

Communication and Peace Building: The 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

by

Koblwe Obono

Koblwe.obono@yahoo.com

Lecturer, Department of Communication and Language Arts
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan, Nigeria

&

Ngozi Joy Onyechi

ngoonyechi@yahoo.co.uk

Lecturer, Department of Communication and Language Arts
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Using the discursive analytical approach, this paper examines the role of communication in peace building, and describes the pre-election and post-election strategies and interactions that enabled a peaceful environment despite the overwhelming negative campaigns and volatility of the process involving the 2015 Nigerian Presidential election campaigns. Hence, this paper illustrates the communicative behaviour of the contenders and their public display in the media which serve as a model for political peace communication; and points to the power of strategic communication for peace building, which has implications for a violence-free environment, social order and political development in Africa.

Keywords: political communication, negative campaigns, peace building, political violence, presidential elections

Introduction

The 2015 Nigerian presidential campaigns of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (GEJ) of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari (GMB) of the All Progressives Congress (APC) were violent-laden. The process deviated from an issue-based discussion to hate speeches and personalization, hence, people forecasted electoral violence and predicted a more violent outcome than the 2011 Nigerian presidential election crises hatched in Northern Nigeria following the victory of Goodluck Jonathan. Accordingly, a press report by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) stated that the 2015 elections would be a rematch of the 2011 elections between GEJ, a southern Christian and GMB, a northern Muslim (Campbell, 2015).

Polarization during the political process is not common to Nigeria but it is a global phenomenon which may result to unintended violent acts. This is implicated in the Nigerian election processes and governance and may breed disunity, enmity and regional crisis. The envisaged 2015 election violence is critical for a nation that has been clamouring for sectionalisation as evidenced in the struggles for Biafra in the Southeast. Rather than unification, there has been divisional rancour expressed in the chaotic electioneering environment. Because region, religion and social differentiation are sensitive issues in the Nigerian social political structure, any ethnic or religion-instigated crisis may jeopardise national unity, hence, the need for peace building in the 2015 elections. Accordingly, Kofi Annan expressed that peace building is the paramount during and after elections as reported in *Sun* online (2015), thus:

Nigeria cannot be allowed to slide into chaos for the obvious reason that it would destabilize the entire region, if not the whole continent. The brief conflagration which followed the 2011 elections was disastrous. Its scars are still being felt till today and many of its victims are just now receiving compensation for their pain and suffering.

To avoid such scares, negotiating peace activities were vital for maintaining unity of the state. A communicative response for quelling the envisaged crisis was imperative. Stakeholders, including elder statesmen, political party leaders and their flag bearers, in collaboration with the media interacted to build electoral peace. Through discourse analysis, the paper describes the role of verbal and nonverbal communication for peace building. It highlights the 2015 pre-election and post-election strategies adopted in ensuring political harmony between Jonathan and Buhari political camps. These actions were initiated to promote unity and eliminate political anomie in Nigeria. The paper, therefore, describes the roles played by human and nonhuman agents in building peace throughout the election period.

Political Campaigns and Social Media

Political campaigns are important and to a large extent contribute to the success or failure of a candidate. They entail mobilizing and getting people's support through different methods. Because desperate parties and their candidates have a mind-set to win elections, civility is often missing in campaigns (Day, 2012). This virtue is sacrificed during political campaigns because, the period is the greatest chance that contenders have to convince the electorates about their programs and visions (Isaw, 2010). Although the intention is to reach many people with political information, not everyone is reached through physical contact, hence, the adoption of diverse media platforms.

Communication tools remain critical for engaging the public in the electioneering process. With the advent of the new media, especially social media, political campaigns have taken a new dimension. This is because, politicians do not only rely on rallies, indigenous media and traditional media to disseminate information but also utilise online platforms that enable interaction among political actors. Hence, digital media strategies are crucial components of contemporary political campaigns (Howard, 2005) and social media grant people access to engage in complex social, economic and political discourse (Onyechi and Obono, 2015). The platform enables a two-way method of communication through the creation, sharing, discussion and modification of information that can make or mare a political agenda, outcome or career.

The relevance of social media in the political process is obvious. Their use is situated on the existing architectural structure that enables their use in Nigeria (Obono, 2016). Although the media do not have a single preordained outcome, they have become coordinating tools for nearly all of the world's political movements (Shirky, 2011) and a global trend towards "Internet elections" or "e-electioneering" (Macnamara quoted by PLAC, 2011). Social media tools like text messaging and social networking could be veritable tools for mobilizing multitudes for political participation. For instance, the Obama 2008 campaign created a nationwide virtual organization that motivated 3.1 million individual contributors and mobilized a grassroots movement of more than 5 million volunteers (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011). According to them, the Obama-Biden transition and administration utilized many of the same strategies in their attempt to transform political participation and civic engagement.

