Youths and the Use of Social Media in the Peaceful Conduct of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

The history of elections in Nigeria is replete with records of violence and malpractices. However, with the advent of social media which is globally been used as a tool for political engineering, especially during elections, there is a noticeable change in the attitude of the Nigerian youths. This paper examines the positive use of social media by organized youth in the peaceful conduct of the 2015 elections in Nigeria. The research adopts a secondary source of data through a critical review of related literatures on the subject matter. The paper posits that unlike the previous elections in Nigeria where youth were used to perpetrate vices, especially through the use of social media, the organised youths in the 2015 elections used the same technology to advocate for peace.

Keywords: youth, social media, election, peace

1. Introduction

The conduct, results and aftermath of the 2011 elections in Nigeria was greeted with mixed feelings both locally and internationally. While on the one hand it was adjudge the fairest elections since the return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999; on the other hand, it was the most violent elections recorded since independence. The election was also celebrated because of the use of social media as a tool for social engineering and political participation. Sadly, the same instrument was used to perpetrate violence and spread hate speeches and fake rumours that led to the death of over 800 persons after the results of the elections were announced (HRW 2011:9); no thanks to the activities of the youths who were used as vanguards for these dastardly acts. Expectedly, therefore a lot of fears, skirmishes and anxiety heralded the preparation for the 2015 elections in Nigeria. Also, amidst the activities of the insurgency in the North-eastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, and the coalition built by four political parties with Mohammadu Buhari emerging as the flag bearer, to contest against the then incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, many feared that, whoever wins eventually, there could be unprecedented levels of violence in the election aftermath, and might lead to the disintegration of Nigeria (Cambell, 2014). Contrary to the prediction however, Nigeria held the general elections in the months of March and April, 2015 successfully, and ushered in new leadership at both the Federal and state levels of government. These relatively peaceful presidential and gubernatorial elections marked a positive shift in Nigeria's history of political violence.

One thing that remarkably happened before and during the conduct of the 2015 elections was that organised youth groups propagated the messages of peace (Alli, 2015). Unlike past elections wherein gullible youths were manipulated by the political class to play destructive roles (such as election rigging, ballot-box snatching, hooliganism, or intimidation), in the conduct of the 2015 elections the youth undertook various positive initiatives. These include peace campaigns, voter education, election monitoring, and polling unit administration to ensure successful conduct. (Osumah, 2016).

Apart from the other sources of information like the newspapers, magazines, radio and television, youths largely used the social media as one of the viable medium of conveying their message before, during and after the elections. Unlike previous elections, where communications were only through conventional media, election observers, mostly youths employ the complete usage of the social media as a tool for dissemination of vital information in the 2015 elections. Although, politicians also used the social media as an important platform in reaching many targeted electorates during the elections, our focus on the youths is because they constitute the active users of the various social media platforms.

Social media are computer-mediated technologies that allow individuals, companies, NGOs, governments, and other organizations to view, create and share information, ideas, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. Prominent examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, Google plus, Wikipedia, LinkedIn, Reddit, WhatsApp (Wikipedia, 2016).

The position in this paper is that unlike the previous elections where youth were used to perpetrate vices, especially through the use of social media, the organised youths in the 2015 elections used the same technology to advocate for peace. The paper is therefore divided into four sections. In the first section, an attempt is made on the conceptualization of the term 'youths' and 'social media'. The aim is to simply put into perspective the meaning of the concepts. The second section examines the trend of youths and social media in other parts of the world with a view to discussing how the Nigerian youths regain their courage in political participation through the use of social media and lastly the critical role played by youths using social media as a vehicle to drive home the objective of peaceful general elections in Nigeria is discussed.

2. Conceptualization:

2.1 Who is a Youth?

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with one of the largest populations of youth in the world, about 70,000,000. (National Bureau of Statistic, 2012). The National Youth Policy (2009), defines youth in Nigeria as citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria aged 18–35 years. The government characterizes youths as ambitious, enthusiastic, energetic and promising. The National Youth Development Policy of Nigeria (2001, p. 1), puts it thus:

> Youth is the foundation of a society. Their energies, inventiveness, character, and orientation define the pace of development and security of a nation. Through their creative talents and labour power, a nation makes giant strides in economic development and socio-political attainments. In their dreams and hopes, a nation founds her motivation; on their energies, she builds her vitality and purpose. And because of their dreams and aspirations, the future of a nation is assured.

