CAMPAIGN RHETORIC AND THE QUEST FOR POWER IN 2015, 2019 AND 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Persuading voters is the essence of a political campaign. In an attempt to achieve their political objectives while undercutting the influence of opponents, Nigerian politicians strategically deploy manipulative rhetoric in political discourse and communication. This paper engages the presidential campaign rhetoric in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, particularly the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. It undertakes an analysis of the leading presidential candidates during these elections, based on three indicators: the identity of the leading candidates, their health status and national security considerations. The paper contends that, while it is uncertain the exact impact of campaign rhetoric on the outcome of elections given the enduring role of factors such as ethnicity, religion, region and money in Nigerian politics, the negative and vile campaign rhetoric most often set the tone for violence witnessed before, during and after elections.

Keywords: Campaign rhetoric, Identity politics, Political Power, National Security, Nigeria

Introduction

Elections play a significant role in deepening democracy in the sense that they enable the governed to decide who governs them and confer legitimacy on those who govern. However, an election is not just an event, it is, more importantly, a process involving a multiplicity of

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activities and stakeholders. Campaigns are one of these essential activities. Election campaigns are how candidates and political parties prepare and present their ideas and positions on issues to the voters in the period preceding the election, helping voters make educated and informed decisions. Thus, campaign strategies and messaging are important elements in discussions about electoral democracy (Albert, 2007). In 1999, Nigeria returned to civil rule following the demise of General Sanni Abacha in 1998 and a snap transition programme by his successor General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Within these 24 years, seven general elections have been held – in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023.

However, it is a reality that more than two decades of the conduct of elections and the practice of democracy have not led to the genuine transfer of power to the people as the democratisation process continues to oscillate between consolidation and regression, (Ashindorbe and Danjibo, 2022, Obi, 2008); what is incontestable is the periodic rituals of campaigns and elections. as aspiring leaders actively canvass for votes to secure victory at the polls. Political parties and their candidates have to sell their programmes and manifestoes to the electorate to gain their votes, an act that Hakansson (1999) called electoral rhetoric. Rhetoric, as conceived by Aristotle, is the "ability, in each case, to see available means of persuasion" (translated by, Roberts, 2008). Aristotle identifies these means or ways of persuasion available to the speaker to be credibility and trustworthiness (or ethos – which entails goodwill (*eunoia,* practical skills [*phronesis]* and propriety [*arete*]); emotional connectivity (pathos); and persuasive skills or the persuasiveness of their arguments (logos) (cited in Ahmed, Eje & Sabe, 2022). Others are the end goal (telos) and the opportune moment and place (Kairos) (Britannica, 2008; Condor, Tileaga & Bilig, 2013; Liddel & Scott, n. d.).

Based on this premise, rhetoric is essentially a persuasive argument, that combines the speaker's credibility and emotional connection with a target audience to exert the expected impact while using an opportune moment and the right place to influence the outcome and accomplish their end goal. Ultimately, it involves

transforming people's minds from a point of uncertainty to reaching a definitive decision (Ahmed, Eje & Sabe, 2022).

According to Kane and Patan (2010), rhetoric is central to politics, hence political actors are always obliged to persuade the people to be able to lead them. Burke (1982) adds that political rhetoric can be rational, when it is based on facts, or irrational, like purveying deliberate falsehoods. Campaign rhetoric in Nigeria's Fourth Republic orients to three political dimensions, which were proposed by Hakansson (1999). The first dimension is the parties' accounts of the outside world, either by a general description or by making disparaging remarks about the outside world, particularly about political opponents. Elections in Nigeria have been characterised by intense negative or smear campaigns by directing personal attacks, invectives and damaging reports, on their opponents, such that Opeibi (2006) branded it "political macheting". The second dimension focuses on campaign issues and the parties' positions on them. This is mainly advocated during electioneering as a way of dissuading negative campaigns; so, it is common to hear terms like "issue-based campaigns". The third type centres are the portrayal of self, both as individuals and collectives. Presidential systems pull all attention toward the presidential candidate, as evident over the last two decades in the current republic. This paper engages the campaign rhetoric in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, particularly the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections. It undertakes a comparative analysis of the leading presidential candidates during these elections, based on three indicators: the identity of the leading candidates, their health status and national security considerations.

