

# **The 1991 NANS Academic Reform Campaign (ACAREF), the Destruction of a Movement for an Inclusive Educational System and a Genuine Democratic Society and the Pathway to the Future**

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## **The Background to ACAREF**

**There** is no way we can discuss the NANS Academic Reform Campaign of 1991 without doing a brief historical analysis of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), a radical student movement which in a critical conjuncture of our history evolved as the most important voice for a democratic society and a democratic, accessible educational system funded from public purse and managed effectively by a minimally nationalist, if not socialist governmental structure that had succeeded in weaning the national economy from the global imperialist order.

**The** National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) was formed in July 1980 at a meeting of students' representatives and activists across the country held at the Yaba College of Technology, Lagos after the proscription of the former students' movement, the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) in 1978 by the Obasanjo regime, after the nation-wide students' unrest of that year. NANS main objectives were encapsulated in the NANS Charter of Demands which was launched in December 1982. The major objective of the charter is the democratization of all levels of education in Nigeria.

**The** concept of democracy in education, according to NANS, is hinged on three factors. These are adequate funding of the educational institutions from the primary to tertiary level, to the extent that every Nigerian is well educated (not just the ability to read and write). Second, is on the relevance of education to those receiving it and third, is the enthronement and consolidation of the democratic culture in schools, in terms of participatory decision-making and the autonomy of the institutions (NANS, 1982). The Charter reflected on the authoritarian nature of the inherited neo-colonial educational system which itself was a mirror of the entire society as one that is biased against the mass of the people, as it perpetuates gross social inequalities, mass poverty and is ruled by foreign capital.

**The** Charter insists that socio-economic justice and equity should form the basis of democracy. This direct linkage between the crisis bedeviling the educational system and the challenge of perpetual underdevelopment and social inequality pervading society necessitated that NANS would forge strategic alliances with democratic forces outside the campuses. The Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) then led by Hassan Sunmonu, established lasting bonds with the students as well as the ASUU. It is the NANS Charter of Demands therefore that provided the minimal theoretical framework for the momentous struggles of Nigerian students through the 1980s up till the mid 1990s when the Nigerian state succeeded in destroying this movement.

**The** NANS Charter was a manifest demonstration of the finest tradition of youthful idealism and dogged commitment to a just and egalitarian society; an objective that could never be realized without the right of every Nigerian to a functional liberatory education.

### **The Theoretical Planks of the NANS Charter**

**At** the heart of the NANS Charter is the principle of democratization of education with a view to make it accessible while its dissemination necessarily engages both learner and teacher in a pedagogical process that questions all orthodoxies while facilitating a free functionally liberatory environment capable of unleashing the imagination to express innermost impulses for all round development. It follows in the traditions of Paulo Freire and his commitment to a pedagogy that factors in the experiential knowledge of the learner with a view to arrive at very practical solutions that reflect realities and solve problems. In this schema, the process of education is crucially important for it must transcend the traditional teacher – student interaction to embrace a two-way communication that fosters initiative, creativity, and criticism with a view to achieve the acquisition of attitudes and dispositions, knowledge and skills that are individualized and critically thoughtful. Like Kathy Emery, echoing Freire and Dewey puts it “For democratic education to take place, ideals have to replace standards, and teachers have to understand the purposes and interests of their students. They have to teach students how to pose their own problems and solve them democratically, in groups”.

**The** Charter also insists that education must be accessible and to achieve this, it must be free and well funded. In this vein, one of the recurrent demands was for government to reflect the UNESCO recommendation that a minimum of 26% of the annual income of a nation be committed to education.

**Finally**, the Charter also affirms that administration and governance of the educational system must be participatory and open. This means that organs of university administration, from the governing councils to the various boards and committees that run the university system must have the direct participation and inputs of students. The Charter also reflects on the need for the production and reproduction of knowledge to take place in an environment of academic freedom which encapsulates the ‘right to tenure/studentship, freedom of association and university autonomy. These are necessary for unfettered production of knowledge and its free flow in the society.’ (Y. Z. Yau, ASUU)

### **NANS Struggles in the 1980s**

**NANS** struggles in the 1980s mirrored its overarching commitment to the ideals of the Charter. The first major clash with the state after the historic 1978 ‘Ali Mon Go’ protests which directly led to the banning of the NUNS, NANS immediate precursor, was recorded in 1986. The Vice Chancellor, Ango Abdullahi. Ango Abdullahi was reputed to be a very autocratic Vice Chancellor,

who in his around six-year tenure in office, expelled and suspended about 160 students (ASUU, 1986:11). Although there was a constellation of factors contributing to the crisis, the immediate cause of it was that the Students Union, following the directive of NANS, sought to commemorate the 1978 “education jihad”, in memory of their colleagues slain during the popular uprising. For the event, the students duly sought and obtained permission from the school authority to stage a peaceful rally, which they did on April 21, 1986.

