

Hate Campaigns in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria: Implication for Future Democracy

Ibrahim J. M. and Adamu F. R.

Department of Political Sciences, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

ABSTRACT

Campaigns are known as essential part of electioneering. This reason is because the message sent across to the electorate during campaign contains the ideas that the candidate wants to share with the voters. However, a study of the situation in Nigeria, with specific reference to the 2015 Campaigns and Electioneering, shows the contrary with hate speeches as the main theme. Hate Speech presents a profound challenge to the Nigerian democratic landscape. This is because in this country like many others around the world, hate speech often precedes outbreaks of violence. No doubt, politicians who engage in hate speech during election campaigns depart from issue-based electioneering. Data from secondary sources indicate that unlike what is obtainable in other parts of the world where democracy is practiced, with policy issues forming the backbone of campaign messages, the Nigerian situation was basically on persons, character assassination, violence and abuses (hate) speeches. This paper argues that this campaign strategy often leads to electoral violence before, during and after elections. The paper therefore concludes that only campaigns that are issue based can guarantee peaceful and credible elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: Hate speech, Electioneering, Campaign, Nigeria, and Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Hate speech is generally used to describe any communication that denigrates a particular person or a group on the basis of race, color, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic. It can be in the form of speech, gesture, conduct, writing, or display [1]. Politically motivated hate speech is historically a precursor to election related harassment and violence in Nigeria.

Generally, political campaigns are an organized effort which seeks to influence the decision-making process within a specific group or environment. This is because it provides that mobilization of forces either by an organization or individuals to influence others in order to effect an identified and desired political change. The import of this is that it shows people and particularly, political candidates' ability to sensitize the political community in relation to making the community considers them as potentials and better representatives of the people [2]. A critical analysis of the above shows that for a political campaign

to be able to act effectively and efficiently as the mobilization force that will eventually influence the decision of the people, the message contained in the campaign must be convincing and attainable.

Scholars have argued that political campaigns in Nigeria, especially during campaigns have deviated from the original norm. This is because instead of the political actors sensitizing the political community in relation to making the community considers them as potentials and better representatives of the people, they engage more in hate speeches [3]. Thus, in the nation's political arena, hate speech is fast becoming so pervasive that it is doubtful if there are many Nigerians that are completely free from the vice.

Issue based campaigns on the other hand presents the perfect antithesis of hate speech. Instead of mudslinging, bigotry and insults, politicians are expected to campaign around various questions of public policy. Issue based campaigns require politicians to center their

conversations around their views and plans on matters which are or have been a matter of controversy in the country. Issue based campaigns should lead to issue-based voting, where voters compare the candidates' respective principles against their own personal belief systems in order to decide for whom to vote.

Substantively, dangerous/hate speech in the Nigerian context is a speech acts that:

- Insults people for their religion
- Abuses people for their ethnic or linguistic affiliation
- Expresses contempt against people because of their place of origin
- Disparages or intimidates women or girls because of their gender
- Condone discriminatory assertions against people living with disability
- Abuses or desecrates symbols of cultural or religious practices
- Denigrates or otherwise ridicules traditional or cultural institutions of other people
- Deliberately spread falsehood or rumours that demeans or maligns or otherwise ostracizes other people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender or place of origin for the accident of one form of disability or the other [4].

Although, this is fast becoming the norm in Nigeria, however, the International Law and national legal frameworks both prohibit such speech. For instance, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law. The Article 4 of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), also provides for states to declare an offence punishable by law "all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination acts of violence or incitement to such acts against any race or group of persons of another colour or ethnic origin" [5]. In his analysis, [6] argued that there is strong relationship between campaign of calumny (hate

speech) and electoral violence, and that as far as history is concerned, elements of this have often characterized elections in Nigeria. He painted a graphic picture of this thus: Elections in Nigeria have historically been conflict ridden. The campaigns preceding elections are invariably marked by pettiness, intolerance and violence...including abduction and assassinations. And elections and their outcomes have often been neither free nor fair" characterized by violations of the process (both inadvertently and willful), corrupt conduct by officials, rigging of results and so on.

Emphasizing the above, [7] opined thus: with unprecedented political thuggery and uncontrollable violence characterized by wanton destruction of lives and property, election period in Nigeria is best described as warfare...incidence of intra party and inter-party conflicts and violence have led to endemic abductions and assassinations of opponents and innocent victims, flagrant and official rigging of election results.

From the above, it is clear that the relationship between hate speech and electoral violence is a strong one and has been largely responsible for post electoral destructions in most parts of the world especially in the Third World countries, where the hold-on-to-power at all cost syndrome is strong.

