

Limits of Media Power in the Determination of Electoral Success: The Case of the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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1.1: ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of the media for electoral campaigns. It highlights the fact that media channels remain the most influential path to wooing electorates. It reasons that a control of the media could come via ownership pattern, or through the financial prowess of the campaigning entity, and the readiness to deploy same in the mobilization of voters. While the media could play a critical role in the manipulation of hearts and minds, for the benefit of a campaigner, an overwhelming ability to control the media is not an ultimate guarantor of electoral victory. There could as well be other intervening variables. The paper uses the 2015 general elections in Nigeria as a case, with a particular focus on the presidential elections, largely dominated by the All Progressive Party (APC, where Gen. Mohammedu Buhari was presidential candidate and the People's Democratic Party (PDP, where the incumbent, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan was candidate. It concluded that despite the statutory and financial muscle of the incumbent President Jonathan, which gave it an edge in media campaigns, it was still not enough to ensure victory for the PDP.

1.2: METHODOLOGY

The research was based on participant observation method. This method came as a keen observer of the election process, while interviews were conducted to gain insight into the topic. I monitored the election process from the beginning of the campaigns, up to the time of the elections, from the point of view of a researcher. I was also in touch with newspaper outings of the two major political parties. I was abreast of their campaigns on the broadcast media, on television and on radio, while keeping tabs with their online campaigns as well. Though these channels were awash with many campaign themes and leads, I was in touch with key themes, reasonably suitable to be a representable sample of the awareness creation process. I added interviews to the research method, as a way of enriching the technique. The interviews were conducted with some respondents to widen the scope of evidence used for analysis. Those sampled for the interviews cut across age groups, income categories, and occupational boundaries. The interviews indeed enriched the research through the provision of different sense of perspective, which my observation would ordinarily not provide.

1.3: INTRODUCTION

Electioneering processes is always tense in many political climates. It often has nothing to do with the level of the country's development. Contestants are always fierce because of the influence of power, and its ability to help the bearer influence lives, possibly change systems, and then make some impact on posterity. Electioneering process in western democracies is repeatedly tense, interesting and unnerving. It is often the case because a holder of a political office is able to make or mar a nation's destiny. He or she could determine the lot of the people, whether or not it will be improved. In the United States of America (USA) for instance, an election year is a politically busy year, not just for the citizens of that country, but for the international community, because of the status of the country as a global industrial power. The situation is similar in the United Kingdom (UK). So it is in Canada, in Germany, in France, and in Italy.

The tension that heralds elections in civilized democracies mentioned above pales into insignificance when compared with the situation in developing countries. In these societies, there is a closer association to state. This is because the state is seen as a major source of wealth distribution. The closer you are to the state resources, the more comfortable you are likely to be, or the more comfortable you are likely to be able to share influence and largesse. Gladiators are therefore often more determined, and are ready to fight to no end to be in power. The desire is hardly seen as a call to serve, even if that is proclaimed. It is allegedly personal, even if there is always a hypocritical denial of this. Sometimes, violence, death and destruction come in the wake of election results. Some politicians a times lose their limbs and lives. Thugs are habitually deployed, while court cases challenging election outcomes continue endlessly.

Nigerian can be a good case for this experience. The country gained her political independence in 1960. It has

since had a troubled history. It has been a witness to coups, counter-coups, and a bloody civil war. It has had many attempts at civilian administration, following long years of military rule. The civilian administrations have always being ushered in by one disputed election or the other. Besides the elections of the 1960's, the more recent ones in 1979 and '83 were particularly problematic. So were the 1999 elections, and almost all other elections from then on. Many of these elections were a witness to assassinations, kidnappings, and shades of gangsterism. The judiciary was overworked in some cases, following endless disputations, injunctions and counter-injunctions, some even from courts of parallel jurisdictions. An inability to resolve these disputes sometimes leads to military intervention like the case of the December 1983 coup, of bloodletting like the instance of the 2011 presidential elections. These arguments, no doubts points to the story of turbulence in a nation's political history.

Ahmed Abubakar corroborates the above: "The history of democratic elections in Nigeria especially ones that would be adjudged and accepted by the electorates as free and fair had always been a problem in the country. In 1960, shortly after Nigeria's independence there was a transition from the colonial rule to the country's first ever election process. However, it is common knowledge that Nigeria's electoral process has persistently come short of the glory of what the electoral process should mean for a democratic society. Nigerian electoral history has not been a pleasant one. Nigerians have participated in many elections, beginning with the colonial era when the concept of elections was first introduced. The electorate has also grown from about 5,000 adults with 100 pounds sterling income per annum as qualification to be eligible to vote, to over 90 million voters of 18 years of age and above" (www.peoplesdailyng.com). The turbulence of Nigeria's elections obviously outweighs what the case usually is in the advanced industrial societies.