A regulation at the ABU forbade male students from entering female hostels, but this was done during the rally, which the Vice Chancellor construed as an affront to his authority and the laws of the university. Consequently, some student union leaders were rusticated, while some others were suspended. Outraged by the school authority’s decision, the students organised a rally on May 22. In response, the Vice Chancellor invited the police to quash the “revolt”. The clash which ensued between the police and the students left four students dead, including a female student. The callous killing of the ABU students on their campus by the police ignited a wildfire of mass demonstrations, riots and violence in most tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The students, who engaged the police in street battles in the major cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Ife and Kaduna were actively supported by different groups of people—commuter drivers, motor park-touts, the unemployed, the workers and market women.

**This** brutal action of the police was also condemned by most organisations and interest groups in the civil society. However, the decision of the Federal Government on the crisis, was not to assuage the aggrieved students, but rather, to impose punitive measures on the students, their teachers and the organisations sympathetic to the cause of the students, like the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC). For example, some universities and polytechnics were shut down for over six months for their role in the crisis (e.g. Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, and Kaduna Polytechnic), Students Union activities were suspended on all campuses, NANS was proscribed, ASUU disaffiliated from the NLC, through Decree 17 of 1986 and some labour leaders were arrested and detained for about two weeks.

### **The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and Political Escalation of the NANS Struggle**

**The** NANS struggle for a democratized educational system and a democratic society escalated sharply with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the Babangida junta in 1986. By the middle of the 1980s, Nigeria came to be afflicted by a devastating economic crisis, manifesting in increasing indebtedness, falling production levels leading to a systematic deindustrialization and the rapidly declining purchasing power of the incomes of the Nigerian workers due to hyperinflation. Unlike the Buhari military junta that it overthrew, the Babangida regime introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which it said would halt economic stagnation and revitalise growth. The essential elements of SAP included currency devaluation and exchange rate deregulation; cuts in public expenditure especially in the social

services sector and so called removal of subsidies on state provided goods and services; and privatisation and commercialisation of public enterprises and services.

**According** to Professor Attahiru Jega, ‘the Babangida regime pursued the implementation of the SAP ardently, with rapid and dramatic, if not profoundly devastating, consequences for the Nigerian political economy. The result was little, if any, curbing of waste in the management of the economy and in the operation of the government, with the manufacturing sector experiencing persistent decline in capacity utilisation, and the economy recording large overall fiscal deficits. The economic growth rate was inconsequential, falling to 1.5 per cent in 1993 while GDP growth virtually stagnated (World Bank, 1995:149). Similarly, the country continued to be pressed down by a heavy external debt burden which rose from \$19.5 billion in 1985 to around \$30 billion by the end of 1994 (World Bank, 1995:151). In addition, the period witnessed a phenomenal rise in inflation, reaching triple digits in 1994, as well as increased job losses and insecurity.

**The** cost of education and healthcare sky-rocketed; whatever indicators are used to assess the impact of SAP, the picture invariably looks grim and disconcerting. Clearly, the combined impact of the socio-economic crises and SAP exposed the Nigerian state as reckless, insensitive, and irresponsible, if not structurally weak and incapable of meeting its basic obligations to the Nigerian people. The prebendal, patrimonial as well as authoritarian manner by which the state tried to suppress and contain popular agitations against its management of the economic crisis, rather than strengthen it, objectively further eroded its legitimacy and efficacy. The reaction, or response, of civil society to the state, in turn, contributed to the acceleration of the process of the decomposition of the state. For example, a national, Nigerian, civic identity, imbued with patriotism and accepted, uncontested obligations to the state, virtually disappeared.” (See *THE STATE AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION UNDER STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN NIGERIA* by Attahiru Jega in *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria* edited by Attahiru Jega, Nordiska Afrikan Institutet, and CRD, Kano, 2000)

**The** major showdowns of the ‘80s between the NANS led student and youth movement and the Babangida junta took place in 1988 and 1989 when nation-wide students’ demonstrations and protests directly related to the SAP policies of the state rocked the very fabric of the nation. The 1988 was ignited by an increase in the price of petroleum products. The protest started at the University of Jos on April 11, 1988 and quickly spread to other higher institutions across the country. Urban informal working groups, market women, transport workers as well as the unemployed readily joined the massive protests which swept through most institutions of higher learning. The Babangida junta responded by closing down higher institutions that had participated in the protests while assuming the sole authority to reopen the closed institutions while student leaders and activists were arrested especially in Jos.