Accordingly, many Nigerian politicians are exploiting the opportunities offered by social media for on-line electioneering. During the 2011 general elections, many politicians, particularly presidential aspirants, used social media tools to connect with voters and their constituents (PLAC, 2011). According to the report, Goodluck Jonathan had nearly 300,000 fans on his *Facebook* page. The frequency of social media use for the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria was intensified due to the skilled manpower, cost-effective mobile phones, and the availability and accessibility of the Internet by citizens (Obono, 2016).

The popularity of social media among politicians may therefore be explained by the vast potentials inherent in them for campaigning. They offer politicians and their parties the opportunity to broadcast messages directly to their followers and recruit a huge number of volunteers to support their campaign (PLAC, 2011). This direct communication with supporters has weakened the possibilities of gate keeping, which had tended to delay political information dissemination or alienate politicians from their followers.

As the political communication landscape becomes more complex participatory, the networked population gains greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and enhanced ability to undertake collective action (Shirky, 2011). This fact has been buttressed by Chou et al in Onyechi and Obono (2015) that social media have enabled users' direct participation and interaction about contemporary political issues. Through these media tools, the public are no longer passive because they utilize the platform to actively participate in the political process. Social media put enormous power in the hands of the ordinary citizen to capture and upload events without gatekeepers. Accordingly, politicians explore this medium in the awareness that their utterances and remarks can go viral (Day, 2012) and they are capable of jeopardizing their opponents' political career, restate their position and convince supporters about expected political conduct, especially in a violence terrain.

Conflict and Peace Building through Human and Media Agencies

The prevalence of conflicts and wars has made focus on peace and peace building imperative. Although the African continent contributes about 12 percent of the global population, it seems to have experienced more violent conflict than other continents (Hoeffler, 2008). Losses resulting from these conflicts and wars have far reaching human and material implications. While lives are decimated with reckless abandonment, economic development is put on the reverse and the road to recovery is always tortuous.

Painting the overarching consequences of conflicts, Osodo, Kiririge and Mung'ou (2014) argue that conflicts lead to loss of lives, evictions and displacements, destruction of infrastructure, loss of property and psychological trauma, especially due to torture and disappearance of family members. Their outcomes may not be limited to the countries where crises occur but the echoes may reverberate in neighbouring or far countries, leading to mass migration to unknown destinations. Conflicts and wars will never be completely wiped off the society but may vary in duration and intensity. This knowledge would, to a large extent, determine the response of stakeholders to issues that may degenerate to crises and disrupt the tranquillity of society. Uzuegbunam cited in Hoeffler (2008) observes that both national and international Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are particularly playing an important role in conflict intervention and post-conflict peace-building.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has been at the forefront championing world peace. In his 1992 report on “An Agenda for Peace,” former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali introduced the concept of peace building to the UN as “action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict (UN Peace Building Fund: undated). Efforts have been made to elaborate on this concept almost two decades after it was introduced to the UN. In 2007, the Secretary-General’s Policy Committee described peace building as:

A range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development. Peace building strategies must be coherent and tailored to the specific needs of the country concerned, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives.

Mass media are veritable tools that could be mobilized for peace building objectives. Although some scholars (Howard, 2002; Hoffmann, 2014) recognized the double-edged nature of the media for destructive and constructive use in conflict periods, they acknowledged the great potentials of the media for their positive contribution to peace building. Howards (2002:3) encapsulates it this way:

But there is another aspect to the media. It can be an instrument of conflict resolution, when the information it presents is reliable, respects human rights, and represents diverse views. It’s the kind of media that upholds accountability and exposes malfeasance. It’s the kind of media that enables a society to make well-informed choices, which is the precursor of democratic governance. It is a media that reduces conflict and fosters human security.

This kind of media will be perceived beyond just reporting news but committed to fostering the resolution of conflicts in the society. Howard (2002:3) further elaborated this notion by noting the range of expectation from the media to transcend provision of information to facilitation of positive social initiatives, including peace building. He posits that:

Recently new initiatives have focused on the media as a means to communicate information specifically intended to foster public sentiment favouring peaceful resolution of conflict. The focus is on the effect of the media in its widest possibilities rather than the mere presence of professional news media outlets. The media thus becomes a facilitator of positive social change rather than a professional, disinterested observer/reporter.