While the United Nations (UN), for statistical consistency across regions, defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by member states. (Wikipedia, 2016). All UN statistics on youth are based on this definition, as illustrated by the annual yearbooks of statistics published by the United Nations system on demography, education, employment and health. For activities at the national level, for example when implementing a local community youth programme, "youth" may be understood in a more flexible manner. UNESCO will then adopt the definition of "youth" as used by a particular member state. It can be based for instance, on the definition given in the African Youth Charter (2006) where "youth" means "every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years". Suffice it to say that, when carrying out its Youth Strategy, UNESCO uses different definitions of youth depending on the context. For activities at international or at regional level, such as the African Youth Forum, UNESCO uses the United Nations' universal definition.

However, Johnson (cited in Abhuere, 2000:85) argued that, while leadership of youth programmes has no upper age limit, their membership has in practice covered people of over 35-45 years old. And Berger (1972:42) insists that youth cuts across age, pointing to culture as what really matters. According to him, anyone who feels youthful, and exhibits such qualities as spontaneity, impulsiveness, energy, etc. is a youth. The Wikipedia, 2016 corroborates Berger's point of view by saying youth is the time of life when one is young, but often means the time between childhood and adulthood (maturity). It is also defined as "the appearance, freshness, vigour, spirit, etc., characteristic of one who is young".

From the foregoing, the youthful stage is a period of transition and it is more fluid than a fixed age group. What is important in the youth is the fact that that due to their energies, they are the agents of positive or negative change in any given society. This perhaps explains why former President of Nigeria from 1999 until 2007, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, believes that addressing issues that would enhance the lives of the youth would increase their participation in national issues thereby improving overall national development. He stated that, "Youth constitute Nigeria's only hope for a real future" (Wikipedia, 2016). In a similar vein, former secretary general of the UN, Kofi Annan cited in (Frank, 2015 p.1) succinctly put it thus;

> "Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of their societies."

2.2 Social media: The term 'Social media' has been defined in different ways by its users, ICT experts, and authors. According to Narnia and Charl (2011:2) "the term social media refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, and search for content and information without having to log on to any specific portal site or portal destination". Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Nwabueze (2012) stretched the argument further by saying "Web 2.0" refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to "web1.0" which describes the state of the web prior to 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, Wikis, and blogs, are among examples of web 2.0 sites (Allen, Ekwugha & Chukwulete

2011).

Social media use web-based and mobile technologies on smartphones and tablet computers to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals, communities and organizations can share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content or pre-made content posted online. They introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities, and individuals. (Kietzmann and Hermkens, 2011). Social media changes the way individuals and large organizations communicate. Social media differ from paper-based or traditional electronic media such as TV broadcasting in many ways, including quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence. Social media operate in a dialogic transmission system from many sources to many receivers (John and Shawn, 2015). This is in contrast to traditional media that operates under a monologic transmission model (one source to many receivers), such as a paper newspaper which is delivered to many subscribers. Some of the most popular social media websites are Facebook (and its associated Facebook Messenger), WhatsApp, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, Baidu Tieba, pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube, viber and Snapchat. These social media websites have more than 100,000,000 registered users. (Wikipedia, 2016)

Social media is also the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Websites and applications dedicated to forums, microblogging, social networking , social bookmarking, social curation, and wikis are among the different types of social media.

From a more practical point of view, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008:179) in PLAC, (2012) defines social media as a "read-write web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of web content to actually contributing to the content". This means that Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social dialogues. For Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013) those Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online are referred to as social media. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing Interaction among people (Adibe, Odoemelam and Orji 2012).

The variety of stand-alone and built-in social media services currently available introduces challenges of definition; however, we shall adopt the common features of social media as identified by Obar and Steve (2010) as follows:

1. social media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications,
2. user-generated content such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, as well as data generated through all online interactions, are the lifeblood of the social media organism,
3. users create service-specific profiles for the website or app, that are designed and maintained by the social media organization, and
4. social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals and/or groups.

From the foregoing, many Nigerian could be said to be users of social media. Estimates indicate that "out of approximately 150 million Nigerians, 87 million own mobile phones that can send and receive SMS messages and 44 million have internet access". (Asuni and Farris 2011: 4). This figure may have tremendously increased in 2016. According to Emmanuel (2015), at least 7.1 million people use Facebook daily in Nigeria, while more than 500,000 are on Twitter, making the country Africa's biggest user of the social media platform. Other forms of social media include YouTube, Whatsapp, 2go, Flickr etc. They are referred to as media because information could be stored and or disseminated through them.