**The** 1989 students' protest, which followed the 1988 protest actually addressed the political economic foundations of the crisis of education in Nigeria. It was at once a strike at the deteriorating quality of life and learning in the higher institutions and the structural adjustment programme which spurned it. It also took on the so called political transition programme of the government which NANS described as a process of political legitimation of the SAP. NANS demanded the 'freezing of debts repayments, and an embargo on further external borrowing, the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy, the constitution of a mass-based constituent assembly which would elect an interim democratic government that would initiate and manage the transition to multi-party democracy, and the granting of greater priority to social sectors like education and health' (NANS leaflet, 1989).

**According** to Dr. Said Ajetunmobi, "the 1989 protests are one of the most profound and well co-ordinated popular uprisings by NANS. Virtually all parts of the country were touched by serious disturbances, especially the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, Ife, Zaria, Port Harcourt and Kaduna. The crisis shook the Babangida regime to its very foundation, such that it had to quickly respond to it with a mixture of stick and carrot. The latter took the form of SAP relief measures. These included, the directive to the National Directorate of Employment to create 65,000 jobs, the Federal Ministry of Works to create 10,120 new jobs, 20 million Naira was given to each Federal University, the People's Bank was created, workers allowances were increased, the students in tertiary institutions were to be awarded N500.00 each as a bursary, and import duties and tariffs on vehicles were reduced in order to assuage the transport problems in the country".

**Needless** to say, most higher institutions were closed down, while student leaders and activists were subjected arrests and detentions. In 1990, the attempt by the Babangida administration to accept a World Bank loan \$120 million negotiated by the Federal Ministry of Education on behalf of federal universities in Nigeria, became the basis of yet another contestation. The loan ostensibly to help revitalize crumbling infrastructures in the federal universities, had as part of its conditionalities, the introduction of school fees, staff and course rationalization and the phasing out of sub-degree programmes in Nigerian universities. NANS waged a strident agitation against this development, a development which was only interrupted by the Major Orkar failed coup of April 22, 1990.

**In** 1991, NANS launched the Academic Reform (ACAREF) Campaign at its Senate meeting of April 27, 1991 at the University of Ilorin and came up with a ten point demand. The main thrust of the ACAREF Campaign included a declaration of a state of emergency in the educational sector, immediate payment of a N2,000 bursary loan to students of higher institutions, immediate recall of all suspended or expelled student activists and leaders, right to independent student unionism, free education at all levels, a halt to panicky closure of campuses when

students and staff make legitimate demands, adequate funding of education, and greater participation of students in the administration of their institutions.

**From** 1992 to 1995, NANS kept true to its militant tradition of relentless struggle against the forces of neo-liberal reforms, forces that were necessarily authoritarian, repressive, unpopular and anti-democratic with varying degrees of success and in the midst of the untiring effort of the state to undermine the student movement from within. As part of the State's covert effort at destroying the student movement, violent secret cult groups as well as opposition 'student' groups, directly funded by the state created. A Student Peace Commando, for instance was sponsored to oppose radical student activism in the campuses, report on student union activists to the state and generally cause an atmosphere of disaffection and mistrust. It took a mass student uprising to dislodge the Commando from its University of Ibadan base while secret documents belonging to the Commando were confiscated by the students with massive material evidence of state support to the group.