Media and technologies by themselves cannot create peace, but contribute to building an environment where people can more easily communicate, understand current situations, visualize the implications of their actions, and understand each other's point of view (Etiwel, 2011). The mass media will in this regard provide the platform for people in society to air their views and opinion on national issues. They will ensure provision of a fair playing ground that will accommodate all individuals to engage in constructive discussions that will engender peace building.

However, the media can downplay issues that tend to divide people and focus more on those that can foster peace, inclusiveness and tolerance. To achieve this, the media must present accurate and balanced reports that do not give undue advantage to a particular angle. A diversity of views must be presented at all times in order to enable the public make informed choices and decisions. The media serve as a watchdog over political leaders and officials, and hold them accountable. As the fourth estate of the realm, their place in peace building should never be compromised.

Although the media have an important role to play in peace building, they cannot independently succeed in fulfilling this task. Collaborative human-media effort is required for meaningful peace building achievements. Some agencies and nongovernmental organizations interested in peace building have devoted efforts to encouraging a reliable, diverse and free news media in possible conflict-stressed environments (Howards, 2002). For him, most prevalent interventions have focused on basic training for journalists, provision of technology and establishment of basic legal protections for journalists. Accordingly, there is conviction that communication has potential to conflict transformation and peace building (Hoffmann, 2014). Team work demands that while people make conscious efforts to becoming agents of peace building in their societies, the media are allowed to carry out their social responsibility functions in society. Media and human interventions are therefore crucial, hence, citizens should be peace building oriented, especially when confronted with issues that may ignite violence and jeopardise harmony.

Methods

The study used Discourse Analysis (DA) in examining communication and peace building during the 2015 elections in Nigeria. It described the language, context and social variables that contributed to reconciliatory peace building actions of the PDP and APC. Pre-election and post-election interactions of political actors, stakeholder, and the media were analysed for peace building communication strategies. Accordingly, the verbal and nonverbal interactions of the presidential candidates were examined. The analysis, therefore, went beyond speech because of the close connection between the formal features of communication and their situations of use.

This is for complementarity, hence, the speech and paralanguage used for peace building during the 2015 elections were described. This approach is relevant because, the underlying assumption of DA is that language is essential to perception, cognition, action and communication (Jensen in Hacker, 1996). The analysis of peace building focused on what is said, how it is said, when it is said and what is not explicitly said.

Results

Political communication takes diverse forms and its success depends on the strategies utilised to persuade citizens concerning different political opinions. People engaged in politics most likely pay attention to political news and information from newspapers, television, radio, the Internet and avenues party messages are disseminated. Those that frequently pay attention to these sources are more likely to be exposed to the political scenario as well as acquire information that facilitates learning about public affairs, political choices and engagements. Hence, repeated exposure to political discourse may socialize and influence the electorates, including the retracing of steps from post-election violence.

Peace building in the 2015 Nigerian elections was achieved through verbal and nonverbal communication, which occurred during and after the presidential elections. It was instituted by peace agents, actualised by politicians and exposed to the public by the media to calm the raging storm of post-election political violence. Although the core activity and intention of the initiators of the pre-election meeting was the signing of the peace accord treaty agreement by the presidential aspirants, media reportage was mainly focused on APC and PDP. The nonverbal actions of the candidates were made visible to the public and eventually spoke louder than the contents of the agreement from the audiences' point of view. The Peace Accord treaty was initiated, moderated and facilitated by national and international men of goodwill, who reasoned that the tone of electioneering was on the path to national violence, hence, the institution of a strategy to build peace. In addition to the pre-election activities, GEJ and GMB built upon the existing peace structures by displaying post-election harmony to convince citizens about their stance in maintaining national peace and unity.

Pre-election Peace Treaties

Different stakeholders were involved in the peace treaties, including two of Africa's foremost international public servants, the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan of Ghana and Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria. They forum that was used for the signing of the Peace Accord was the "2015 General Elections Sensitization Workshop on Non-Violence", which was jointly organized by the Office of the National Security Adviser and the Office of the Special Adviser to the President on Inter-Party Affairs.

During this first meeting, which held in Abuja, all the fourteen presidential candidates and their political party chairmen signed the peace agreement. The peace accord was symbolic and had significance for peace building. It is strategic that media reportage of the incidence focused exclusively on the actions of the main political contenders, Jonathan and Buhari. They showcased the predisposition of the candidates to peaceful co-existence, using television, newspaper and online media to highlight the message because their supporters were more inclined to political violence. The signing of the Peace Accord agreement by President Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP and the presidential flag bearer of the APC, Muhammadu Buhari showed their commitment to a peaceful election.

