

Resistance to Change in Nigeria: A Case Study of Renaming the University of Lagos as Moshood Abiola University

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ABSTRACT— *The University of Lagos, Nigeria was established in 1962 and has provided quality education to students both within and outside the Country. It has impacted positively on education and academic matters globally. Chief Moshood Abiola was a popular Nigerian businessman and politician. He died in 1998 as a political Hero while in detention because of his insistence on claiming his electoral victory. In 2012, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria took a decision to honour him for making the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of justice and truth by renaming the University of Lagos as Moshood Abiola University. Many people and corporate bodies including Students, Lecturers and the Alumni Association of the University strongly expressed their rejection of the decision on the renaming. However, some other group of people did not find anything wrong in the decision. The reasons adduced for resistance to the nomenclatural change cover legal, historical and political factors. Controversies, generated by the decision of the President to rename the institution have lingered on for several months but the change is yet to be effected. This suggested that the proposed name change has been successfully resisted, at least, to some extent. This experience has, therefore, become a typical case study on resistance to change.*

Keywords – Resistance to Change, Case study, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Brief on the University of Lagos*

The University of Lagos was established by an Act of the Federal Parliament in April, 1962. The Institution has, for about five decades now, provided quality and objective education to students both within and outside Nigeria. The University has built a legacy of excellence and has been instrumental in the production of top range graduates and academia that have tremendous impact, directly or indirectly, on growth and development in Nigeria. The institution offers courses in the faculties of Art, Business Administration, Education, Engineering, Environmental Science, Law Medicine, Social Science and Pharmacy. It has impacted positively on education and academic matters globally.

1.2 *Brief on Chief Moshood Abiola*

Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola (August 24, 1937 – July 7, 1998) was a popular Nigerian businessman, philanthropist, publisher, politician and an aristocrat of the ‘Egba’ clan in the south Western part of Nigeria. He ran as a Candidate in the presidential race of the 1993 elections and he is widely presumed to be winner. However the election was regarded as inconclusive because no official final results were announced. The entire election results were ultimately annulled by the then ruling military government. He died in 1998 while in detention because of his insistence on claiming his electoral mandate.

2. ANNOUNCEMENT OF CHANGE OF NAME

In a ‘Democracy Day’ broadcast made on May 29, 2012, the President and the Commander-In- Chief of the Armed forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, announced the change of name of the University of Lagos (UNILAG) to Moshood Abiola University. The President said that the Federal Government took the decision to honour Chief Moshood Abiola for “making the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of justice and truth”. He also stated that ‘destiny and circumstances conspired to place upon his (Abiola’s) shoulders a historic burden and he rose to the occasion with character and courage.’

3. PUBLIC RESISTANCE TO THE NAME CHANGE

It appeared that the President (and also Visitor to the University of Lagos) did little or no consultation with stakeholders of the institution such as the Alumni, the Lecturers and the students before the decision of the Federal Government. This is discernible from the fact that the announcement of the name of change promptly generated controversies amongst different segments of the public. Indeed, many people proclaimed their rejection of the decision of the president and vowed to resist the nomenclatural dislocation.

No sooner than the President made the pronouncement than the students trooped out to strongly express their rejection of the decision. Students protested against the renaming in somehow vociferous and obnoxious ways. For instance, they barricaded major roads, thereby disrupting commercial activities and free flow of traffic within Lagos metropolis. In the wake of the mass protests by students, the Senate of the University closed down the institution. In a circular that went round the University campus and halls of residence on May 30, 2012, the Senate stated that “*In view of the recent development on our Campuses, the Senate of the University had directed that all academic activities be suspended forthwith for two weeks. Accordingly, all students are to vacate the halls of residence by 11.00am (Wednesday) May 30, 2012. The University security has been mandated to ensure compliance*”. Chairman of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), University of Lagos chapter, Dr. Karo Ogbinaka described the suspension of academic activities as ‘unacceptable’ to the Lecturers.

A swift reaction by the Alumni association (made within 24 hours of the announcement of the renaming) through a Press Release published in *The Guardian* newspaper of May 30, 2012 page 9 read as follows:

UNILAG Alumni Association Rejects Proposed Change of Name

The National Executive committee on behalf of all members of the University of Lagos Alumni association, the student and the entire University community reject the shocking announcement by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan during his ‘Democracy Day’ address renaming the University of Lagos as Moshood Abiola University. The University of Lagos is the first University to be established by an Act of Federal Parliament in 1962 and has built a strong brand name in its 50 years. That is why it is the University of first choice and the nation’s pride. We expect that any change in name should have taken stakeholders’ interest into consideration and followed due process. We are aware that neither the Governing Council nor the University Senate nor any other stakeholder was consulted before the change was announced. Also, we are not aware of any act of the National Assembly to change the name. It is therefore inappropriate that Mr. President will attempt to change the name of a 50 year-old without (its) consent. Did Abiola himself not say “you cannot shave a man’s head in his absence?” Without prejudice to the person of Late Chief MKO Abiola, we the Alumni Association on behalf of the entire University Community reject the name as announced.

The Press release was signed by the National President, University of Lagos Alumni Association - Professor Olayide Abass (*OON, FAS*) and the National Secretary - Femi Oladimeji (*MNIM*).

