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## **PROVOCATIVE DISCOURSE AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA'S 2011 ELECTIONS**

BY PATRICIA ENIMIEN OFILI

### **SUMMARY**

- Regional, religious, and ethnic cleavages marked the April 2011 elections in Nigeria resulting in violence, destruction of property, and displacement of people.
- Inflammatory rhetoric among politicians and the media served to inflame passions and fuel conflict during the elections.
- The April 2011 elections offer an opportunity for Nigerian society to learn from past mistakes to avoid similar conflict in the future.

The April 2011 general elections in Nigeria were hailed as among the fairest in the country's history, but also among the bloodiest. More than 800 people died in three days of rioting in 12 states in northern Nigeria. Aid workers estimated that 65,000 people were displaced during the elections (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The outbreak of violence and the resultant displacement is — at least in part — attributed to inflammatory statements made by political leaders and public discourse in the media before, during, and after the elections.

The elections featured many contenders for the office of president, but two emerged as the front-runners and became the focal points of attention: Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari. Incumbent candidate, President Goodluck Jonathan represented the People's Democratic Party (PDP). President Jonathan, a Christian from the minority Ijaw ethnic group, hails from the south of Nigeria. Formerly Nigeria's vice president, Jonathan became president in May 2010 upon the death of then-President Umar Musa Yar'dua. Jonathan's opponent, General Muhammadu Buhari, a former military head of state, represented the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). Buhari is a Muslim from the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group in northern Nigeria.

The disparate identities of the two candidates for the presidency meant the

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election would touch on the fault lines that define Nigerian politics, namely regional, religious, and ethnic divides. In particular, Nigeria's north versus south divide was prevalent and dominated the election discourse among politicians and the media.

President Jonathan's candidacy was cast against the backdrop of his southern Nigerian roots and the process by which he ascended to the highest political office in Nigeria. The fault lines in Nigerian politics necessitated the creation of mechanisms to prevent conflict in elections. At the national level, various drafts and reviews of the Nigerian constitution retained a 'quota system' as a means of maintaining equilibrium in the socio-political structure. Versions of the quota system have also been reflected in the internal power structures of political parties. For instance, the PDP, which has been in power since 1999, devised a 'rotational system' (also known as 'zoning'), which ensured the alternation of southern and northern candidates in each general election. In this way, if the presidential candidate for 2011 was a southerner, then in the next general elections, the PDP would select a northerner as a candidate (Amakihe, 2010).

This formula resulted in the party choosing retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, an ethnic Yoruba and Christian from the south as a presidential candidate, and Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim from a minority ethnic group in the north as Obasanjo's running mate in the 1999 elections. The Obasanjo-Abubakar team won the elections and governed Nigeria for two consecutive four-year terms. On the completion of the last term in office, the party—on the basis of the same formula—fielded Umar Musa Yar'dua, a Muslim from the north as candidate for president and Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south as vice-president for the 2007 election (Awowole-Brown, 2006).

The death of President Yar'dua in May 2010 unsettled the 'zoning' balance within the PDP (Afrol News, 2009). In the wake of Yar'dua's death, the ensuing debate centred on whether the zoning formula should remain or not. Northern political leaders, including former president Ibrahim Babangida, former finance minister Adamu Ciroma, and former vice-president Atiku Abubakar, insisted that a northerner be selected as president for the next eight years as the south had used up its eight-year term under Obasanjo (Adegbuyi, 2010). Other contentious questions in the debate included the following: Between the country's constitution and the party's, which was

pre-eminent? What is the constitutional position of the vice president in the event of the demise or absence of the president? Should the party decide what is right for Nigeria? (Shilgba, 2011). This situation generated intense rancour and dissention within the PDP, and by extension the rest of the country.

The discursive and rhetorical patterns employed to construct the opposing stand points and the accompanying uproar—especially surrounding pressing social issues like high crime rates, insecurity, greed and corruption among politicians—also established the premise for the 2011 post-election crisis. The post-election crisis developed from long, drawn-out political intrigues and skirmishes over the manner in which stakeholders engaged in discourse and other communicative devices. In this kind of tense social climate preceding the elections, unguarded utterances and media claims—especially partisan ones—easily spark violence and crisis.