Campaign Rhetoric in the 2015 Presidential Election

Nigeria's 2015 presidential election was the fifth since the Fourth Republic started in 1999. The election, which was initially billed for February 14, was postponed to March 28 due to logistic hiccups in the distribution of Permanent Voter Cards (PVC) and continued Boko Haram terror in the north-eastern regions (Nigeria delays elections, 2015). Fourteen candidates contested the election, but the two major

contenders were the incumbent President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (GEJ), who was the candidate of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), and former military Head of State, Retired Major General Muhammadu Buhari (GMB), who represented the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). Buhari won the election by a margin of 2.57 million votes to emerge as the first opposition candidate to defeat an incumbent president in Nigeria (Ezeamalu & Adebayo, 2015).

Identity Factors in the 2015 Presidential Election Campaign Rhetoric

Identity, especially as it pertains to regional and religious affiliation, was a major factor in the 2015 presidential election. There are informal or unwritten zoning and power rotation agreements amongst the majority of Nigerian political parties, according to which the parties deliberately zone important positions and candidates to various regions of the country. This arrangement was adhered to by the PDP in 1999. A southerner, Olusegun Obasanjo, served out his two four-year terms and a northerner, Umaru Yar'Adua, succeeded him. However, his death in office in 2010 resulted in the presidency reverting to the south and inadvertently created crises within the party (Adibe, 2015). Goodluck Jonathan, a southerner from the minority ethnic group in the south-south completed Yar'Adua tenure, and contested and won the 2011 election, but a combination of identity factors and a reinvigorated opposition scuttled his re-election in 2015. Goodluck Jonathan's main challenger in the 2015 presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari, a northerner, who enjoyed a cult-like following in the north but had lost three previous elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011 eventually succeeded in 2015.

Besides ethnicity, religion also played a significant role in the 2015 election. LeVan (2019) in his book, *Contemporary Nigerian Politics: Competition in a Time of Transition and Terror,* argued that religion predicted voter preferences even more accurately than ethnicity at the polls. In particular, he demonstrated with a survey that 56 per cent fell in support of the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, respondents who self-identified as Muslim. This is understandable given the spike in terror attacks during this period and the perception that President

Goodluck Jonathan had not done enough to curtail Boko Haram attacks. Ethnic identity politics was significantly played up through negative campaigns, Oyero et. al. (2017) illustrated that the campaign was marked by deep-seated division, hostility, cleavages and desperation. In the heat of this feverish campaign some Niger Delta leaders, like Chief Edwin Clark, and particularly militant leaders namely, Asari Dokubo and Government Ekpemupolo, popularly referred to by his sobriquet Tompolo resorted to threats of disruption to crude oil production if Jonathan a candidate from the zone is defeated in the election. In a press release published in Premium Times on March 15, 2015, the opposition APC, in turn, accused President Jonathan of funding ethnic militias to cause unrest before, during, and after the elections.

There were also recriminations by the PDP against the APC for carrying out negative campaigns in the 2015 presidential election. According to a statement credited to Abubakar Kawu Baraje, a former PDP Chairman, the APC was alleged to have brought in Fulani mercenaries from outside Nigeria to help win the 2015 election. However, this revelation was made long after the 2015 election and after he defected back to the PDP from the APC (Uwerunonye, 2021). The APC spokesperson, Lai Mohammad, had particularly pandered to identity politics by accusing the PDP government of politicising the declaration of emergency rule only in traditional APC strongholds of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, while leaving out crises-ridden areas of Plateau, Benue and Taraba (Tukur, 2014). He played ethnic politics by proposing "political negotiation" with a dreaded terrorist group, Boko Haram, in the same fashion it was done with regional militant groups like MEND. The APC Chairman at the time John Oyegun, threatened that the party would form a parallel government if the 2015 election was rigged (Udumebraye, 2014). The negative identity politics of the two leading parties are illustrated with the following wordings in their newspaper advertorials.

A. Words in a PDP advertorial in the Punch of January 28, 2015:

> Buhari humiliated Awolowo, then picked his in-law as a spare tyre.

Nigerians don't be fooled.