The Treaty was instrumental to the maintenance of electoral peace because the major opponents not only signed this agreement but their aura supported the pact. Accordingly, the verbal and nonverbal actions of Jonathan and Buhari became the main drivers of political peace building as the signing of the peace agreement, coupled with their posture— hugging, smiling, shaking hands and embracing – communicated peace to their supporters and not violence.

The capturing of these moments by the media was significant. They highlighted peaceful scenes to popularise the demeanour of the supposedly political enemies. The social behaviour of the candidates and the social responsibility of the media became contributed to the 2015 peace building processes and outcomes. The portrayal of peace conduct of contending candidates was displayed on different media platforms to enable supporters make informed decisions, especially as both flag bearers, together with their party chairmen, were displayed and portrayed as having a harmonious relationship. This notion is derived from formal meetings which communicates the parties and contestants' position of cordiality, hence, the friendly posture of the contestants and their national party chairmen - Alhaji Adamu Mu'azu of PDP and Chief John Oyegun of APC. It was a call on public office seekers to take anti-violence pledge.

After the Abuja Accord signing of January 14, 2015, renewal of the peace treaty was organised by the General Abdulsalami Abubakar-led National Peace Committee on 2015 elections. This second agreement was signed on March 26, at the close of campaigns and a day before the general elections, probably to remind the candidates about their earlier pledge for peace. Both candidates restated their commitment towards a peaceful and violence-free election exercise. According to General Abubakar, the peace committee was working to help political parties and Nigerians ensure peace and harmony before, during and after the elections (Sede, 2015). The peace pact: "Renewal of our pledges to peaceful elections. Joint statement issued by His Excellency, President Goodluck Jonathan and Major General Muhammad Buhari on Thursday, March 26, 2015 ahead of the 2015 presidential elections", was therefore a document to reiterate their commitments to a peaceful elections.

The content of the agreement, which was read by Bishop Mathew Kukah, Catholic Church Bishop of Sokoto read thus (Sede, 2015):

You may recall that on 14th January 2015, both of us, long with nine other party leaders signed what has now come to be known as the Abuja Accord. The substance of that Accord was our commitment to free, fair and credible elections in our dear country. In the Accord, we agreed to, among other things, run an issue-based campaign and pledged that our electoral campaigns will not involve any religious incitement, ethnic or tribal profiling, both by ourselves and all agents acting in our names. Now that the campaigns have come to an end, we meet today to renew our pledge for peaceful elections. We therefore call on all fellow citizens of our dear country, and our party supporters, to refrain from violence or any acts that may in any way jeopardise our collective vision of a free, fair and credible election. In addition, we call on INEC and all security agencies to ensure strict adherence to their constitutional roles. We also pledge to respect the outcome of free, fair and credible elections. Today, we again renew our commitment to a united, democratic and prosperous Nigeria. We want all Nigerians to stand together at this critical phase of our nation's history. Long live the Federal Republic of Nigeria. God bless you all.

The message is all encompassing. It reiterated the general vision of building peace through all relevant institutions and stakeholders. It restated the January Accord and called on all party members, citizens, the national electoral body (INEC) and security operatives to respect the peace decision and take proactive steps towards its implementation. Resonating their earlier actions, Jonathan and Buhari revealed their intentions for a harmonious state through their verbal and nonverbal communication. This became another period that the main contenders pledged for peaceful elections, appealing to Nigerians and party supporters to refrain from violent acts that may jeopardize their vision of a free, fair and credible election. The mediation of this perspective through image representation negates the dominant frames of politics in journalism, which were strongly biased towards negativism. Reporters formerly stressed struggle rather than compromise, division rather than unity, and political incompetence and corruption rather than success-stories (Newton, 1999).

The pre-election peace building was made possible by the acts and actions of national and international human agents, peace advocates, the media and contestants. Their combined efforts played a critical role in ensuring that post-election violence was intercepted. These activities culminated in the strategic communication of contestants and their party chairmen, which were made visible by the media using traditional and online media. The textual and pictorial interaction between Jonathan and Buhari were particularly spread through Nigerian Television and social media platforms.

Post- Election Peace Building Communication

While the pre-election peace communication was all inclusive with varied agents of peace building, the post- election peace initiatives depended solely on the proactive actions and interactions of the main contending presidential candidates. After the elections, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan accepted defeat and conceded before the official announcement of the presidential election results by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Jonathan took personal responsibility in foregrounding peace in his political party caucus and his actions contributed to dismantling the forecasted post-election tensions. This singular peace building communicative behaviour and the accompanying response dispelled political crises or violence. Accordingly, the peace building negotiations were not limited to pre-election activities as post-election violence was thwarted by the actions and reactions of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari.