**In** the book, *The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army: Siege of a Nation* by Maj. Gen. Chris Alli (rtd), General Chris Alli (Rtd) reveals how the military apparatus particularly under General Babangida did everything to undermine and destroy the student and youth movement which he describes as the 'spear of the nation'. According to Dr. Said Ajetunmobi, "by 1995 things had begun to fall apart for NANS, with the association bedeviled by internal wrangling and bickering, greed, opportunism and a loss of focus and direction. ..Repression appears to be the most visible and a daunting weapon used against NANS. Between 1986 and 1994, no less than 1,000 students were arrested and detained, over 300 killed and maimed, many wounded and over 600 rusticated and suspended as an aftermath of the various protests and demonstrations carried out during the period. ..During the 1989 protests, the death toll was officially put at 300 (including non-students) (Momoh, 1994:53), while about 90 students were killed and maimed during the 1994 uprising particularly in Benin and Ekpoma. In 1991, no less than 200 students were arrested, including the NANS leaders and were detained under extremely inhuman conditions. Indeed, Mahmud Abdul Aminu, the NANS President and Bamidele Aturu, an activist, wrote to the Nigerian public on the inhuman conditions of their detention. The write up was entitled "Before we Die".

**In** the same year, about 150 students were expelled from the universities of Ibadan, Jos, OAU, Ife, University of Agriculture, Abeokuta and College of Education, Katsina, and over 50 suspended. 13 students were put on trial for arson at the University of Jos...a Students' Union Activities (Control and Regulation) Act, otherwise known as Decree No 47 of 1989. The decree was meant to vitiate the strength and unity of NANS and completely demobilise it. The major highlights of the decree include the making of students' participation in union activities a voluntary one and by implication making the payment of union dues by students voluntary.

Besides repression, other state tactics for weakening NANS were through infiltration, promotion of divisions and dissension within the association, through bribery and co-optation of its members. This was a usual practice of the state, except that it became more pronounced and pervasive under the Babangida regime, which used it, among other weapons to dislodge the opposition. ..” (See *Structural Adjustment, Students’ Movement and Popular Struggles in Nigeria, 1986–1996* By Said Adejumobi in *THE STATE AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION UNDER STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT IN NIGERIA* edited by Attahiru Jega, Nordiska Afrikan Institutet, and CRD, Kano, 2000 and *Great Nigerian Students: Movement Politics and Radical Nationalism* by Bjorn Beckman and Y.Z. Yau, PODSU and CRD, 2005).

### **The ACAREF Revisited**

As already pointed out earlier, the 1991 ACAREF Campaign was a mere amplification of the historic NANS Charter of Demands which was formulated less than a decade earlier in 1982. It stresses the necessity for democratization of education through the triple principle of the right to access, the right to participatory process of education in an environment of academic freedom and autonomy; and the right to proper and adequate funding. Today, it is almost a quarter of a century since these ideals were articulated and presented as a mantra of popular agitation. Are the demands still relevant? If in the past 25 years, the Nigerian educational system has been successfully liberalized with private educational institutions pervading the landscape from kindergarten to university levels and with ASUU still complaining and going on strike over everything that was fought for in the 1980s till the mid ‘90s, then of course ACAREF and the Charter that predated it, remain poignantly relevant. However, new challenges have also arisen that must be factored into a reformulation of a renewed struggle for genuine democratization of education in Nigeria.

### **The Challenge of Neo-liberalism and the Quest for Democratization of Education; Towards A new Programme of Campaign and Movement Building**

The SAPs have successfully ensured that education is now a commodity in the service primarily, of global capitalism.

1. Due to paucity of funds, the Nigerian educational system has witnessed the hemorrhage of the ‘best and brightest’ faculties to Europe and America in relentless brain drain.
2. Apartheid between private funded institutions of learning adding to the pressures on the public universities and the challenge of defining proper regulatory framework; quality assurance etc private funded education institution and underfunded public institutions.
3. The business-like management of universities: public universities forced to do cost recovery, raise fees, privatize certain services etc
4. Inability to challenge the dominant paradigms and frameworks, let alone explore alternative pathways to development. When in 1989 the UNECA and the OAU adopted an African Alternative Framework for Structural Adjustment, there were virtually no

academic debates provoked; Mafeje's discussion of it in CODESRIA Bulletin (Mafeje 1995) had no rejoinders in the English or French versions of the Bulletin

5. Poor access of both students and lecturers to ICT ( See *Globalisation and Academic Freedom* Prof Mohamed Najib Abdulwahed Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, Paris)

A new frame work of campaign for democratizing our education system and rescuing our country from the precipice of the proliferating poverty, joblessness, social and economic inequalities that threaten to tear apart the very fabric of the Nigerian nation, becomes an imperative. The past, however, provides a guide for the path that must be followed.