B. Words in an APC advertorial in the Punch of March 24, 2015:

> What does the First Family feel about Northerners? "Our men no dey born children thruway for the street. We no dey like the people for that side." …Patience Jonathan talking about *Almajiri* at a campaign rally in Calabar. Help stamp out prejudice and tribalism. (cited in Iwuchukwu & Ugor, 2016).

The first advertorial was sponsored by the PDP, and it was invested in negative identity rhetoric, which sought to refresh the memory of the Yoruba ethnic group that the APC presidential contender once allegedly humiliated Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, their patriarch and highly revered sage. The APC Vice-Presidential candidate, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, is married to the granddaughter of the sage. His nomination for that position is referenced by the PDP as a slight on the entire group. Meanwhile, the PDP inadvertently or deliberately insulted Yemi Osinbajo by calling him a "spare tyre". The second advertorial was sponsored by the APC in which they accused the incumbent President's wife, Patience Jonathan, of prejudice and tribalism for her negative remarks about *Almajiris* at a campaign rally in Calabar. The First Lady's gaffe was framed as a collective insult to Northerners

Health Status Label in Campaign Rhetoric

The health status of the presidential candidates was a recurring point of reference in the 2015 presidential campaign rhetoric. The PDP candidate at 58 years was much younger and looked healthier when compared to the APC candidate who was 72 years old at the time and allegedly harbouring health issues. There were reports that candidate Buhari had collapsed during the All-Progressives Congress (APC) presidential campaign event in Calabar, Cross River State. This was followed by news that northern elders were reconsidering backing him for the presidency on account of his health – to avoid a repeat of what happened to their son, Umaru Yar'Adua, who died in office

(Dugguhngutor, 2015; Presidency, 2015). Although, the report was refuted by the APC. Thus, the health status and age of the APC candidate were part of the subjects of campaign rhetoric in the 2015 election. The PDP campaigned against the age and health of GMB, claiming that he was too old and medically unfit to lead the country. This is evident in an advertorial in the Punch newspaper publication of January 9, 2015, sponsored by a PDP governor, Ayodele Fayoye.

C. Words in a PDP advertorial in the Punch of January 9, 2015

> "NIGERIANS BE WARNED! NIGERIA" . . .
> "I have set before thee LIFE & DEATH. Therefore, choose LIFE that both thee and thy seed may LIVE".
> (Visuals of Late Heads of State, General Sani Abacha, and Late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua were used. (There was a picture of GMB with a question mark next to these graphics, and "AGE 72" was written next to GMB's photograph. The advert reads "Will you allow history to repeat itself? Enough of state burials. Nigerians)
> VOTE WISELY. VOTE GOODLUCK JOHNATHAN. NORTHERN PRESIDENCY SHOULD WAIT TILL 2019".
> (Cited in Ogwezzy-Ndisika, Faustino & Amakoh, 2019: 247).

In the punch newspaper advertorial above, the erstwhile PDP governor's campaign rhetoric did not only attack the APC presidential candidate on the grounds of health and age but went further to predict his death in office. This campaign advertorial was in bad taste considering that in 2007, the three leading presidential candidates-Yar'Adua, Atiku and Buhari were northerners and according to Albert (2007:69b), … "Neither Atiku nor Buhari referred to Yar'Adua state of health in their attack campaign against the PDP". Even though the PDP presidential campaign organisation had in a statement by its Director of Media and Publicity distanced itself from the advertorial, it however insisted that the PDP would continue raising concerns about GMB's health status based on facts (Umoru, 2015). On their part, the APC

condemned the act while accusing GEJ of violating the non-violence pact signed by presidential candidates on January 14, 2015, in Abuja (Alkassim, 2015). An APC Chieftain, Joe Igbokwe, defended the age of GMB by mentioning names of world leaders and countries that are older (Igbokwe. 2015).

