

POLITICS AND PROPAGANDA IN THE COVID-19 ERA: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

Patrick Ukim INEJI¹

¹PhD, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria
Corresponding author: Patrick Ukim Ineji; e-mail:patrickineji34@gmail.com

Abstract

Coronavirus, popularly known as COVID-19, emerged as one of the pandemics that ravaged the world in recent times. Governments all over the world were compelled to employ drastic measures to stem the spread of the pandemic and control the mortality rate. The Federal Government of Nigeria declared a lockdown in most sectors of the nation, including the closure of schools and the adoption of preventive protocols to be implemented, which included the wearing of nose masks, social and physical distancing, avoidance of overcrowding, etc. Unfortunately, coincidentally the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) declared an indefinite strike to compel the government to implement the 2009 agreement. The government later eased the lockdown in some sectors of the national life while public universities remained closed. The continued closure of universities generated a lot of concern and aroused suspicion in the public about the government's so-called avowed commitment to the safety of the lives of Nigerians and the spread of Coronavirus. It was obvious that the government was engaged in politics and propaganda, but it used patriotism as a way of deceiving the public, making it believe that it was interested in saving the lives of Nigerian students. The study x-rayed the strategies employed by the government during that period and the implications of the government's subterfuge on the nation.

Keywords: *Coronavirus, Government, politics, propaganda.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus, popularly known as COVID-19, emerged as one of the pandemic diseases that have ravaged the world in the past. Governments all over the world were very concerned about the rapid spread of the diseases amid socio-economic damage and the disruption of the economic, political, social and educational spheres. In the light of the ravaging consequences and disorientation in the different facts of national life, the Nigerian Government quickly rose to the occasion by putting in place cogent preventive measures to nip the pandemic in the bud to

contain the high rate of the spread of the virus and mortality rate. These measures were consequent upon the lockdown of the economy. Closure of business premises, airports, hotels and recreational centres, schools, interstate borders and other measures designed to contain the spread of the pandemic virus. Specifically, the preventive measures were anchored on World Health Organization's (WHO) prescription predicted on the following planks: social distancing to prevent contact; use of nose masks, restriction on social gatherings (prevention of overcrowding), caution in coughing, hand washing with soap or the use of sanitizers, all designed to curb the virus's high rate of spread.

Coincidentally, while the Nigerian Government declared a total lockdown in most aspects of national life, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) declared an indefinite and total industrial dispute with the Federal Government of Nigeria to compel the government to implement the 2009 agreement and the 2017 Memorandum of Action (MOA), which the government had reneged having mutually agreed before the strike was suspended in 2017. Unfortunately, while the government was very decisive in its resolve to see to the enforcement of preventive measures, it could not be firm in some areas as it stock to its guns in ensuring that educational institutions remained closed. It later relaxed the measures to allow candidates who enrolled for the Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSCE) to write their examination. However, the government refused to allow tertiary institutions in the country to resume insisting that all preventive measures must be put in place before the tertiary institutions could resume. In spite of all these, politicking could not

be halted. For instance, the party primaries for Edo and Ondo held amid the peak of coronavirus in the country. This was the hallmark of politics and propaganda at play. This was a pointer to the fact that the government was playing politics with the education of the masses with a high deployment of certain propaganda devices—hood-winks, half-truths and lies to beat time as it was not ready to resolve the issues at stake, as declared by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU). The government's deployment of propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic might mainly be considered true or false, depending on the side of the political continuum – government or ASUU.

In their use of propaganda, government officials most times deployed repetitions, suppression of facts and rationalization which they expect the public to accept as the truth. Unfortunately, as government officials continue to engage in one form of propaganda or the other, the media and the public were not wary to dictate the government's intrigues and subterfuges. Most often the language of the government is couched with avowed commitment to public interest while the government's ulterior motive was politics.

Most often the language of the government to defend policies is subsumed under public interest while the ulterior motive which is convert is downplayed. The first consideration of any government in marshalling out any policy is self-preservation and the desire to maximize the benefits or advantage. Hence, the language is fraught with subterfuge, innuendos, insinuations, all designed to advance its cause to the detriment of public interest.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The continued closure of the educational sector generated a lot of concern and aroused suspicion in the public about the government's so-called avowed commitment to the safety of the lives of Nigerians amid the spread of Coronavirus and high mortality rate in the country.