In the Nigerian political process, the use of social media became more pronounced in the 2011 general elections especially among youths. Most political aspirants in Nigeria including President Goodluck Jonathan, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Pastor Chris Okotie, used Facebook, Twitter, Naija Pals, Nairaland among others to engage the youths in discussing their political programmes and policies (PLAC, 2012). President Jonathan took the shine off the IBB (Ibrahim Babangida) presidential declaration in Abuja by choosing that morning to announce his own bid on facebook. Ibrahim Babangida launched a YouTube campaign video, and had an aide boast that he had become an avid facebooker. Politicians and political parties created websites, and utilized electronic messaging and social networking tools. Also during the protests staged in January 2012 against the government's announcement of the removal of Nigeria's fuel subsidy, which resulted in a 120 per cent increase in the per litre pump price of petrol, the effect of social media was largely felt. The announcement provoked a series of demonstrations across the country and internationally, both on the streets and online using the hashtag '#OccupyNigeria'. (Bartlett, J. et'al (2015).

3. Trend of Youth and Social Media in Global Perspective

The increasing effect of social media as a tool for social mobilisation and political support is being embraced globally. Omeruo, (2010:12) rightly notes that "social media is gradually detecting the pace of information-

sharing and collaboration online and even in the real world, thereby making the traditional mass media to experience some decline in patronage especially among the youths".

In the World Youth Report (2005:13) it was captured thus; "*It is becoming increasingly apparent that through modern day media, ICTs and global interconnectedness have combined to influence the lives of young people, creating what is referred to as global media driven youth culture.*

The above statement shows the rate and speed at which the social media have taken a firm grip on the youths generally and will continue to influence their thinking pattern including political decisions. The relevance of the social media in our contemporary society is such that most leaders now maintain a *Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and 2go* account to interact with the masses regularly. According to Amaefule (2011:20) "The Facebook, which is one of the first social media tools was launched in 2004 and has over 664.03 million users in about 233 countries worldwide". Since Facebook was launched, there has been massive interest from especially youths in Africa to use the medium for different purposes. This observation has been echoed by Narnia and Charl (2010:12) thus: "*Facebook is currently the most visited website by internet users on the African continent and currently 17 million people on the continent use Facebook. This may appear to be a small percentage, considering that the population of Africa which stands at over 1 billion, although it depicts an increase of 7 million from 2009*". These figures may have doubled now considering the massive usage of the Facebook account on daily basis by youths in Africa. The rapid growth of social media activities especially over the last ten years is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture, and its integration into the daily lives of many people. Today the surest and fastest way of reaching million young people is via the social media.

Although many people see social media as instrument for engaging in negative activities and spreading negative news, it is instructive to note that not all things that come out of the social media are negative. Around the world, cases abound where youths using the vast platform of the social networks have been able to engage the political class to promote good governance in their countries. The activities of bloggers in Asia, especially in Malaysia who is an ample evidence as to how the social media has been a veritable tool in the hands of youths of goodwill to engage their governments to sit up or, and to mobilise other people of equal goodwill to challenge a defective status quo.

It is also on record that, the social media played prominent role in the post electoral crisis in Kenya in 2008. The Ushahidi platform that was established after the 2007 election violence was instrumental in collating and mapping citizen reports of electoral misconduct, receiving 45,000 visits to its website. The success of the initiative resulted in the launch of Uchaguzi in 2013, a programme designed to repeat citizen electoral monitoring for the Kenyan presidential elections. The website recorded over 3,000 incident reports in the days surrounding the elections, which included nearly 400 security reports and issues of voting irregularities, registration problems and polling station difficulties. (Makinen, 2008, Bartlett, et'al 2015). This experience had serious implications in the process of democratization in Kenya.

In 2012, Senevote was developed by the Senegalese election watch coalition (COSCE) and resulted in 74,000 individual observations of activities at polling stations. (Bartlett, et'al 2015). In other parts of Africa, precisely in 2011, the social media played a leading role in mobilising support for or against unpopular leadership in the Arab spring. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain etc. clearly demonstrated the effects of the social media on political mobilization of the youths to effectively checkmate leaders thus leading to their enthronement or dethronement.