National Security as a Campaign Issue

National security was one of the major issues of the 2015 presidential election and one which attracted the deployment of rational and irrational rhetoric as defined by Burke (1982). The rational rhetorical engagement was marked by issue-based consideration of security matters, based on facts, while the irrational aspect featured deliberate attempts to spread falsehoods to taint the credibility of the opponent and win over the voters. North-eastern Nigeria has been under constant attacks by the terrorist group, Boko Haram, which has killed thousands of civilians and affected more than three million, as of 2014 (Walker, 2014). This national insecurity fed into the campaign rhetoric of the election. The incumbent government was alleged to have mismanaged national security and failed to decimate the Boko Haram insurgents. According to reports, the rise of Boko Haram was aided by governmental corruption. It was reported that soldiers were not paid and were given insufficient supplies of ammunition before going into battle, despite having billions budgeted for security services (Campbell, 2015). According to Gar, Umar and Sallau (2022), GEJ's poor management of national security was one of the major factors that caused his defeat at the poll. Meanwhile, Buhari, a Muslim and retired soldier was framed as the only presidential candidate that could defeat the terrorist group.

In the heat of the 2015 election campaign, the two major parties used political rhetoric negatively to discredit their security management credentials.

The PDP attributed the growth and expansion of the Boko Haram insurgency to the APC and its presidential candidate. The PDP spokesperson, Olisa Metuh, cited instances of Buhari and party members making inciting utterances after the 2011 election and before

the 2015 election. One cited example was Buhari's statement in which he threatened bloodshed if the 2015 elections were rigged. Another instance is the APC Chairman's threat of forming a parallel government. The PDP thus accused the APC of planning to violently overthrow the government by funding terror attacks (Nwabufo, 2014). The APC in its reaction deployed counter-negative rhetoric against the PDP by redirecting the allegation of sponsoring against the then-ruling party. Lai Mohammed backed his allegation by citing the PDP-led government's alleged indifference towards the anti-terrorism war, failure to defeat Boko Haram and disregard of proposals on ways to deal with the terrorists (Tukur, 2014). While it is uncertain the exact implications of campaign rhetoric on the outcome of elections, it is however certain that, the 2015 election highlighted the significance of regional and ethnic factors in Nigerian politics. President Buhari, a northern Muslim, secured significant support from the northern states and the southwest while President Jonathan, a southern Christian, had strong backing from the other southern regions. The 2015 election also marked the first time in Nigeria's history that an incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, gracefully conceded defeat before the results from all 36 states had been announced and handed over power to the opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. This peaceful transfer of power demonstrated a maturing democratic process and set a precedent for future elections

Campaign Rhetoric in the 2019 Presidential Election in Nigeria

Nigeria's 2019 presidential election was the sixth since the country returned to democracy in 1999. It was held alongside other general elections on February 23. The two major contenders were the incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB) of APC, who sought re-election for a second term and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, a former Vice President between 1999 and 2007 who had made four unsuccessful attempts as an aspirant to become president before 2019 – in 1993, 2007, 2011 and 2015 (Adibe, 2015). PMB won the election with a 3.9 million vote margin (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2019).

Identity Factors in the 2019 Election Campaign

The key contenders in the 2019 presidential election were both northern Muslims, but President Buhari is from the north-west, while Atiku Abubakar hails from the north-eastern part, a region that has never produced a president except the Prime ministership of Tafawa Balewa. President Buhari had warmed himself into the hearts of the majority Muslim north by standing by their ideal of the full implementation of Sharia in the country in the early 2000s when Atiku was the Vice-President (Akhaine, 2001). On the contrary, Atiku Abubakar was perceived as noncommittal. In the recent interview he granted to *The Africa Report* he intoned this position: "I was the only northern politician in Nigeria who stood up against Sharia in 1999" (Norbrook, 2022). So, northern voters' disposition towards him had been tepid (Kperogi, 2023).

The sentiment seems to have shaped the results of the election. In every state in the country's North-West geopolitical zone, the APC presidential candidate won by landslide margins. Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa, and Kaduna are the states that make up this group. He also harvested landslide wins in four states in AA's North-east zone. The states under question include Bauchi, Gombe, Borno, and Yobe. In Adamawa and Taraba, which have a significant Christian population, the APC lost by a narrow margin (Adebiyi, 2021). The identity factor was also symbolic in the choices of Vice-Presidents. PMB retained Professor Yemi Osinbajo (PYO), a Yoruba Christian from Southwest, with whom he had won the 2015 election. PMB's decision to choose a Yoruba Christian and a pastor was first to appeal to voters in the Southwest and to Christians, who form a sizable part of the zone's population. Similarly, Atiku Abubakar factored in identity consideration by choosing Peter Obi as his Vice-Presidential candidate to appeal to voters in the Southeast and South-South. LeVan (2019) describes Atiku's decision to choose Peter Obi as a clever move to win over the ethnic Igbo who perceived Buhari as sectional and covertly in cahoots with marauding pastoralists.