## **NIGERIA'S ETHNIC COMPOSITION, IDENTITY CRISIS AND DISCOURSE OF THE "OTHER"**

Four hundred and fifty ethnic groups make up the Nigerian state. The nagging issue of sectional identity in the Nigerian social and ethnic consciousness has often brought about and empowered a discourse of the "other." The prevalence of this discourse and the constant reference to it reflects the country's fierce ethnic nationalism, which has a fragmenting effect on the Nigerian social, political, and religious identity. As a routine rhetorical practice, the 450 ethnic groups often construct the "other" in discriminatory and derogatory terms. Examples include the Yoruba, an ethnic group in south western Nigeria and one of the three major ethnic groups in the country, referring to the Igbo as "*omo kobokobo*," meaning a people without pedigree; "*omo irankiran*," meaning a people without lineage; or "*omo tan fi ipa ji baba wan*," meaning children without respect. In a similar manner, the Yoruba also have denigrating references for the Hausa in northern Nigeria, whom they describe as "*awan malu*," meaning "cows" in reference to the nomadic, cattle-breeding lifestyle of the Hausa-Fulani, and "*awan omo abi pa be*," meaning the "uncircumcised." On the other hand, the Igbo ethnic group in the southeast of Nigeria labels the Yoruba as "*ndi ofe – manu*," literally meaning, "people of oily soup," a reference to the use of perceivably inferior cooking oil by the Yoruba. The Igbo also derogatorily refer to the

Hausas as “*nama*,” the Hausa word for meat, but which the Igbo corrupted and use to mean “cow.” The Igbo also derogatorily construct the Hausa with words implying “stupid” and “ignorant.”

On the other hand, the Hausa refer to the Igbo as “*nyamiri*,” “*dan kudi*,” meaning lovers of money in line with a perception of the Igbo as greedy people, juxtaposed against the perceived industry and aggressiveness of the Igbo, who are mainly traders and entrepreneurs. The Hausa also call the Yoruba “*mai rebe*” (male), “*mai rebia*” (female), meaning-people from the south-west but a remark that acknowledges disregard for the Yoruba, a reference that considers them as people with poor sanitary tendencies. Hausa Muslims even regard Yoruba Muslims as inferior. To the Hausa, true Muslims are those who hail from the regions that can lay claim to the ‘Jihadist flag’ issued by Usman dan Fodio, mainly people of the Hausa-Fulani flock. Other Muslims outside this range are regarded as being of lower status.

The use of denigrating terms and expressions for other ethnic groups is not peculiar to the major ethnic groups; it also permeates the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. These groups have attitudes and expressions of derogation for the majority, and other minority ethnic groups in the country.

## LINGUISTIC AND COMMUNICATIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE 2011 GENERAL ELECTIONS

While the discourse surrounding the zoning formula threatened to tear apart the PDP, some major players were threatening chaos if a southerner re-emerged as the presidential candidate of the party (Adegbuyi, 2010). The northern caucus of the party, in an attempt to retain power, set up a committee, headed by Adamu Chiroma, with the objective to produce a consensus candidate from among the northern presidential candidates for the PDP primaries. The committee worked hard to produce a formidable opponent to counter the strength of President Jonathan’s incumbency, as it was evident he was the preferred candidate both by the party and much of the population.

While the debate raged on in the PDP, the other political parties were strategizing to unseat the ruling party. On the other hand, among population and civil society agencies, energies were focused on ensuring a non-

violent, transparent, free, and fair election. The awareness created by these diverse interests and schemes created a charged communicative order, often producing scathing tensions and conflicts of interest. Alongside the tension, discourses were advanced to ensure credible elections and use the opportunity to institutionalize a healthy electoral system. This culminated in the appointment of Professor Attahiru Jega, a distinguished and respected Hausa-Fulani academic from the north, as chair of an independent electoral commission (Haruna, 2011). His appointment calmed tensions and created a level climate for the commencement of the elections.