Here in Nigeria, Social media has helped change the way INEC communicated with the public beginning from the 2011 elections. Through its enhanced communication channels, reports from distant polling units are easily received by INEC officials and responses made within a reasonable time. This perhaps explains why (Asuni and Farris 2011:10) argued that more than 70,000 people were able to contact INEC directly to report incidents and have their questions answered, while the Commission also received about 4,000 Tweets and 25 million hits on its website in three days during the 2011 presidential election alone. Many candidates that contested the 2011 general elections had Facebook, Twitter, and/or YouTube accounts. President Goodluck Jonathan was among the candidates that used the social media early in the race. President Jonathan made a remarkable move by announcing his intention to run for Presidency on Facebook.

4. Youth, social media and the peaceful conduct of the 2015 Elections

Nigeria has witnessed an exponential growth in internet usage. From a modest 200,000 users in 2000, now an estimated 51 per cent of the population use the internet. (Bartlett, J. et'al (2015). According to the Nigerian Communications Commission, as of February 2015, there are a total of 186,410,197 active mobile lines in Nigeria. This is a twofold increase from the 93 million reported in 2011 by the commission. Also, in a report prepared for the Department for International Development (DFID), by Demos (2015:4) on *social media for election communication and monitoring in Nigeria*, it was reported that "over the period 18 March – 22 April 2015, researchers collected 13.6 million tweets posted by 1.38 million unique users associated with the Nigerian Presidential and State elections held in March –April 2015". These are clear examples to the fact that the use of

social media in the 2015 Nigeria's election increased significantly.

According to Ogundeji (2015), a recent Mobile Africa 2015 study conducted in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa by GeoPoll and World Wide Worx indicates that Internet access via phones is on the rise in Africa, especially for Facebook use, which stands out as the most common phone activity among the countries surveyed. While Facebook was the most visible platform for sharing views and information during the Nigerian electoral season, several election-related Twitter handles were created, including hash tags like #NigeriaDecides. Undoubtedly, the use of social media has acted as the catalyst for change in an already unpredictable environment in Nigeria during the 2015 elections. The use and availability of social media easily created connections between prominent leaders of thought, activists and ordinary citizens rapidly expanding the network of people willing to take action. The voters used social media to report their experiences and receive election related information. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) used social media tools to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report the outcome of their monitoring of the electoral process.

Amongst the several platforms for engagement and discussions by youths, social media platforms have proved very effective. The effectiveness comes from the relative ease of access, the anonymity it can confer on participants, relative speed of dissemination and the general prevalence of feature phones. For example, Oyinlade (2015), noted that what would have been the most embarrassing moment of the election was saved by the quick intervention by mostly young people and dissemination of information on social media platforms. He said "when the card readers provided by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to ascertain the true identity of voters began to fail, Nigerians observed that the seal on those cards had to be removed. Circulating such important notice on social media helped a lot". Many other writers on the 2015 elections in Nigeria including the Situation Room and EU election Observation mission also concurred to this view.

Oyinlade further maintained that where a case of underage voting was discovered, the suspected was snapped with phone camera and the picture went viral in a matter of minutes which provoked INEC quick intervention and investigation.

The efficacy of social media and mobile technological advancement also assisted Nigerians in policing their votes till they were counted. A case in point was at Bauchi state during the 2015 gubernatorial elections where the youth mounted guards at the INEC office in Bauchi and monitored the collation and counting of the ballots from all the 20 Local Government Areas in the state, using various social media platforms they quickly circulated counted unofficial results from pooling units in the state until the final announcement of results was made by the retuning officer. This made it difficult for anyone to change the results.

According to (Oseni, 2015), "In the Ekiti State gubernatorial election, accredited election and citizen observers, the civil society situation room, and the APC, PDP and INEC situation rooms deployed observers to the field who relied mainly on SMS, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, BBM, Instagram, for the report of incidents. Three hours after voting commenced, observers and citizens had started broadcasting election results announced in their respective voting centres through social media, which then drew the attention of political parties, local and international observers towards the comprehensive tracking and analyses of these results.