Health Factor in 2019 Electoral Rhetoric

Health was a key factor that influenced the electoral rhetoric of the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. This was occasioned by Buhari's health status during his first term in office. Less than a year after he was sworn in as president, he travelled to the United Kingdom on a six-day medical vacation. About five months later, he embarked on another foreign medical journey, returning after ten days (Abiodun, 2021). He had undertaken other medical trips at other times, including the one he embarked on starting May 7, 2017, and he returned after 104 days. The total tally was calculated to be above 170 days between 2015 and 2019 (Campbell, 2018).

As expected, President Buhari's health status became a subject of the 2019 electoral rhetoric. A news headline in the Daily Post of May 8, 2018, reads "2019: PDP attacks Presidency for hiding nature of Buhari's illness". In the news report, the opposition party, speaking through its spokesperson Kola Ologbondiyan, inveighed the presidency for allegedly deceiving Nigerians over PMB's health and further stated that the citizens were taken for granted on the right to know the state of health of their president (Opejobi, 2018). The ruling party, APC, weaved a counter-rhetoric to the opposition's criticisms and declared Buhari's medical fitness. This was demonstrated by PMB's work rate while observing his festive holiday in Daura, his hometown. Buhari elected to walk to his residence after participating in the Eid-el-Kabir prayers. The presidency media office put the distance he covered at 800 metres, as a strategy to rhetorically frame him as fit and perhaps to reset public views over PMB's frequent medical trips. Speaking on the walk, PMB's Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, states rather assuredly: "Now that the President has proven his fitness and well-being, to continue in office is a settled matter" (Buhari's 800-metre walk, 2018).

Security Issue during the 2019 Campaign

Security concerns were the major issue that facilitated APC's victory in 2015 and they re-emerged in the 2019 presidential election campaign, with Boko Haram still on the rampage in the northeast and herdsmen

attacks on farming communities more frequent. The PDP fired the first salvo at the president on the heightened spate of insecurity in the country. The party tasked PMB to show adequate leadership by clamping down on what it perceived to be "escalated insecurity", arising from an increase in kidnappings, banditry, and terrorist attacks (Yukubu, 2018). It deepened its adversarial political engagement with the president by accusing the federal government of stoking the flames of insecurity by bringing into the country "political mercenaries" from neighbouring countries to participate in their campaign rallies and unleash violence against Nigerians (Yakubu, 2018). Atiku also seized the circumstance to promote himself by framing his national security plan as the better blueprint for ending the multidimensional insecurity in the country.

However, the APC through the rhetorical strategy *sought* to suppress the opposition's outcry against the level of insecurity by rather pushing forward their perceived achievement in that area. During his nomination acceptance speech at the APC national convention for the 2019 election, PMB portrayed his administration as having done "good work" in their first term and as deserving of continuity. In the security sector, PMB recounted the security situation his government inherited and was addressing: he alleged that the PDP handed over a country where 18 local government areas were under the control of terrorists. He went on to recount the following achievements of its administration on security: (a) "We have arrested and checked the slide to anarchy on the security and economic fronts"; (b) "Boko Haram is reduced to dastardly attacks on soft targets. Normalcy has returned to much of North East and neighbouring North West states" (Buhari's speech at APC's convention, 2018). The outcome of the election showed that incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari won his re-election bid, defeating his closest rival Atiku Abubakar. The People's Democratic Party, (PDP) candidate rejected the election results calling the electoral process 'militarized' and a 'disservice' to Nigeria's democracy. The courts which are the final arbiter in election matters however confirmed Buhari's victory at the polls.