Literature Review

Hate Speech Campaign in Politics: The Case of Rwanda and Kenya Research has shown that in most countries where the people and their political class have not been able to curtail the use of hate speeches in campaign and political activities, the end have always been disastrous. This was the case in Kenya and Rwanda. In the case of Rwanda, available historical evidence has shown that the Hutus and Tutsis share much in common. In fact, not many factors divide the two peoples; even language did not divide Hutus and Tutsis whether in Rwanda or Burundi. Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda both speak Kinyarwanda, which is closely related to the language spoken by the Tutsi and Hutu of Burundi, namely

Kirundi. Other aspects of culture such as religious traditions, dance and music, are also shared by the two groups and were governed for centuries by the same aristocracy. Unfortunately, due to political manipulation and hate speeches, by the second half of the twentieth century, Rwanda and Burundi have shared a history of communal conflict which resulted in death and internal and external refugee flows on massive scale [8].

Describing the form and nature the genocide in Rwanda took, [9] noted that the world was rudely awoken only in April, 1994, by the badly mutilated and bloated bodies of hundreds of thousands of the massacred Tutsis floating in Lake Victoria, and the gory pictures beamed to it by television, of Tutsis being subjected to the most inhuman torture to death by the militia group Interhamwe ("those who attack together") and Impuzamugambi ("those who only have one aim") [10]. The killings were not spontaneous. They were well planned by "groups of extremists at the heart of government, all of them members of the President's entourage, and many of them related to the President," using the resources of the state.

In Kenya, it was reported that the disputed 2007 Presidential election resulted in the outbreak of post-election violence which left over 1,000 people casualties and over 600,000 people displaced. The post-election enquiries concluded that hate speech and incitement to violence was widespread on the campaign trail and in the mainstream media, exploiting tensions between ethnic communities. In the years since the 2007 elections, a few politicians were arrested for engaging in hate speech and inciting violence [11]. In 2009, political candidates Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto (President of Kenya and Deputy President respectively), were indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity for their alleged part in orchestrating the 2007 post-election violence. Investigations established that hate speech was also disseminated via SMS messages on mobile

phones. Hate speech on native language which were also relayed on radio stations and online fanned ethnic tensions.

In the case of Ivory Coast, in the aftermath of the lost election, the incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept his defeat. Along with his wife, Simone Gbagbo, he organised parallel State's structures, attempted to censor the media and reinforced his hate speech against ethnicities living in the North of the country and heightened the level of attack and destruction in the land. At the end, over 3 000 deaths were recorded, while thousands of hundreds of refugees from the country were scattered all over West Africa. Gbagbo's wifewas jailed for 20 years for the inflammatory statements she made in the post-violence of the election 2011 in Ivory Coast. In a nutshell, the above give a clear detail of what hate speech can do to a nation's polity [12].

Identifying Hate Campaign

There are several considerations to examine before abusive language or innuendo can be considered hate speech. These include:

- Severity- Hate speech can be identified by the severity of what is said, the severity of the harm advocated and the intensity of the communication.
- Intent- Another way is to look at the intention of the author of the statement. Was the statement intended to spread racist or intolerant ideas through the use of hate speech or was it an attempt to inform the public about an issue of general interest?
- Content- Specifics of the speech including its tone and if it requires listeners to respond with certain actions or inactions are important. The inciter themselves should be considered, specifically their standing in the context of the audience to whom the speech is directed. The level of their authority or influence over the audience is relevant as is the degree to which the audience is

already primed or conditioned, to take their lead from the inciter.

- Extent- this refers to the public nature of the speech. For speech to qualify as hate speech, it must have occurred in public. This also means that communication has to be directed at a non-specific audience (general public) or to a number of individuals in a public space [13].

Extent of Hate Campaign during the 2015 General Elections

Drawing from the lessons of Rwanda, scholars have argued that in the history of the country's political campaigns, the 2015 General elections recorded more campaign of calumny and character assassination, so much so that it almost turned the country's political arena into a theatre of hate speeches and campaigns coloured in a form that defies logic and common sense. In a more specific term, [14] opined thus: The 2015 General elections have been turned into a theatre of hate speeches and campaigns coloured in a form that defies logic and common sense. Various politically motivated hate speeches about various candidates and especially the two leading Presidential candidates of All Progressives Congress and Peoples Democratic Party have been bandied. I am sure if experts should collate analyses of contents of the social media this year, Nigeria will rank top because arguably more than 40 million young Nigerians who have since graduated and have no means of livelihood have found solace in the various social media platforms and are busy churning out divergent messages. The use of hate speeches in Nigeria preparatory to the coming general elections has become notorious [15].

A careful analysis of the Ahmed Lemu's Panel Report on the 2011 post election violence in Nigeria shows that hate speech played a major role in inciting people against one another. According to the report, as a result of this, more than 1000 persons were killed across the country with Kaduna State having the highest casualties of about 847 during the

post-election violence of 2011. As the stage became set for the 2015 General Elections and the actors of the major parties became sure of the flag bearers, hate speeches fast assumed a common place in the various campaigns. During this period, hardly could one hear a politician or group of politicians address issues without using abusive expressions, especially during political rallies which became avenues for raining hate speeches. In some other instances, contestants from even the same religious group, openly incited her members against others [16]. Same was the case even among people that professed the same faith but different denominations. In some other instances, ethnic groups were freely denigrated. Similarly, the online campaign was not less competitive. Candidates and political camps went all out to engage the over six million Nigerian Facebook users and about a million users each of messaging services such as Twitter, BlackBerry Messenger and WhatsApp. Sites and accounts of various contestant and party sprung up on these messaging services, leading to a fierce online war between the APC and the PDP [17]. Other political parties were not left out as the platforms proved to be veritable area where candidates and parties with less financial muscles competed with their more endowed counterparts easily.