There was a growing concern that other sectors of the nation—politics, health, aviation, etc were

receiving serious attention from government while it displayed a lackadaisical approach to the education sector. Perhaps, it was reasoned by some citizens, that government was not sincere and was in its best interest to propagate falsehoods, hoodwinks, half-truths and deception in its approach to enforce the preventive measures. Why should the government engage in politicking without a strict observance of social distancing, overcrowding, the non-use of nose masks during political campaigns in the governorship campaigns in Edo and Ondo states? Put differently, why did the government not suspend the scheduled election in the two states to save lives of Nigerians? Why was the government more interested in resolving issues in the Health and Aviation sectors while not giving a hoot to the educational sector? It was convincingly argued that perhaps, the Nigerian government was not yet ready to satisfy the demands ASUU and so it used delay tactics in the resolution of the industrial dispute. Could it have been right to conclude that the government was engaged in politics and propaganda in the selective implementation of COVID-19 preventive measures in some sectors while ignoring the educational sector?

A number of techniques were used by the government to generate propaganda, some of which could be identified as logical fallacies designed to convince the Nigerian populace, but they might not have been necessarily valid.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory. McCombs and Shaw (1972) who propounded the theory hold that the media has the ability to select and emphasize certain public issues and by doing so it cause the issues to be regarded as important by the public. The corollary is that the media sets the agenda for public discourse (MCCOMBS & SHAW, 1972). The implication is that the media may not always determine what we think, which means that the media directs our attention to salient issues to ponder about, without which we may not have a specific direction to follow.

The impression created by the Presidential task force on COVID-19 pandemic has often

impressed the public, stating that the reopening of tertiary institutions in the country would endanger the lives of millions of students and that saving lives was more paramount than the attainment of academic laurels. After all, it is only the living being that can study and obtain an academic certificate. This became the fulcrum upon which the media disseminated the COVID-19 message. Therefore, it was the selective emphasis on protecting human lives by keeping students at home that was highlighted by the Nigerian mass media. The other perspective of students waiting for several months at home to the detriment of their academic career was downplayed by the media. In fact, there was a threat by government to sanction any state and institution that resumed classes without the expressed approval of the federal government through a clearance from the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 pandemic.

This theory is apt and relevant to the study because the Nigerian media ignored the implication of students staying too long at home which endangers their academic career, as well as the attendant socio-economic disruption in the lives of Nigerians. The media's attention and emphasis were concentrated on the need to serve the lives of Nigerian students, which was more important than anything else.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a need to strengthen the study by reviewing the relevant literatures that are pertinent to the issue under investigation.

Government: The government is an organized body vested with the responsibility of managing the welfare of the citizenry under a sovereign authority. Nearly all governments, including democratic ones, use propaganda to win support from their citizenry and other nations. Governments also sponsor propaganda and information programmes to promote desired behaviour among their own citizen. For example, the government's propaganda might urge people to support certain policies or to oppose foreign political systems (CHOMSKY, 1997).

Politics: This refers to the process of canvassing a viewpoint in order to win support or sympathy

over a cause or the act of contributing to decision making with the intent to influence a policy in the desired direction. All humans are involved in politics in one way or the other.

Propaganda: Nelson (1996) says "Propaganda is neutrally defined as a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass or direct media channels (NELSON, 1996). A propaganda organization employs propagandists who engage in propagandizing - the applied creation and distribution of such forms persuasions.

Originally, propaganda was often used to influence opinions and belief on religious issues, particularly during the split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. Today, propaganda has become more common in political contests.

In the beginning, propaganda was a neutral term used to describe the dissemination of information in favour of any given cause. During the 20th century, however, the term acquired a thoroughly negative meaning in Western Countries, representing the international dissemination of often false but certainly "compelling" claims to support or falsify political actions or ideologies. This definition arose because both Soviet Union and Germany's government under Hitler explicitly admitted to using propaganda favouring, respectively, communism and Nazism in all forms of public expression. As these ideologies were repugnant to several Western societies, the negative feelings towards them came to be projected into the word "Propaganda" itself (BARAM & DAVIS, 2006).

5. DISTINCTION BETWEEN PROPAGANDA AND PERSUASION

A thin line separates propaganda from persuasion, even though some scholars argue that there is no clear distinction between the two concepts. In an attempt to differentiate propaganda from persuasion, Jowett and O'

Donnell (2012) state that the terms, propaganda and persuasion, have been used interchangeably in the literature on propaganda, as well as in everyday speech (JOWETT & O' DONNELL, 2012). Propaganda employs persuasive strategies, but it differs from persuasion in purpose.