Campaign Rhetoric in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

The 2023 general elections took place on the 25th, of February, and were the seventh in the series to be held in the Fourth Republic. The election lived up to the pre-election prognosis as the most competitive in the current dispensation, albeit with allegations of irregularities and rigging not only by the opposition candidates who lost out but also by local and foreign observers (CDD 2023 Post Election Briefing, European Union Election Observer Mission Preliminary Report,2023). The four major presidential candidates in the election were Bola Ahmed Tinubu (BAT) of APC, the declared winner, Atiku Abubakar (AA) of PDP, Peter Obi (PO) of Labour Party (LP) and Rabiu Kwankwaso (RK) of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). While it was the first presidential contest for three of the candidates, for Atiku Abubakar, it was his third contest as a presidential candidate of a political party – the first one was in 2007 under the Action Congress, while the second was in 2019 under the PDP, the party in which he was the standard-bearer at the 2023 presidential election.

There was a surge in voters' registration in the run-up to the 2023 election leading to an increase of almost twelve million new voters added to the voters register (INEC, 2019, 2023). The surge has been attributed to a new awakening by young and first-time voters who want their voices heard in the way the country is governed (Okpi & Awojulugbe, 2022; Gavin, 2022, Onyekakeyah, 2023). A recent Afrobarometer study shows that roughly 89 per cent of Nigerians believed that their nation was moving in the wrong direction, and 77 per cent were unhappy (cited in Gavin, 2022). Meanwhile, voters' confidence had increased with the signing into law of a new electoral act, which sanctioned the use of technology to enhance the credibility of the election outcome.

Identity Factor in the Campaign Rhetoric

Identity factors, like ethnicity and religion, played an active role in the 2023 general election campaign. The four leading candidates are from four of the country's six geo-political zones. Atiku Abubakar and Rabiu Kwankwaso are from the Northeast and Northwest respectively, while

Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Peter Obi are from the Southwest and Southeast, with Peter Obi as the only candidate professing the Christian faith. Religious consideration for candidate pick seemed to matter more in the North than in the South in previous elections. For instance, the last two presidents from the South were Christians and that identity feature was barely contested in the South.

But the dynamics are diametrically opposite in the north, where religious suasion matters more than ethnicity. Realising this, Tinubu chose to nominate a fellow Muslim as his running mate much to the chagrin of Christian members of his party from the north. Protest against the same faith ticket by different northern Christian groups, especially within the party was loud. In a news conference held in Abuja, a group known as the Concerned Northern APC Christians Forum insisted that the ruling party must drop its existing Muslim-Muslim pairing. When it appeared, the party was not going to heed their plea, some party chieftains like Yakubu Dogara, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Babachir Lawal, a former secretary to the government of the federation and Daniel Bwala, a former national legal officer for APC took more decisive actions. While Dogara and Bwala defected to the PDP, Babachir declared support for the Labour Party and Peter Obi.

Identity politics was intense, particularly during the party primaries as zoning principles and past rotational pacts were reviewed and (re) negotiated. For the PDP, the unwritten rotational rule was set aside for a chance at attaining power at the centre. By that unwritten agreement, it should be the turn of the South to present a presidential candidate. Atiku emerged as the PDP candidate after some highwire politicking at the party convention, but that led to internal rebellion in the party led by Governor Nyesom Wike of River State. The disagreement partly accounts for the party's defeat at the polls. For the APC, there were initial antics of queueing behind a northern candidate despite claims of zoning the presidential position to the south. It was this intra-party wrangling that triggered an outburst by now president-elect Ahmed Tinubu who was then a leading aspirant for the party ticket. While in Ogun state in June 2022 to woo delegates of his party,

he recounted his pact with President Buhari, and fiercely declared in his native Yoruba the now popular phrase "Emi lo kan", meaning- 'it is my turn' to be the president of Nigeria.