Adeniyi had also argued recently that "of importance is the expansion of media outlets following gains in new technologies of communication. In the traditional days of the physical media, military coups were staged through essentially Radio announcement. The announcement was usually carried out on the Federal Government owned Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN). The coup masterminds simply had to capture the station broadcast headquarters, and get the station manager on duty to guide them to make their announcement, as they desire. The coup information may now spread to other media, like the state television and newspapers, and subsequently other private media, especially the print"

He continued: "With liberalization of media ownership and the rise of online media, outlets and platforms for the dissemination of information have multiplied. There are now many private radios, and many private television stations. The implication of this is that with the democratization of media ownership, a potential coup planner would have to do the impossible task of muffling the voices of tens of other media houses to prevent countermanding messages from being relayed. The unilineal flow of information obtainable through FRCN in the previous arrangement, did not just whipped the populace into line as soon as there was a coup, but could shut out counter coups, just in case. With the present state of numerous media, the success chance of a coup has been largely reduced, all thanks to the expansion" What is being displayed in the above statements is the fact of restlessness in a nation's attempt at political stability, apart from the fragility of institutions. And specifically though, where is the place of the media?

2.1: MEDIA IN NIGERIA'S ELECTIONEERING PROCESS

The role of the media in Nigeria's electioneering process cannot be overstated. The media is relied upon for the marketing of politician's manifestoes, and programmes. The speeches, worldviews and opinions of key contestants are highlighted through the power of the media. Opponents are also castigated through the same means. All channels of communication have been deployed for this purpose. In the days of the traditional media, newspapers, television and radio were used for these objectives, in their different regions and depending on ownership patterns. In the second republic for instance, the Ibadan based, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo owned *Nigerian Tribune* was in the forefront of campaigning for the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), which was then led by Chief Awolowo. The *Sketch* Newspaper and other media organisations based in the South West region gravitated towards the UPN, signifying a form of regional media solidarity for their own.

The Kaduna based *New Nigeria* and the Lagos based *Daily Times* aligned with the interest of the federal government, being government owned newspapers. The *National Concord* owned by business mogul, Moshood Abiola was in support of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the main interest of the publisher. The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), two governments owned broadcast media were unapologetically supportive of the interest of the central government. Many other media organisations like *The Guardian*, *Vanguard*, *The Democrat*, *The Reporter*, *The Triumph*, *The Herald*, *The Tide*, *The Trumpeter*, *The Mail*, *Newswatch*, which all came at different times, played their respective roles in the

political processes, either in more balanced, open, or subdued manner than the other openly partisan press.

The NTA which has always being the most influential audio-visual medium of communication in the land is usually loud and bold about the sides it takes during elections. They are either directly on the side of the incumbent or on the side of the candidate of the incumbent. They make no pretension about towing the line of who pays the proverbial piper. They were boldly behind the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), in 1979 and 1983, and repeated same in the 1999 general elections, just like they supported the preference of the government in the 2003, the 2007, the 2011 and the 2015 general elections. The FRCN which is the Radio version of the solely government owned electronic media does same from the audio perspective, covering the entire states of the federation with their powerful frequencies, and galvanizing listeners' support for the government of the day, in all major languages (Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo), at different broadcast times.

Because these organisations are publicly owned, they are supposed to be objective, balanced, and expected to strictly abide by their professional code of conduct, which bothers on objectivity and unbiased reporting. Unfortunately, they cannot now do this because the management of the organisations has been consciously or unconsciously made aware of where their loyalty is; to their employers. The employer is seen as the individuals running the government on behalf of the public. The public is now however sacrificed for the personalities in power, which makes their interest paramount in the estimation of the managers. If they go against the bidding of their "bosses", they are fired, sometimes with ignominy. To preserve their jobs therefore, the helmsmen at the organisations are forced to do the bidding of the people in power, at the expense of the public, whose tax maintains the organisations.

As a result, the messages, manifestoes and pronouncements of those in power are promoted far above those of their opponents. It does not matter if the opponents are even ready to pay for the service. The loss in revenue is also not a concern. What matters is the interest of the persons at the top, as against the public interest. The news reports, features stories, documentaries, bulletins, and photo-ops are therefore populated to favour the men in power. There are little or no concern for ethics, professional need to balance stories and the calling for objectivity. Stories become predictably pro-government, leading to loss of viewers, listeners and readers, in the case of newspapers. The critical audiences are no longer stimulated by reports. They are no longer educated through the news stories, as they see day in, day out, the same pro-government, anti-opposition reports, leaving no room for civil engagement, the encouragement of thoughts, and the formation of quality opinion-that could come through a proper debating of issues.

