
Party Politics, Hate Speech and the Media: A Developing Society Perspective

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Abstract

Party politics stems from the political activities that are aimed fostering the good of political parties rather than the people. It can be vicious. It can be debilitating to the body politic. This is so much so during electioneering seasons. Political parties employ extreme propaganda to further their agenda. At all cost, the rival parties must be mowed down. It is a jostle for power; a jostle for influence. The centrality of hate speech in this endeavour has become rather too obvious in recent times; especially in a developing country like Nigeria. If it is not the ethnic group that is derogatorily attacked, it is their religion or the personalities who are in the running for elected office. Abusive or threatening speech or writing that targets opponents find free course. To the politicians it is a “normal”; a battle of wits for political survival and advancement. The media, the purveyors of information, are usually critical in electioneering situations because of their roles in political information through news, advertising and discourses. Even with the platform of the social media, Nigerians still depend heavily on the mainline media as a staple. This means that the media’s understanding and sensitivity to the adverse effect of hate speech could see them practice with a little more social responsibility which could help stem the impact on the psyche of the Nigerian electorate. This paper explored this possibility

Key words: Politics, body politic, hate speech, party politics

Introduction

The Context of Conventionality

The contemporary world systems have unwritten conventions which different societies appear to have signed up to in the spirit of following global best practices.

For instance, Nigeria, as a country, is referred to as Federal Republic of Nigeria. Why? Global best practices appear to hold that a country must be governed by an elected head and elected representatives, guided by a constitution, to be part of contemporary human civilization. Even where you have Monarchies, which are deemed anachronistic, the case is made for constitutionality, whereby, power resides in an elected head and representatives, as is the case with the UK and some other Monarchies across the globe.

Democracy – government of the people, by the people and for the people – as a system of government is adjudged, in line with global best practices, as the best political arrangement for all societies, which ensures equity, freedom (of speech, association, movement and worship), justice (predicated on the rule of law), pluralism, peace and prosperity.

Nigeria's experience with democracy can be accounted for in the various "republics" that we have had over the years spanning our political independence. The First Republic was 1963-1966. The Second Republic was 1979- 1983. The Third Republic was 1989-1993. The Fourth Republic began in 1999 and it is still running. It is worthy to note that the vagaries of political actors had caused the various Republics, with the exception of the Fourth Republic, which has lasted for 19 years, to be truncated by the aberration of military interventions.

Global best practices demand that democracy should find expression in elections; political parties, political campaigns, and the intermediary of the media as the link between the political class and the citizenry. Anything short of these might seem aberrant. The conventional thing is that every society must practice democracy as a global standard.

Elections as the Key Component of Democracy

With the practice of democracy comes the idea of elections – a formal and organized choice by vote of a person for a political office or other position (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). According to Kirkpatrick (1991) "Democratic elections are not merely symbolic. They are competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive elections in which the chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticize government, to publish their criticism, and to present alternatives."

Every democratic process is democratic because the power of choice is left to the group and not a clique. It is ballot power and not bullet power, as in praetorian cases or hereditary power, as in monarchies. When Nigerian citizens vote in an election, they decide who should be their local government, councilors, local government Chairmen, state legislators, governors, Federal House of Representative members, Senators and, ultimately, the President. That is political empowerment. The very reason we often hear the saying that "power belongs to the people."

Depending on the constitution of any given country, elections are held after a specified period. In Nigeria's case, general elections are held after four years, barring any bye elections, for elective offices at the state and federal levels. Political power is gained and lost after elections. Elections, therefore, are a veritable aspect of politics – decision-making through public facilities (Deutch, 1970).

Politics in a Democracy

Politics is who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936). That is to say the quest for political power and utilization of this power. Political power can be used to further the interests of a country. It can be used to improve the lives of people by taking decisions that would enable the allocation of resources to development the components of society like the health sector, the education sector, the business or economic sector, the transport sector etc.

In Nigeria, political power means the enablement to decide who gets what. Where would the first standard gauge rail line start? How would it be distributed, in the sense of connectivity with regards to cities across the country? Who becomes a minister of what? Who would be among the service chiefs? Who would head the agencies? Who becomes Ambassador to where? Someone takes that decision because he has the mandate to do so. That is political power.