A former Pro-Chancellor and Chairman, Governing Council of the University, Chief Afe Babalola (*SAN*) described the decision to honour Chief Abiola as noble but the procedure adopted by the President of Nigeria was considered by him to be unconstitutional. His view was hinged on the fact that prior to the announcement of the renaming by the Federal Government, no attempt was made to amend the University of Lagos Act (1962) from which the University derived its name. **The PUNCH** newspaper reported that Professor Wole Soyinka, a Noble Laureate, applauded the decision of the President for rendering honour unto Chief Abiola but described the announcement as arbitrary because he did not think it fit to consult or inform the Administrators of the University, including the Council and Senate.

Generally, it seemed that the decision of the President attracted wide protests from the public but a few other people did not find anything wrong in what he did. Olumide, a respondent interviewed by *The Guardian* newspaper observed that some of the best Universities in the world such as Stanford University, U.K. Jomo Kenyatta University, Kenya and Nelson Mandela University, South Africa were named after individuals. Similarly, the Secretary of the National Universities Commission (NUC), Prof. Julius Okojie, stated that the renaming is not new in the country citing examples such as the University of Ife, Ile-Ife named after the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo; University of Agriculture, Umudike after Michael Okpara; and University of Yola after Adama Madibbo. However, in a different perspective, another respondent Ogbinaka argued that when the people of Ghana wanted to honour their former President Kwame Nkrumah, they built a new University and named it Kwame Nkrumah University. They did not change the name of the University of Legon or that of the University of Cape Coast or of University of Winneba. According to Ogbinaka, “Chief Obafemi Awolowo built the University of Ife (UNIFE) and the Federal Government acquired it. Samuel Ogbemudia built the University of Benin (UNIBEN) and the Federal Government acquired it. Colonial government built the University of Ibadan (UI) and the Federal Government acquired it. The University of Lagos (UNILAG) was built by Nigeria. It is, therefore, the first true (Federal) University in Nigeria and the name is a brand in the country. You cannot go abroad and address it as former, No! it is UNILAG forever”.

Senator Ahmed Tinubu a former two-term Governor of Lagos State, Nigeria urged the Federal Government to immortalize Chief Moshood Abiola by naming a national monument in Abuja after him. He specifically asked the Federal Executive Council (FEC) to work with the National Assembly so that the National Stadium, National Hospital, (where Abiola died), Eagle Square or the International Conference Centre, all in Abuja could be named after the business mogul.

4. SOME REASONS ADDUCED FOR NEGATIVE REACTION TO THE RENAMING

The name change was rejected by different groups of people on many grounds including legal, historical and political. In a feature article published in *The Guardian* newspaper, Olukotun stated that “names are in the language of socio linguistics signifiers and carry emotional connotations, which speak to the quality of the brands that they represent”. He also noted that at age 50, the University of Lagos can be regarded as a developed brand name ably marketed as the ‘*University of First choice*’. He further observed that the University, like many others, conducts international relations as a non-governmental actor, which implies that a change of identity would have international consequences. According to him ‘it is to be regretted that these ramifications were not considered before the pre-emptory announcement of the renaming.’ Afe Babalola (SAN) observed that the University of Lagos Act does not empower the President of Nigeria as the Visitor to change the statutory name of the institution. The action of the President, therefore, amounted to a usurpation of the powers of the National Assembly, which by the provisions of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is the only body empowered to pass a law to amend the University of Lagos Act. It appeared that the President found merit in the opinion of Afe Babalola (SAN) concerning the unconstitutionality of renaming the Institution. This is premised on the fact that on June 7, 2012, the President sent a bill to the National Assembly seeking to amend the University of Lagos Act to reflect the change in the name of the University.

5. REACTION OF FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO REJECTION OF NAME CHANGE

Notwithstanding the controversy, the Federal Executive Councils (FEC) declared the renaming of the University of Lagos as a *fait accompli*. The Honorable Minister of Information strongly defended the decision of the Federal Government and stated categorically that ‘the decision cannot be reversed.’ However, *The Guardian* newspaper cited a case to mitigate the seemingly rigid stance of the FEC. In its editorial titled ‘*Wrong Way to Honor a Hero*’ published in the newspaper on May 31, 2012 page 14, it drew the attention of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the case of name change of Imo State University (IMSU), Nigeria to Evan Enwerem University. Following public outcry, the name was reverted to Imo State University. It, therefore, urged the Federal Government to review its decision, rescind the renaming of the University of Lagos and seek a better way to immortalize Chief Abiola.

6. CONCLUSION

One cannot fathom out why a seemingly trivial issue such as the renaming of an educational institution after an individual by the President of a country could generate so much furor. Many posers which are creating information gaps that need to be filled include the following: What were the possible remote causes of the controversy generated on the renaming? Were some of these causes tainted by ethnic and political issues? Could the controversy have been mitigated if more stakeholders had been involved in the decision to rename the institution? More than sixteen (16) months after the announcement by the President to rename the University, the name change is yet to be effected. Could it be that the proposed name change has been successfully resisted by a segment of Nigerians? Will it be possible for the President to receive a face-saving legislative support for the change of name? What major lessons can be learnt from this case, especially with respect to resistance to change and management of change?

7. ENDNOTE

In presenting the case study, the authors have focused on problems with respect to resistance to and management of change. The authors have avoided deep analysis of some of the legal, historical and political issues mentioned in the case study in order not to introduce biases. This will give room for readers to critique the presentation with an open mind, identify management problems and generate possible interventions to effectively manage similar change experiences.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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