Cynthia Mbamalu, programs manager at Nigerian youth charity YIAGA, said platforms like Twitter and Facebook helped the Buhari campaign to reach population pockets that they could have otherwise missed. "Social media provided the opportunity to connect with Nigerians, especially young people," she explains. "For the first time in a long while there were tweets targeted mainly at promoting the person of General Buhari and the party's vision for Nigeria."

Some Youth driven partners like the Mandela Washington Fellowship Alumni Association of Nigeria (MWFAAN) in collaboration with Youth Initiative for Advocacy Growth and Advancement (YIAGA) held series of workshops in Cross River, Kano, Kaduna and many other places, towards the mobilization and sensitization of youths for peaceful election in 2015 in Nigeria. Ashiru Abubakar, President of the Alumni stated that "these series of conferences are expected to further drive home the message of peaceful elections, and we will not relent in our efforts as young African leaders to play our role in ensuring peace and stability in our great country Nigeria." YIAGA during the elections deployed 1,600 and 560 observers to monitor the March 28th and April 11th elections respectively.

Other youth organizations that were actively involved in peace campaigns include the Youth Alliance on Constitution and Electoral Reform, Niger Delta Coalition for Change (NDCC), the Young-stars Development Initiative (YDI) and the Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC). These youth groups initiated various programmes to educate young people about non-violent participation and urged politicians not to use youth to commit acts of violence or political hooliganism before, during or after elections. Some youth leaders representing youth faith groups, civil society and youth development organisations met on 3 February 2015 in Abuja and signed a Youth Peace Accord. They undertook to refrain from and prevent violence during and after the election (Jozwiak 2015, NDI 2015, Osumah 2016). The public engagement of our Youths through the NYSC Scheme (National Youth Service Corps) to serve in all constituencies to ensure strict observance of electoral processes with a view to prevent all forms of electoral frauds and manipulations is also a contribution to the

success of the elections. The outcome of their activities resulted in fair conduct and reporting of electoral registration and release of valid results.

Also, in late March-April 2015, a physical Situation Room was set up at a hotel in Abuja, for nine days around Nigeria's general elections, which had been repeatedly postponed as the country dealt with escalating violence. This operation centre housed 40 youth incident reporters fielding calls in two shifts, day and night. They took 2,748 calls from the public during that period. An additional 300 all-women election monitors - who were deployed in 10 targeted states for two days during the elections - reported nearly 5,000 incidents. (Women Situation Room, 2015). These young monitors collected information on incidents through questionnaires, reporting issues ranging from voting complaints to gender-based violence incidents.

The social media also revolutionized the efficiency of election observation by increasing coverage and reporting while minimizing costs. By increasing transparency and accountability, social media promoted the credibility of Nigeria's electoral process and track down incidences of violence through prompt reportage.

The importance of social media extended beyond polling day. Following the presidential inauguration, Nigerians posted tweets that included the hashtag #BuhariFixThis to offer their suggestions for the priorities of Buhari's first term in office. The Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa also developed an app, 'the Buharimeter' designed to track the progress of electoral promises and provide a forum for political discussion.

5. Conclusion

The use of social media by the organised Nigerian youth groups in the 2015 elections has evidently presented some cross cutting advantages. At a time when the National Human Rights Commission in Nigeria was reporting dozens of deaths from pre-election violence in more than half the states in the country, and with analysts predicting more of the same, it was very doubtful that the outcome of the 2015 elections was going to be anything but peaceful. However, Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and biggest economy, surprised the world by organising largely 'peaceful' presidential and national assembly elections, especially when it is compared to the 2011 elections in Nigeria.

The activities of the organised youths and civil society organizations who tirelessly spread the messages of peace, before, during and after the elections are highly commendable in this regard. This has proven to the political class (who hitherto manipulate these youths to committing electoral fraud and violence) that young people in Nigeria, like their peers in other parts of Africa and the world at large can now ride upon the innovative mobile technological advancement and the efficacy of social media to launch a bottom-up popularization of political participation. The call is for other election stakeholders to use social media in subsequent elections in Nigeria and in engagements that deepen Nigeria's democratic governance.

The submission is also that given the importance of the presence of social media in Nigerian elections and elsewhere, it has now clearly provided an excellent opportunity for citizens to contribute to election monitoring and advocating for peace. Campaigns in the lead-up to elections or other flash points to educate people on how to use social media to monitor/communicate (for example, using certain hashtags, accounts, adding location data) could increase the volume of citizen engagement in the election process and therefore reducing the tendency to violence.

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