A lot has been said about marginalization in Nigeria, this is because political decisions taken by those who have acquired political power appear to take care of certain groups to the disadvantage of other groups. So, in order to serve some interests and be in a position to enact policies and laws of the state, people engage in politics – actions or activities concerned with

achieving and using power. The stakes are usually very high, especially where we have the mentality of winner-takes-all, as is the case with Nigeria. A lot appears to be lost when political power is lost. For instance, if the geopolitical zones are not represented in visible political offices, like that of the President, the Vice President, the Senate President, Deputy Senate President, Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives or Deputy Speaker, the feeling of not being counted in the political equation arises. Nobody should then be surprised at the manner politics is a do-or-die thing in Nigeria. Anything and everything could be done in order to gain political power, including the employment of hate speeches to demean or demonize political opponents.

Party System in a Democracy

The practice of politics in a democracy is facilitated through the instrumentality of political parties. A political party is a group of voters organized to support certain public policies. The aim of a political party is to elect officials who will try to carry out the party's policies (Flanders, 2007). The political party is a platform for the association of political like minds who have the same interests, share the same ideological leanings; have the same vision and fears. All these are contained in a manifesto which identifies what a political party stands for; this coalition bands together to seek political power by engaging the citizenry who can empower them through the ballot box.

Nigeria gained flag independence as a multiparty democracy. The political parties in the first republic were:

- The NCNC (National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe
- The Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo
- The Northern People's Congress led by Sir Ahmadu Bello

Apart from the NCNC which had a hue of Pan-Nigerian leaders the others were formed along ethnic lines and geographical lines – A recipe for the schisms and rivalries that soon attended the young Nigerian nation and nearly resulted in the breakup of the country when the then Eastern Region attempted secession, after the pogroms that decimated the Igbo population in the North.

During the Second Republic the six political parties were:

- NPP (Nigerian People's Party) formed by late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe
- NPN (National Party of Nigeria) headed by Makama Bida, a former Chieftain of the Northern People's Congress.
- GNPP (Great Nigeria People's Party), an offshoot of NPP formed by late Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim
- NAP (Nigeria Advance Party) headed by late Dr. Tunji Braithwaite
- UPN (Unity Party of Nigeria) formed by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo
- PRP (People's Redemption Party) formed by late Mallam Aminu Kano

Once more history would repeat as most of these parties were formed along ethnic line and the quest to further the interests of tribal groups.

The Third Republic saw the formation of two political parties modeled after the two main political parties in the United States, by the then military president Ibrahim Babangida. These parties were:

- National Republican Convention; and

- Social Democratic Party

Though the Federal Government tried to move the country away from the politics of regions and ethnicity, the gravitation of politicians of northern extraction towards the NRC and politicians of southern extraction towards the SDP had led to the suggestion that the NRC was indeed “Northern Republican Convention” and the SDP, “Southern Democratic Party.”

The Fourth republic is laden with so many political parties that you might lose count. Barring the emergence of more political parties, the following are the political parties associated with the Fourth Republic:

- Africa Action Congress (AAC)
- All Progressives Congress (APC)
- Alliance for Democracy (AD)
- All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP)
- All People's Party (APP)
- All Progressives Grand Alliance
- Democratic People's Alliance (DPA)
- National Democratic Party (NDP)
- New Democrats (ND)
- People's Democratic Party (PDP)
- Progressive People's Alliance (PPA)
- People's Redemption Party (PRP)
- People's Salvation Party (PSP)
- United Nigeria People's Party (UNPP)
- Fresh Democratic Party (FDP)
- National Conscience Party (NCP)
- Justice Party (JP)
- Masses Movement of Nigeria (MMN)
- Labour Party (LP)
- Kowa party
- Social Democratic Party (SDP)

These political parties provide the platform from which political power is sought in Nigeria. According to the Nigerian constitution there is no provision for independent candidacy.

With this number of political parties, we can imagine the degree of party politics that prevails in the Fourth Republic. The stakes are indeed high.

Party Politics

With political parties comes party politics. This is expressed through partisanship. Political parties are supposed to work for the good of the country but what we see in contemporary Nigeria is a struggle among the political parties to gain power and dominate governance for the good of the party.

Political parties in Nigeria which have won elections appear to view victory at the polls as the passport to the “spoils of war”. This is why any party in power believes they have the right to run the country as a “Family Affair” to the exclusion of the opposition who are supposed to lick their wounds and try to stand on their feet for the next crushing defeat by the ruling party.