In distinguishing persuasion from propaganda Hiebiet and colleagues in Joweth and O' Donnell (2012) opine that "propaganda... is the communication of facts, ideas, opinions and concepts not for their intrinsic merit but for the sake of the audience, but for the benefit of the communicator, to further the communicator's purpose whatever it might be. They further explain that any attempt to persuade another person is propagandistic, whereas any attempt to inform is educational. Propaganda contains a great deal of information and there is much persuasion in education. People's minds are changed by both education and propaganda, the difference between the two lies in the communicator.

It is argued that both propaganda and persuasion are intended to win converts but the only difference lies in the motive of the source. In order to properly understand the relationship between propaganda and persuasion a proper understanding of the concept of persuasion is necessary. Persuasion is a type of communication initiated with the intent that receivers will internalize new attitudes or voluntarily accept new beliefs of values or behave in a specific way.

Persuasion has been defined in different ways by different authors. Some see persuasion as a conscious attempt by one individual to change the attitudes, beliefs or the behaviour of another individual or group of individuals through the transmission of some message. It represents a human communication designed to influence others by modifying their beliefs, values and attitudes (WILSON, 2005).

There seems to be a general agreement that propaganda has something to do with the use of communication channels, through persuasive or manipulative techniques, in an attempt to shape or alter public opinions. In realization that propaganda has been viewed by the public with pejorative connotation which renders it controversial, attempts however have been made to disguise propaganda efforts in giving it a

"silver lining" thus, the use of the term and concepts such as public relations, publicity and diplomacy have been deliberately coined to give propaganda information a positive and acceptable meaning.

Propaganda is persuasive and applies to different segments of the society, including the democratic societies, which use it to control and manipulate audiences in subtle ways. Vincent (2007) reports that a study on propaganda in Edward Benays revealed that propaganda was in fact a usual tool for democratic government. He added that it was only natural after the war ended that intelligent people asked questions on whether it was not possible to apply a similar approach to the problems of peace (VINCENT, 2007).

Jowett and O' Donnell (2012), in an effort to compare and contrast propaganda with persuasion, state that propaganda may appear to be informative communication when ideas are shared, something is explained, or instruction takes place (JOWETT & O' DONNELL, 2012). Information communicated by propaganda may appear to be undisputable and totally factual. The propagandist knows, however, that the purpose is not to promote mutual understanding but rather to promote his own objectives. Thus, the propagandist will attempt to control information than to shape perception through strategies of informative communication.

A persuader, likewise, shares ideas, explanations or instructs within the purpose of promoting the mutual satisfaction of needs. In fact, a persuader skilfully uses evidence to reach potential persuadees however, do not try to appear as informers. An effective persuader makes the purpose as clear as possible to bring about attitude or behavioural change. The propagandist may appear to have a clear purpose and certainly an explicitly stated conclusion, but the true purpose is likely to be concealed.

Thus, from the foregoing it can be categorically stated that propaganda is a form of communication and it uses both informative and persuasive communication concepts in order to promote its objectives, by controlling the flow of information, managing public opinion and manipulating behavioural patterns. Propaganda is a subset of both information and persuasion. Sharing techniques with information and persuasion but

going beyond their aims, propaganda does not seek mutual understanding or the mutual fulfilment of needs. Propaganda deliberately and systematically seeks to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist, while propaganda is biased and self-seeking and involves deliberate efforts by the source in order to influence the target audience. Persuasion is an honest, sincere and altruistic communication endeavour with both the source and receiver playing equal and reciprocal roles based on mutual respect. Also, in persuasion, the communication effort is geared towards the benefit of both parties - the source and receiver. Persuasion is more interactive and transactional and the goals of both parties seem to be fulfilled while propaganda differs from the simple persuasion attempts. Propaganda can be coercive and aggressive in manner, it is not objective and it has little regard for the truth, even if it is not necessarily false, since sometimes the truth can represent good propaganda. It comes in a range of types from black (deceptive, frightening and unscrupulous) to white (soft and with a selective use of truth).

6. PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES/ TECHNIQUES IN COVID-19 PROTOCOLS

A number of strategies and techniques were employed by the Buhari's government to manipulate the Nigerian public in the enforcement of COVID-19 measures.