3.1: ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN NIGERIA'S 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The Nigeria's most recent general elections is the 2015 elections. The elections were fiercely contested by two top politicians belonging to two leading political parties: Dr. Jonathan of the PDP, and Gen. Buhari of the APC. Jonathan was the incumbent, Buhari was the main challenger. Jonathan, being in power had access to influence, and endless financial supports. The apparatus of the states were at his command. In this clime, it is hardly an offence for such apparatuses to be deployed for the satisfaction of individual desires. Jonathan's PDP set up huge committees that were adequately funded. There were lavish campaign launchings in all the states of the federation. The airwaves were awash with PDP campaign jingles, slogans, and catchphrases. Countless interviews were also being granted by PDP chieftains, by Jonathan himself, and his numerous supporters. Those interviews easily found their ways to the newspaper readers, TV viewers, or Radio listeners, because the funds were either available, or the organisations were controlled by government. The polity was openly awash with PDP stories.

The PDP did not only stop at marketing their own manifestoes and the achievements of Jonathan alone. They criticized the main opposition leader, Gen. Buhari to no end. They did documentaries, published many newspaper advertisements, including the expensive wrap-around, and kept their jingles running endlessly on the Radio. Their advertisements was not only limited to the Above-the-Line (ATL) media alone. They were also prominent Below-the-Line (BTL). They were involved in poster campaigns, Billboarding, lamp posting, direct communications, and even door-to-door campaigns. Billions were obviously expended on the campaigns. Unverified modest projections put the Jonathan media campaign expenditure at close to N250billion, if not more.

The APC had its own angle to the perception on expenditure. The following quote explains: "The All Progressives Congress (APC) Presidential Campaign today declared that the President Goodluck Jonathan-led Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) government has wasted one trillion Naira that belongs to the Nigerian people in his desperate quest to remain in power. "We had expected that a President that has spent about 6 years in office

with the revenues more than what all governments before him had received will run on a record of performance rather than peddling lies and hate media campaigns that are accentuating ethnic and religious tensions in the country,”

“It said in a press conference in Abuja addressed by Mallam Garba Shehu, its Director of Media and Publicity. The APC Campaign observed that a panoramic view of how much of Nigeria’s resources Jonathan and the PDP have spent on print, broadcast and social media campaigns just to damage the unassailable credential of Gen Buhari’s integrity would confound any casual observer of the polity in recent times. Among them, it noted: “An average cost of a wrap around in Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers in Nigeria is between N15 million to N20 million and the Jonathan campaign buys average of 5 wrap around and front pages in a day in the last 3 months coupled with the hundreds of billions that have been spent on negative TV exposures on AIT, NTA and other television and radio stations across the country”.

Benefitting from these largesse in terms of advertising patronages were key public and private media organisations like NTA, AIT, FRCN, Channels TV, Silverbird, TV Continental, *The Guardian*, *Thisday*, *Vanguard*, *Tribune*, *The Nation*, *Daily Trust*, *Leadership*, and *The Sun*, amongst many others. For the government owned NTA and FRCN, they enjoyed arguably the greatest patronage. While the PDP and Jonathan had the upper hand, the opposing Buhari and APC were struggling with their finances. They were nearly obliterated by the campaign prowess of the incumbent PDP government. The NTA and FRCN even reportedly declined to publish their advertisements sometimes, irrespective of their readiness to pay for it.

Some partisan private media, notably the AIT went all out, in obvious support for the PDP government. They aired documentaries that literarily damaged the character of some APC chieftains, notably Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Many, like this case, ended in the law courts. Gen. Buhari however suffered the greatest damages. He was called all kinds of names. His family history was negatively traced, his lineages maligned and his professional antecedent as an “intolerant” military dictator exposed. The PDP campaign machine had the resources. They had literarily taken over the media space, and were deploying it to the sort of use they desired, even up to the eve of the elections. APC had been burnt out financially. The leading parties might though have had quality media hands; they were separated by their financial muscles. PDP had the advantage on this score.

4.1: MEDIA POWER AND ITS LIMITATIONS IN THE DETERMINATION OF THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS’ OUTCOME

It is clear from the above that the PDP and the incumbent President Jonathan controlled the media ahead of the 2015 general elections, but the control was not good enough to ensure the party’s victory in the elections. The PDP lost the election to the APC, with Gen. Buhari emerging victorious over Dr. Jonathan. What therefore could have accounted for the inadequacy of media power in this instance? A respondent, Mr. Abimbola Adesokan (Pastor, Male, 42), spoke as follows: “The media can only work to an extent. How many people truly read the newspapers? Nigeria is a nation of over 180million people. The level of our illiteracy is also very high. How many Nigerians can afford to buy newspapers? Not many! Then how many copies do the newspapers publish in themselves? Not many compared to the population of the country. So you may buy all the advert pages, from now till eternity, it is only going to be seen by a few people, and there is no guarantee that these few people will all support you. Then you will also have to ask if they are people that will vote? Do they have voters’ cards? Many newspaper reading elites don’t really vote” (Interview conducted 14/07/2016).