Partisanship

In politics, if you are a partisan, it means you adhere firmly to a political party, faction, idea or cause; you exhibit “blind, prejudiced, and unreasoning allegiance (Hannity, 2018). Partisanship is the term used to describe the support that any party gets from its supporters in opposition to the party’s political opponents (White and Ypi, 2016). When we can’t talk politics without our ego getting bruised and our feelings hurt we are probably partisan. When you just think of voting a party instead of the best candidate you are probably partisan. Partisanship is apparently the behavior that ensures that a political party ploughs ahead of an opponent. This can give rise to hate speeches whereby in the quest to gain the ascendancy in the minds of the citizenry, a party might embark on campaign of calumny against the opponent, banking on messages that resonate with their base.

Bipartisanship

Bipartisanship is a meeting in the middle: nobody gets their most extreme position enacted, but the parties broadly agree on a centrist position (*The Economist*, 2010).

Partisanship in politics smacks of politics of exclusion but when we begin to think of Government of National Unity which seeks to heal the wounds of elections, we are in the region of bipartisanship. In 2011, the Nigerian electorate in the Southwest voted massively for the candidate of the PDP even though he belonged to the opposition AC, and declared that he voted for the candidate, whom he adjudged the best and not his political party. This was bipartisanship in action, a healthy situation for a democracy – putting the interest of country above party and oneself.

Hate Speech: What You Need To Know

Party politics comes with political campaigns which take the nature of political communication – communication in the political process which can take place in a variety of forms (formal or informal), in a variety of venues (public and private) and through a variety of medium (mediated or unmediated content). It includes the production and generation of messages by political actors, the transmission of political messages through direct and indirect channels, and the reception of political messages (On Thu, 2016); and political advertising – advertising that attempts to influence or comment upon a matter which is currently the subject of extensive political debate. This includes advertising or marketing communications about a political party, representative or candidate, advertising about political issues or issues of public interest, and advertising in relation to government policies (whether published/broadcast by the government or someone else). Advertising by Government, political parties, lobby groups and other interest groups may fall into this category (Ridout, 2010).

These forms of communications are aimed at skewing opinions favourable to the party sponsoring such campaigns.

We hear about Islamophobia, anti-semitism and anti-immigrant nationalism. These extreme positions of hate could form the basis for political campaigns.

In Germany the AFD (Alternative for Germany, a party described as right wing and nationalist became the third largest party in Germany after the 2017 federal elections. The party campaigned mainly on anti-immigrant, xenophobic and Islamophobic lines.

The leader of the one-man Freedom Party (PVV), Geert Wilders once said, on the hustings, that Islam was not compatible with freedom. He had been credited with such statements as:

“Dutch values are based on Christianity, on Judaism, on humanism. Islam and freedom are not compatible; you see it in almost every country where it dominates. There is a total lack of freedom, civil society, rule of law, middle class; journalists, gays, apostates — they are all in trouble in those places. And we import it”; and calling Moroccan immigrants to the Netherlands, "Moroccan scum".

Hate is intense dislike or passionate and extreme aversion for or hostility toward somebody or group. Hate speech or messages imply various ways of subordinating, wounding, humiliating, or degrading personalities or groups (Brown, 2017). Nazi atrocities against the Jews during the Second World War were born out of the hate messages spewed by the Nazi propaganda machine headed by Joseph Goebbels.

The Nature of the country Nigeria against the backdrop of Hate Speech

Nigeria has never been one country. The two divides of the Northern and Southern Protectorate have always been separate entities until the administrative amalgamation by the British who saw economic sense in this act and inadvertently sowed the seed of suspicion and fear of domination between these entities that are now Nigeria. This appears to have perpetually hindered Nigeria from attaining nationhood and making real progress very difficult. In the Twenty-First century when Nigerians are supposed to be talking about issues bogging the nation and assembling men and women with the capacity and vision to deliver the goods, there is still, “it is the turn of the North” “Igbo Presidency” “If we support so and so, power will go to so and so region.”

If Nigerians should appraise their political journey so far, can they say that these tendencies have helped them any? It is clear that the divide and rule tactic of the British colonial masters still subsists today. Nigerians are still with the much they had left them just as they still have the exploitative rail system to show for their nearly 60 years of flag independence.

