The Political Pulpit in Lagos

Contributed by Anthony Akaeze
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It is called Gani Fawehinmi Park or Freedom Park and it is gradually becoming popular as a political pulpit for telling those who rule the country the home truths

It is located opposite a stinking dump site in Ojota. Before the recent strike called by the NigeriaLabour Congress, NLC, to protest the fuel subsidy removal, the park, which is named after the late Gani Fawehinmi, the irrepressible lawyer and human rights activist, was just one of the beautiful gardens around that area of Lagos. Beyond that, it didn’t hold much attraction for many people. But the strike has changed all that. The park has now come to be regarded as “Freedom Park,” after thousands of people thronged there to protest the subsidy removal. These included Nigerians of all classes: workers, the unemployed, progressive forces, musicians and actors as well as members of Fawehinmi’s family, specifically Ganiat, his wife, and Mohammed, his son. For the one week the protest lasted, beginning Monday, January 9, to January 13, the park assumed a carnival like atmosphere as the teeming crowd was entertained by music aired through giant loudspeakers mounted by the organisers as well as live performances of musicians such as Ras Kimono, Femi and Seun Kuti; Baba Fryo, Eldee and others who were physically present. The choice of the park, as centre of the protest, was hardly surprising, considering the reputation of the man whom the park is named after. Fawehinmi, in his lifetime, was a human rights crusader and symbol of defiance against all forms of injustice and oppression. The Ondo State- born Lagos lawyer, who died in 2009, was described by one of his admirers as a “scourge” of successive military and civilian administrations, and any struggle for a just and better nation should rightly begin from there. Apart from its beauty, there is a statue of Fawehinmi, in his lawyers apparel, in the park.

Femi Falana, a lawyer and human rights activist, was one of the visible faces at the rally. He told Newswatch that although members of the pro-democracy group had visited the park in the past, the choice of the place as the centre of the protest was not just a way of honouring the late activist but to make the park a rallying point for future struggle. “The choice of Gani Fawehinmi Park signifies the continuity of the struggle. His spirit remains a motivational factor for the struggle. For most of those who went there, the struggle has to do with bad governance and not just the return of fuel to N65. You could see that even in the face of the onslaught, we refused to be cowed to submission,” Falana told Newswatch. Indeed, the scene at the Gani Fawehinmi Freedom Park during the week-long strike reminded one of Tahirr Square, which was the centre of convergence for Egyptians of all background demanding a regime change, which later led to the fall of the Hosni Mubarak’s regime. “In all my life as a Nigerian, I never saw such a huge number of Nigerians united by one common cause of fighting for their rights. It is unprecedented, and a pleasant surprise,” said Onochie Eze, a 29- year-old businessman. He was not the only one who was struck by the sight and courage exhibited by many who endured one form of hardship or the other to be part of the cernival at the park. From different parts of Lagos, people trooped out in their numbers and headed to the place. Many had to walk long distances from Yaba, Alagbole, Palmgrove and Surulere to be part of the excitement at Ojota. One of them was Peter Antiv. He trekked from Yaba to Ojota, with some other young men and women. He was thrilled by stories about what was going on there and decided to go see for himself. “We all trekked from Yaba to Ojota and never felt it because we had other people, doing the same thing. It was the same experience on the way back to Yaba.” Isaiah Ibrahim didn’t also plan to go anywhere that Thursday, January 12. But he soon had a change of mind after he received a call from one of his friends, who told him what was happening and why he should come over and partake in the fun. Not long after stepping out of his house, the hurdle Ibrahim would need to surmount stared him in the face: There were no commercial vehicles plying the road as a result of the strike. Only one option was available to him at that point: trek. He decided to do just that. And so, for the first time since he came to live at Alagbole, Ibrahim trekked all the way from his house to Berger, from where he got a motorcycle that took him to Ojota. “I could imagine the spirit of Gani jumping in the park there and punching the air in salute to the courage shown by Nigerians,” said Christopher Chidi, a journalist. “I imagine he is very proud of all those Nigerians who stood up to make their voice heard,” he said. The Save Nigeria Group, SNG, in its assessment of the strike, noted that “never in the history of our country has such a large crowd gathered at a spot for days in a peaceful and orderly assembly…,” and that, given the success of the mass movement, the protest “has proved a defining moment in the history of our country and one from which the correct lessons must be learnt and matters arising squarely dealt with in order to deepen our democracy and ensure that our country is never run again in the same way.” Reported by Dike Onwuamaeze, Ishaya Ibrahim and Pita Ochai