Wearing of nose masks: the teaming crowd witnessed in the Edo and Ondo states governorship electioneering campaigns deliberately ignored the wearing of nose masks as prescribed by the relevant authorities in enforcing the Coronavirus preventive measures to stem the high rate of the spread of the virus and curtail the mortality rate in the country. The government played politics with the lives of millions of Nigerians. It claimed to be protecting then when in fact it relished in electioneering and ignored the enforcement of these very important measures. The security agencies were part and parcel of the campaigns. Thus, this could be described as exhibition of half-truths, hoodwinks and lies on the part of the government and of its agencies.

Crowd control: One of the vital protocols put in place in the COVID-19 Presidential Task Force (PTF) was a directive to the Nigerian populace to avoid overcrowding and the maintenance of physical and social distancing. The electioneering campaigns were at their best with teaming crowd without observance of social and physical distances as enunciated by the COVID-19 enforcement agencies. Again, this represented a deception at its height. The government deliberately concealed its motive of politicking in this connection. The government's roles during the governorship election campaigns in Edo and Ondo states were highly politicized and fraught with political subterfuge. Generally, the role of the Nigerian Government during the period was fraught with deception, half-truths, hoodwinks and lies, all in an attempt to advance a political goal on the altar of sacred lives of Nigerians. Hence, a number of strategies and propaganda techniques were employed by the Buhari's government to manipulate the Nigerian populace in the enforcement of COVID-19 preventive measures; although apparently, the government had touted that it was concerned with saving the lives of Nigerians.

The government's preventive measures were anchored on some of these basic measures:

- (a) Avoid over-crowding
- (b) Maintain social and physical distancing
- (c) Compulsory use of nose masks
- (d) Avoid handshaking

The question is, to what extent did the government abide by the rules created by itself and its agencies to prevent the spread of the virus and save the lives of Nigerians that were considered dear to the government? First, there was the APC primaries at the height of the pandemic when the government, represented by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), defied the protocols and conducted the primaries without caring a hoot about the teaming crowd that characterized the primaries to elect a governorship candidate for the September 19 election. Equally applicable was the governorship primaries in Ondo state conducted by the three major political parties in the state: APC, PDP and ZLP. In this connection, the government's interest in politics was more paramount than anything else.

The question to be asked again is: in whose interest were the elections? For instance, the issue of overcrowding. The government and INEC violated its own rules when they allowed the governorship electioneering campaigns in the face of massive crowds that characterized the campaigns in both Edo and Ondo states. Hence, hoodwinks, falsehood, lies and deception can be attributed to the government in this respect. Other deceptions and lies were witnessed when government officials ignored the wearing of nose masks, by both politicians and party supporters during the campaigns. It was obvious that there was no attempt on behalf of the security agents to apprehend or sanction those who violated the measure of wearing nose masks because politics was at the front burner. Again, was there any effort to enforce social and physical distancing during the electioneering? It was obvious that there was a blatant disregard to implement this very critical protocol. The observance of vehicular and pedestrian movements, in terms of social and physical distancing, was completely violated at the height of the campaigns.

Another critical aspect was that while politicking was at its height, all schools (primary, secondary and tertiary institutions) remained closed during the period, because according to the Federal Government of Nigeria, it wanted to save the lives of Nigerian students and the best measure was to keep them away from contacting the virus. The truth is that the government was waiting to resolve some issues with the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), which was on an indefinite strike. It can therefore be said that the Federal Government of Nigeria took some time to resolve the issues of the industrial dispute with the union while relishing in political campaigns.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In most cases, the government's motive in formulating and implementing policies is covert rather than overt and often self-serving. Although the government's outward utterances are laced

with patriotic fervour, the ultimate goal is to ensure that the public accepts its position unquestioningly with little or no resistance. Thus, it is the norm of the government to play politics using the instrument of propaganda in order to drive home its policies and programmes down the throat of the citizenry.

The Nigerian government used the opportunity provided by the lockdown of the country as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic to avoid discussion with the Academic Staff Union of Universities, all in an attempt to cover up. This portrayed the government in a bad light and exposed its insincerity in tackling the issues regarding the industrial dispute.

The enforcement of COVID-19 protocols was sacrificed on the altar of politics as the government blatantly ignored the core issue of protecting the lives of Nigerians and attending to the university union. Even when the entire country was opened to business, public universities were still closed while students continued to languish at home. It took the courage of university students to embark on a nationwide protest and the intervention of the National Assembly before the Federal Government of Nigeria could give any attention to the union's grievances.

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