest of the organization at heart, neither are they fighting an Ijaw cause, they are more concerned about their financial interest and how they can upgrade their political careers following the principle of 'Belleism' which Raimi (2017) referred to as benefit captor mentality. We have genuine leaders concerned with the freedom of the Ijaw in the Niger Delta; some are armed while others are intellectual. Some are into oil bunkering to fund the armed struggle. We have leaders by day and political thugs by night, those who are into armed struggle but rent out their services to politicians to achieve power. On the other hand, you have leaders by day and criminals by night, reflecting those who are in the armed struggle, but commit the odd crimes on the side acquire riches and maybe fund the armed struggle (Benatari, 2010).

Nevertheless, most recent Ijaw youth activist have used activism to climb the socio-political ladder and even pursuing and becoming political thugs as they are used to pursue the interests of politicians thereby affirming belleism against agitations for good governance. Also of note is a former president of the IYC, who recently ran as the labor party Governorship candidate for the 2023 Bayelsa Gubernatorial election which to held on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November (Busari, 2023). Eradiri served a

commissioner in the government of Seriake Dickson that facilitated his election as IYC President (George, 2013; Oduma, 2018). This is a classic example of the link between the recruitment process of the IYC leadership and their coopting into government posts that incentivises others to follow the same blueprint. There are many other examples of IYC Presidents and officials who have gone on to take up political appointments in the states. Felix Tuodolo, Dr Chris Ekiyor, Oronto Douglas, Alfred Kemepado, Famous Daunemigha, are a few other examples. It should be highlighted that this study is not opposed to the promotion of activists to higher-level public offices. Thus, the instances offered above are intended to establish a trend of elite recruitment of activists into public posts via the IYC, not to condemn their participation in government. However, it should be recognized that once activists accept such positions, they convert into politicians with vested interests in defending the status quo and cease to be agents of change.

Activism has evolved over time into one of the most reliable means of social mobility in the Niger Delta region. Many former prominent activists/agitators have gone into political roles, joining the State structures they previously criticised or 'fought' against. A thorough investigation of the recent political histories of several Niger Delta states would reveal a pattern of activists migrating into public office, including executive and legislative roles. From Bayelsa to Rivers and Delta States, to name a few, activists have established a pattern of serving as Commissioners, Advisers, and members of the House of Assembly and/or National Assembly. (Dickson 2019). This has turned activism into a lucrative industry, which many youths now regard as a sure path to self-aggrandization and the pursuit of other parochial interests. This has resulted in a climate in which activism is primarily motivated by Belleism and the desire for personal wealth rather than real efforts to effect meaningful change in the interest and general good of the community.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the nexus between activism and belleism, or stomach infrastructure, with a focus on how this creates sycophantic struggles among youths who only feel obligated to be purchased with economic and political rewards. This was done with the Ijaw Youth Council as a case study. Based on this, the study concludes that the political approach of Belleism and stomach infrastructure, which is presently popular among young IYC activists, is manifestly futile and harmful to democracy and good governance. Belleism in all of its forms is a strategy to silence activism and corrupt the voice of opposition, which is an important component in any democratic organisation. In the long run, the people and citizens are the victims of these anti-human political practices, as the fruits of democracy become illusive and good governance becomes a mirage.

While the government must balance justice and tolerance when dealing with criticism, activists must also exercise prudence and responsibility. Governments are made up of real people with feelings and families. It is only normal for citizens to be concerned when putative activists transform into sycophants and spokespersons for their perceived oppressors, spreading falsehoods and half-truths about them. People must be well-informed before discussing matters. For activists to make any significant progress in influencing how things are done in this country, they must get rid of the bad eggs among them; those who are all out to abuse and assassinate the character of responsible people simply because they have freedom of expression or because such people are in power or politics.

Citizens must never stand up for or support activists who are blatantly immoral or whose motivations have been proven to be self-centered and self-serving. Society should not continue to praise people while they are spreading abuses against leaders, just to start pushing for their release after they are detained. Critics must be willing to tolerate and accept criticism.

Another critical aspect is to follow international best practices in advocacy and campaigns for social and political reform. We should not praise and critique mindlessly; instead, we should learn to agree with and support the administration when it is appropriate. Our preoccupation should not be limited to the government and politicians alone. We have so many anti-people tendencies in the private sector, as well as numerous social ills that are mostly overlooked. To have a real impact, activists must be disciplined, organised, and focused, as well as have sustainability and non-political alignment. Nigerian activists appear to lack coherence; their activities are disorganised, uncoordinated, and short-lived. When they do get together, their incompatibility owing to individual biases becomes insurmountable. Overall, no activism can transform a society until its fundamental principles are solidly established. As a result, this paper contends that activism in Nigeria is now a shadow of what it was decades ago, as "Belleism" has transformed a large percentage of Nigerian political activists into glorified attention seekers, impeding the true cause of political emancipation in the country.

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