News about the conceding call of the incumbent (GEJ) to the president-elect (GMB) went viral in the country. The information was disseminated through traditional and social media while interpersonal channels broadened its reach, enabling rural and urban dwellers to identify with the peace-building mechanisms of their leaders. Most Nigerians became aware of this historic action, which detracted ardent supporters from challenging the election results or following the path of violence. This behaviour therefore became another opportunity where the actions of the political leaders contributed to peace building. The content of the conceding call is presented below (Oladimeji, 2015):

Jonathan: Your Excellency.
Buhari's aide: Hold on, sir.
Buhari: Your Excellency.
Jonathan: Your Excellency, how are you?
Buhari: I'm alright, thank you very much, Your Excellency.
Jonathan: (laughs) Congratulations.
Buhari: Thank you very much, your Excellency (laughs).
Jonathan: Yeah, so how are things?
Buhari: (laughs) Well...
Jonathan: So, you'd find time to come one of these days so that we can sort out how to plan the transition period.
Buhari: Thank you very much, your Excellency.
Jonathan: Congratulations.
Buhari: Thank you.
Jonathan: Ok.
Buhari: My respect, Your Excellency.

The peace building gesture was not limited to the congratulatory phone call but also its content, which did not reveal both candidates as enemies but friends as reflected in the mutual respect, cordiality, and harmonious interaction. The tone of the conversation also supports this claim. Accordingly, the phone call shows elements of informality in speech, which is a sign of friendship, coupled with laughter and other courtesies shown throughout the interaction. The regular laughter accompanying their discussion suggests that they related as allies, however, they used politeness strategy and power relations. This communicative behaviour contradicted the expectations of their followers, who had projected violence after the announcement of the winner. The violence predictions therefore failed due to the body language of principal characters, the party flag bearers. Hence, rather than disagreements, the candidates showed understanding and respect to each other, acknowledging their political offices as displayed in the regular use of “your Excellency” to address each other. There were no elements of superiority, insubordination, rudeness, hate speech, violence utterances, or questioning of the results throughout their conversation, rather Jonathan extended an invitation to fast track the plan for the transition period. In other words, although the interaction was brief, it symbolised good neighbourliness, peaceful coexistence, harmonious relationship and acceptance of defeat.

The conceding call by Jonathan was novel and unprecedented in the history of politics in Nigeria. It is a model to leaders in the developing nations of Africa and a leap into political development. His attitude is exemplary. He contributed to building peace through his communication choices, which indirectly signalled to his supporters to accept defeat and eschew violence. The acceptance of the 2015 presidential results by Jonathan, coupled with his call to Buhari, quietened the violent aspirations of supporters. The timing of the congratulatory phone call was useful in defusing tensions as Goodluck Jonathan’s actions subtly communicated peace and expelled the rumours of crises. In other words, the communication injected peace into the consciousness of a nation at the brink of war and steered Nigerians towards an enduring and rancour-free transition (Ubani, 2015).

Generally, peace building was approached holistically. It was a collective performance of different stakeholders. The media, party officials, religious leaders, elder statesmen, ardent supporters, contestants, among others, contributed to creating a peaceful post-election Nigerian environment. The information went viral likely because social media was to the heavily used for the 2015 elections in Nigeria (Obono, 2016). Peace building was a convergence of political actors, peace exponents, human mediators and the media. It had effect on citizens who were disabused of the presidential results and maintained national peace. Accordingly, the historic behaviour of Jonathan, coupled with the positive response of Buhari, aided peace building and the growth of democracy in Nigeria. The political response of the incumbent President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, was applauded by national and international observers because it weakened violence motifs and resulted to the realisation of peace and order in the nation. Their actions could be interpreted as a diffuse process of multi-way interactive flows and a spiral of peace opportunities.

Conclusion

The presidential campaign process in the 2015 Nigerian election was geared towards compromising national peace as party loyalists were determined to disrupt social harmony and national unity at the instance their candidate lost the election. However, engagements in peace building intervention, mediation and communication suppressed the envisaged post-election violence in Nigeria. The predisposition, posture and composure of the key presidential contenders, Jonathan and Buhari, projected peaceful co-existence and communicated cordiality, concord, harmony and friendship to their supporters and Nigerian citizens. The paper, therefore, identifies the power of strategic communication for political peace-building and recommends that political activists, agents, parties, candidates, electorates and citizens follow pathways of peace and not violence for national development.

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