In Nigeria nobody talks Nigeria. Nigerians are first Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Tiv, Efik, Berom, Itsekiri etc; Nigerians are first of all, what they are by way of ethnic nationalities. This breeds suspicion, disharmony and often times hate. Some tribal elements cannot stand the “stench” of other tribes – the Igbos staged a tribal coup in the roaring sixties, therefore they must be hunted at every turn and evicted from Nigeria. The Yorubas are prone to betraying pacts the committed to, therefore every Yoruba must be dealt with as a sore thumb. Some misguided bandits hack people to death in their sleep, so ever Fulani is blood thirsty and must be ostracized anywhere they are found and moved back to the North.

Nigerians talk in terms of religion. If you are not a Christian then you must be a Moslem. These religious persuasions are often sources of irritation to those Nigerians who belong to one but not the other. There is always the suspicion that one religion is attempting to lord it over the other.

Now the basis for appointments is no longer competence but Federal Character. This is a sure path to the worship of mediocrity. Nigeria struggles to strike a balance of tribe and religion in almost all crucial aspects of her national dynamics. This opens the door for the unhealthy quest for political power which is the lever that can be used to leverage advantage for one’s tribe or religion. Even if a Christian/Christian ticket can deliver the goods, no way, it can’t be. If it is an all Moslem service chiefs, competent to deliver, no way; that is not Nigeria.

These things that identify Nigerians, divide Nigerians. And as they divide them, they are hate bound. Nigerians address the “other” based on hate because of the negative perception of this “other” that they have. Not every Igbo is IPOB, but you might see the situation where someone says “foolish Igbo IPOBs get ready for ‘python dance’.”; duplicitous owambe Yorubas; almajiri Hausa-Fulani obsessed with power because the lack education. Nigerians can mouth hate in this way as a result of the identity divide.

The identity divide is really ravaging America under Trump. We see the Democratic Party playing the identity card when they seem to have no answer to President Trump’s blistering attacks on the ideals they hold dear. This response has always served to divide America further, since it whips up hate filled sentiments by Trump’s supporters against those to whom racism is supposedly directed.

Political Campaigns and Hate Speech

Nigerian politicians dwell, most times, on what divides Nigerians. When a political party is viewed as tribe-oriented, the “other” in an attempt to undo it and pander to their base might employ hate messages.

A report by the Nigerian civil society in 2015 cited some of the hate speeches used during the 2015 general elections campaign in its report titled ‘Hate speech, Issue based Campaigns and the 2015 General Elections’

- Katsina State Gov. Shema reportedly urged his supporters to attack opponents and referred to his political opponents as cockroaches urging his supporters to kill them as they kill cockroaches.
- The Ekiti State Governor, Peter Ayodele Fayose in January repeatedly took out front page newspaper advertorials warning voters not to vote for the APC presidential candidate Muhamadu Buhari. These adverts, now widely known as “death wish advertorials” insinuated that the presidential candidate was likely to die in office if elected, like the late President, Yar’ adua.
- Speaking during the PDP women presidential campaign rally in Kogi State, the Nation’s First Lady, reportedly described Gen. Buhari as unfit to be the country’s president, calling him old and brain dead.
- Nigerian First Lady, Patience Jonathan is also was recorded as having urged the members of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) to stone anyone that promises them change. “Change” is the slogan of the All Progressives Congress(APC).In the same campaign speech given at a rally which held on Monday, March 2, 2015, in Calabar, the capital city of Cross River state, Mrs Jonathan was quoted as saying “Our people no dey born shildren [sic] wey dem no dey fit count. Our men no dey born shildren[sic] throwway for street. We no dey like the people for that side.” Thus making a derogatory statement obviously referring to the Northern parts of the country where the awful practice of child abandonment known as “Almajiri” still occurs.
- Emerging unscathed after the plethora of criticism that followed the documentary on General Muhammadu Buhari, presidential candidate of the APC earlier in the year, A popular television Network, AIT, on March 1st aired a documentary titled „Lion of Bourdillon“. The hour-long documentary, aired at 11 p.m. showcased various properties and companies across Lagos purportedly owned by Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a top leader of the APC describing him as “Nigeria”s biggest landlord”. It also alleged that the APC chieftain was “charged for narcotics” in 1993.