The Role of the Media

In civilized nations of the world, during elections, the media plays the role of effective management of reportage as a way of maintaining peace and stability. However, in the developing world, the role played by the media has not helped matters. This was the case up to the eve of the 2015 Presidential Election, which has made scholars to question the assumption that the media should act to protect democracy. [20], had argued thus:

In the era of politics, assumption is that the media would serve as platform not only for the provision of information to the citizenry, but also as important instruments in

the mobilization of the people and providing civic education for them to play their role in the democratic process. There is a desire to create a discerning and critical electorate. One of the goals of this political education is to provide a convivial environment for the choice of political leaders through elections with rancor and violence, make peaceful legitimate demands on political leaders, tolerate and accommodate dissenting or opposing political opinions. The public is expected to see through the exploitation of primordial loyalties including acts of thuggery at the expense of issues in the drive to capture political power. Expectedly, the people are to resist being drawn into acts of violence and blind support for political parties and politicians. The media are therefore required to become agents and promoters of peace to the electorate so that they can make informed political choice and take control of their political destiny. There is an expectation that this would contribute to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

It was rather unfortunate that the media continued to play the role of the devil's advocate as they became alarmists and instruments of destruction in the hands of the politicians. In the case of the 2015 Presidential Election, the media was at the disposal of the highest bidders. They were ready to publish or air any news as long as the client was ready to pay even when it threatened the corporate existence of the nation. This act totally contradicts the major role of the media in election issues as opined by [21], thus: ...

that is needed to elect the right candidates who can ensure good governance. Where such public awareness is lacking, those of us in the media must accept a share of the blame of failed elections in Nigeria.

Implications of the Hate Campaign

The blame for the hate campaign speeches and advertisements that dominated the country's 2015 general elections has been heaped at the doorsteps of the nation's media organisations. Appraising how the nation's media fared in maintaining a high level of professionalism, accuracy and impartiality before, during and after the elections, Professor Emovwo Biakolo, founding dean, School of Media and Communication, Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, noted that the media's performance in investigative reporting of the electoral process was less credible. "My major concern is what the state of truth-telling was during the elections in the media? The basic tenets of the media in my own observation are fundamentally factuality, accuracy, fairness and balance; these are the typical norms we expect in media work and sensitivity to ethnic and religious issues. I think the scorecard here is not exactly very high", he said.

On hate speeches, Dr. Abigail Ogwezzy-Idisika of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos, said the various hate speeches from different political groups were enormous and violated the Electoral Acts and Codes. She said since the major political parties have realised that hate speeches accounted for their defeat at the polls, it is better to avoid it in subsequent elections [5].

The electronic media especially is believed to have allowed its stable to be used by politicians to broadcast hate campaigns against opponents. Even the National Broadcasting Commission has had cause to caution broadcasters on the need to be professional and stick to the broadcasting code and the Electoral Act as pertaining to broadcasting election campaigns and election results. But some television stations have been broadcasting some so-called "sponsored" programmes that in many cases demonise

opponents and even ethnic groups. Some television stations have also openly supported political parties [2]. They either openly campaign for the party of their choice or make their facilities and programming available to a party in contravention of the NBC regulations that advocate equal broadcast exposure and opportunities to all parties and candidates in an election period.

From the above, it is clear that through the promotion of hate speech circulation, the media tactically neglected her

responsibility as contained in Sections 22 and 39 of the 1999 Constitution which bestow on her the power to rightly inform the people as well as to hold government and individuals accountable for their actions [16]. This is even more dangerous considering the fact that the level of enlightenment in the Nigerian society is such that a lot of people still believe that any information in printed form or aired from the radio/television is the gospel truth.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

From the discourse so far, it is clear that hate speech took the centre stage as it almost became a legal instrument of campaign. This became even more worrisome when the major political parties during this period tried to outdo each other in terms of hate speeches. This had so much negative impact on both the people, their disposition towards the elections as well as the candidates. Accordingly, while this paper argues that this is not good for the political development of the country, it also advises that the government in

conjunction with the Independent National Electoral Commission and other relevant agencies including those in the academic circle must work together to prevent such occurrence in future. It is also important that those that have taken to politics as their major business and occupation should help save the country from collapse by desisting from speeches and acts that are capable of setting the nation ablaze. A proper legal framework that holds political actors responsible for hate speech and its consequences is necessary.

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