The language and discourse patterns employed by some political leaders, however, only served to heighten tensions to the extent that the resultant post-election crisis was almost certain to happen even before the elections began. A Northern Political Leaders' Forum led by Adamu Ciroma organized the National Stakeholders Conference, chaired by Ibrahim Babaginda, in Abuja on December 16, 2010, to rally support for Atiku Abubakar in the south. Both Abubakar and Babaginda made it clear that the 'zoning' formula of the PDP, which to them represented a peaceful change, should be respected or violence would be inevitable during the elections (Adegbuyi, 2010). These utterances were echoed by General Buhari, who told his supporters to lynch election riggers just a month before the polls. His running mate, Pastor Tunde Bakare, a southern Christian predicted a "wild wild north" if the elections were rigged (Abati, 2011).

The Nigerian media also played a role in inflaming passions through its coverage of the events leading up to the elections. In particular, the choice of words used to frame the election debate could be described as inflammatory. For instance, a major newspaper, *The Nation*, carried a headline that read "the North is against Jonathan." Not only is the headline divisive, but hardly a reflection of the voting pattern that saw Jonathan winning seven out of the 20 states in the north, which is also an indication that the entire north was not against President Jonathan. Another example of media misappropriation of discourse is reflected in a headline in *The Punch*, a publication that describes itself as "Nigeria's most widely read newspaper." Around election time, a headline on *The Punch* read "Hurricane Jonathan knocks out Buhari, others" (Omondi, 2011). This headline lacks the kind of sensitivity that the fragile socio-political situation in the country required. Many onlookers, including Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, believed

the post-election riots were pre-planned, given the utterances of some of the political leaders who kept calling on their supporters to protect their votes even before the elections were underway (Adelakun and Elechenu, 2011).

## **NATIONAL DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2011 POST-ELECTION CRISIS**

The 2011 post-election crisis is reminiscent of past crises, such as the massacre of the Igbos in 1966, the 1953 Kano riots, the Kaduna riots of 1978, the Maitatsine riots of the 1980s, the Zango Kataf crisis of the 1990s, the Tiv/Jukun, Ife/Modakeke, Ijaw/Urhobo/Itsekiri, Boko Haram conflicts, and the Jos crisis from 2000 to 2011 (Merije, 2010).

In the 2011 case, the post-election riots have serious consequences and worrisome implications. The most severe consequence is the loss of lives, estimated at 800, the displacement of people, and the destruction of property (Human Rights Watch, 2011). A significant implication of the riots is that it unsettles the notion of peaceful co-existence among Nigerians already divided along regional, ethnic, and religious lines. It also calls into question the notion that every Nigerian is free to live in any part of the country without being subjected to discrimination and violence because of ancestral origin or belief.

The use of derogatory labels tends to confirm the ingrained mistrust and tussle for power and dominance in the Nigerian political space. These acts of denigration are often used as a ploy by leaders and would-be leaders to negotiate themselves back into the mainstream or to gain a stake over other politicians or advance political interests and positions.

This attitude has largely characterized the political space in Nigeria and seems to have been internalized and channelled by different aspects of the Nigerian social culture, including the media. This kind of sentiment is what the late politician, Malam Abubakar Imam affirmed on the eve of Nigeria's independence in 1960: "We despise each other. We call each other ignorant. The South is proud of its Western knowledge and culture, we are proud of our Eastern culture. To tell the plain truth, the common people of the North put more confidence in the White man than in either their black southern brother or the educated Northerners" (Merije, 2010).

In the case of Nigeria, the concept of the “otherness” progressed from the realm of discourse to that of action through exhibition of clannishness and exclusivity. During election time in 2011, it created an environment for discord and conflict.

The resulting post-election violence should motivate any political leader who has the interest of Nigeria at heart to be particularly mindful of attitudes and behaviours, especially those perceived as derogatory. The discourse triggered by these remarks centre on issues begging for urgent attention, including peaceful co-existence, true federalism, the eradication of corruption, and security.

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