- Oba Akiolu of Lagos on April 3rd, 2015 said, „On Saturday, if anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish that Ambode will be the next governor of Lagos state, the person is going to die inside this water...For the Igbos and others in Lagos, they should go where the Oba of Lagos heads to“
- Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari said, “2015 is more than do-or-die. You are a man and I am a man, we are going to meet at the battlefield“ (News Express 3rd May, 2014)
- Mujahid Dokubo-Asari on Channels Television also said that General Muhammadu Buhari of the APC is a beast clothed in human skin and would ensure he does all in his power to make sure he does not become president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

During electioneering seasons, the wish of Nigerians should be that politicians have learnt from experience to avoid campaigns of calumny based on hate which can be injurious to the Nigeria polity. But recent exchanges among political opponents seem to suggest the opposite. Nerves have been frayed by what some view as exclusionary politics by the government of the day. “Go for the jugular” appears to be the rallying cry of politicians. This does not bode well for the country.

It is not enough to prescribe the death penalty for hate speech. There is the need to address the underlying factors that give rise to hate speech. Bipartisanship should be encouraged by any means possible, especially by the Nigerian media which has the enviable role of the fourth estate of the realm.

The Media VIS-À-VIS Hate Speech

Almost everyone gets his or her information about world, national, and local affairs from the mass media. This fact gives both print and broadcast journalism important functions that include influencing public opinion, determining the political agenda, providing a link between the government and the people, acting as a government watchdog, and affecting socialization (Hendricks, 2018).

The Role of the media in a democracy

The media is an important element for any functional democracy. Prevention of access to information to citizens is a violation of human rights. The freedom that comes with democracy requires that citizens get information and communication to be able to make informed decisions. Media coverage during elections helps the citizenry to form opinions on the right persons to elect to power.

The media as a watchdog exposes the loopholes in the democratic system, which ultimately helps the government to fill the vacuums of these loopholes and to make the system more accountable, responsive and citizen-friendly (Kibore, 2017).

It is through the media that people are made aware of the extent to which government is functioning and politicians fulfilling their campaign promises. They serve as liaison between the elected and the electorate, holding those who are elected to political offices accountable to the citizenry.

The media is often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm because of the oversight function they exercise in the process of governance.

The media in the era of pronounced hate speech

The media can be instrumental in fueling or quelling hate messages. But, more often than not they help to fuel them. In Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, Radio Milles Collines was dubbed

“hate radio” because of its role in disseminating hate messages that helped fuel the massacre of over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus by the Hutu Power militias.

In the US, the incessant attacks of the American mainstream media or the liberal media, led by CNN, and the defiant retorts by President Trump, have only served the purpose of overheating the American polity. Identity politics which have been on the low for some time now have been given vent to by the American media “Trump hate” and “Trumpian” rhetoric. Americans now know that immigrants are invaders. Americans now know that they have “Obama Judges” and “Trump judges”. Decisions that border on national interests are taken along party lines. Bipartisan has been buried on the altar of hate.

When the media becomes partisan, it abdicates its role as a neutral player in the execution of its functions. The democratic environment might become dysfunctional as a result. This was the case with the activities of Rwandan Radio Milles Collines.

Fortunately, the contemporary Nigerian media appears to be a little bit more professional than their American counterparts. This is worth sustaining, now that we can see hate speech as a destabilizing element that should be nipped in the bud. This is crucial in any electioneering season.

Recommendations

The Nigerian media will do well to contain the menace of hate speech by adopting measures that reflect journalistic professionalism. These measures should include:

- Observing social responsibility in their reportage as a way to eschew hate issues. Social responsibility implies that the media like any other sector of the society should not harm, but should promote the political and socio-cultural aspects in relation to the well-being of the society. It involves ethics that guides media practice and puts an obligation on the media towards restraint on activities that might be inimical to the environment, society, culture and economy.
- Avoiding opinion journalism based on sentiments and extremely subjective viewpoints that serve parochial political interests.
- Mounting counter messages on social media platforms designed, specifically to neutralize identified hate messaging. This can be achieved through fact-checks presented to social media users to help them form opinions about hate messages they might have been exposed to.
- Revive the noble art of investigative journalism which is an antidote for fake news. Most hate messages thrive on fake news. It behooves the media to present fact news as countermeasure to fake news.

Conclusion

There is the belief that the power of the media if positively harnessed, could help to cleanse the Nigerian political environment of the malady of hate speech and politics of bitterness. It all begins with information that affords knowledge. A well informed Nigeria could be the catalyst for a reformed Nigeria. As Ted Roberts of VOA fame would say, “News that you can use”. It is the media that should provide news that the society can use. The media can help society to unlearn certain approaches to national life that does no good to the society. It begins with the media unlearning unprofessional practices that can fuel disaffection in the society. The time to unlearn is always now.

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