Another respondent, Ismail Ahmadu (Accountant, Male, 51) said as follows: “The bulk of Buhari’s supporters came from the Northern part of the country. These people are mainly illiterates or semi-illiterates. They hardly read newspapers. They will rather listen to Radio, or maybe watch television sometimes, when they have power. For Radio, it is more affordable and accessible. They can power it with battery, if there is no light. They can take it around in their hands, shops and listen to it in their cars. And Radio was better used by the APC in the North as it was cheaper. Don’t forget that the average Northerner was then a staunch believer in Buhari. He had a cultic following. APC was therefore not going anywhere, no matter the extent of its campaigns. So, I think that would also have been responsible for the inability of Jonathan to overwhelm Buhari with the media” (Interview conducted 14/07/2016).

Ngozi Anyahun (Businesswoman, Female, 37) believed “Nigerians apart from the South-East and South-South people were just tired of Jonathan. They truly wanted change. They were tired of Boko Haram *wahala*, and it was like Jonathan was not capable of handling it. They were tired of corruption, and the poverty in the land. They were tired of much nonsense going on around, and with Jonathan just sitting there and looking lost. For me, I think there was no amount of money that the PDP would have spent on publicity that would have been enough. It was not possible. People’s minds were made up. That is life; once a mind is made up, no amount of

money can change it. Their time was up, and it was time to go, good publicity or no good publicity” (Interview conducted 14/07/2016).

Isokrari Emmanuel (Economist, Male, 45) thinks that the “media machine of the PDP was not particularly an honest one. They would have achieved more if they had rightly deplored the money given to them. They were more concerned about their pockets, and with poor professionalism, and wrong relaying of messages, it was not possible for the people to appreciate Jonathan anymore. The APC media machine was better, even with little funds available to them. If they had half of what PDP had, they would have gathered more votes to defeat Jonathan, much more than they actually did” (Interview conducted 15/07/2016).

Iyiola Lawal (Civil Servant, Male, 39) simply said that Buhari won the election because he had the backing of the South-West. “The South-West for the first time in the political history of Nigerian aligned with the North and that was a deciding factor. Election is about votes, population and political calculations. Massive North, aligning with critical, sophisticated South-West: so what do you expect? With the arrangements that existed along that line, I was not expecting Jonathan to win, even if they spent heaven and earth on the media. Media is just one aspect of the bargain; there are many other influencing factors. These include performance, mood of the nation, tribal and ethnic consideration. If the odds are not in your favour, you cannot carry the day. It was not in Jonathan’s favour, so he could not have won, no matter the control of the media” (Interview conducted 15/07/2016).

Bello Dauda (Banker, Male, 31) thought Buhari won the election because of strategy and policy issues as against media power. First, he said “Some powerful state governors had left Jonathan at a critical moment. Amaechi of Rivers had gone, and then Kano’s Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso had left as well, amongst others. Influential citizens were moving to APC in droves. Second, Jonathan had some truly bad policies, and took some steps that glorified some vices. Imagine the pardon of Alamisiegha? What about the brazen ostentatious living of his people all over the cities? I think the man was weak! He looked like a nice man, but leadership is not about being nice. You have to be firm, and good in taken decisions. He was too gentle to take decisions. We do not need a people pleaser as president. We need an inspirer, one who will be able to take positions and stand by them whether anybody likes it or not. Nigerians had seen it all, and they were convinced that there should be a change, irrespective of the money they were wasting on advertisement and publicity” (Interview conducted 15/07/2016).

Juliet Lawal (Journalist, Female, 29) believes “Jonathan’s media strategy actually help him to get the amount of votes he got. The strategy may not have enabled him to win, but the amount of votes was actually because of the media campaigns, because things were really bad for him. I don’t think the monies were wasted. He would have been disgraced, and embarrassed much more than we saw but for those media blitz. There is power in the media, and once you can control it, you stand a chance of getting the upper hand. Jonathan tried, but he was not just lucky. His aides failed him, and that was his undoing” (Interview conducted 15/07/2016).

5.1: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the arguments above, it is clear that the media may be a powerful tool for political campaigns; it yet has its limitations in terms of reach and effect. In the case of Jonathan’s presidential campaign, though he had the advantage over Buhari of the APC, his campaign machine was reduced to nothingness because of controversial policies while in power. Ideological reasons, dishonesty of aides, cross-regional alliance, ethno-tribal reason combined to whittle down the enormous media power he wielded. The lesson from this is that success in campaigns is importantly not a function of one sector. Many sectors have to combine well for a candidate to benefit. It cannot be a replacement for other areas where the candidate has lacked. It can at best be a complement, as exemplified in the Goodluck Jonathan/PDP experience.

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