As the campaign season began in September, the candidates shuttled different geographic locations juggling for endorsement by prominent socio-political groups in the country, such as Ohanaeze Ndigbo, Afenifere, PANDEF and Middle-Belt Leaders Forum (MBLF). These groups backed Peter Obi's ambition as the next president for equity and fairness in the polity. In late October, Atiku while seeking the endorsement of the socio-political group from his region, the Arewa Consultative Forum, was quoted in what appears to be ethnic baiting when he said:

> I know the whole of this country. I have built bridges across this country. I think what the average northerner needs is somebody who is from the north, who also understands the other parts of Nigeria and who has been able to build bridges across the rest of the country. This is what the northerner needs. He (northerner) doesn't need a Yoruba candidate or an Igbo candidate. This is what the northerner needs…I stand before you as a pan-Nigerian of northern origin (cable newspaper online)

This is apart from inflammatory campaign rhetoric up north with the "naka sai naka" messaging — "your own is your won" in support of the PDP candidate's presidential bid. Similarly, Ahmed Tinubu of the APC sought and got the endorsement of a faction of Afenifere, which is different from the group that endorsed Peter Obi.

On the religious front, the candidates and their running mates were seen participating in different religious functions as they seek to expand their sphere of influence within their faith affiliations. These moves for regional and religious endorsements and their rhetorical instantiations revived the spectre of ethnicity and religion in the 2023 general elections (Esele, 2022). Identity politics was further rhetorically deployed through sobriquets in the 2023 presidential campaign. Such means of identification, in the words of Heath (cited in Sloane, 2001),

seemed to have worked symbolic magic in bringing the candidates' supporters together. This is perhaps most apt with *Obidients,* a moniker for Obi's supporters. Other sobriquets are *BATified*, *Atikulated* and *Kwankwasiyya,* which respectively represent the socio-political movements for Tinubu, Atiku and Kwankwaso. Meanwhile, each party also derived negative codenames that are a product of the campaign activities. So, we have *Obidiots* and *Zombidients,* which are derogatory references to *Obidients*; and *BATstard* and *Agbadorians,* used against Tinubu supporters. Nordquist (2020) termed these positive and negative rhetorical strategies of identification to be *consubstantiality* and *confrontational rhetoric,* respectively.

Health Status as Rhetorical Indicator in the 2023 Presidential Campaign

Health status and age were also recurring issues in the 2023 campaign trail. These issues refused to go away because of how they have impacted the past and current presidencies, while some gaffes and foreign medical trips by some of the candidates have rekindled concerns about these issues. One popular instance is the APC candidate, who has made some gaffes, like mouthing unintelligible words, while making stump speeches. During his campaign address in Akwa Ibom, he wrongly referred to Atiku as a former Senate President.

Meanwhile, the opposition has seized on these gaffes to question Tinubu's fitness to lead the country. Atiku Abubakar while correcting him that he was never a Senate President, threw a jab at BAT that his constant clangers are gradually turning from a humorous relief into a catastrophe and embarrassment to the country. He allegedly linked these slipups to Tinubu's failing health and deteriorating mental and cognitive capacity, which Atiku framed as likely to pose a danger to national security (Jimoh, 2023). Atiku came harder on the APC candidate by reminding him that the presidential villa is "neither a sanatorium nor mental institution". Despite Atiku's harsh rhetoric, he refused to pin the faux pas on age, perhaps to avoid an inadvertent self-criticism, given that he is also advanced in age. However, Peter Obi, the candidate of the Labour Party did not fail to project his relatively

younger age as an edge over the candidates of the PDP and APC. Kwankwaso of NNPP also joined the age and health debate when he advised Tinubu to rather attend to his health.

The APC presidential council spokespersons downplayed the opposition's views about miscues, arguing that making a few slips does not indicate that anything is amiss. They shifted attention to other contenders, whom they alleged to have also made some gaffes without anyone making a big deal out of it. they referenced world speakers, while name-dropping former US presidents, as also capable of making mistakes on the campaign trail. The APC campaign council rhetorically appropriated the criticism to mean a high level of interest in their candidate (Akinwale, 2023). The campaign body also made a statement of positive self-representation, as reported in the Vanguard on September 13, 2022, claiming "Asiwaju Tinubu is not ill. He is hale and hearty. A man who works for 20 hours a day, meeting people and strategising about finding solutions to Nigeria's problems, cannot be said to be ill".

Physical fitness also became a major issue in the campaign. Following his absence in many interparty activities and criticisms about his health, Tinubu shared on his verified social media handle, a video of himself working out on a spin bike. Atiku was also not spared of allegations regarding his health status: it is alleged that he had collapsed during the campaign and flown abroad for medical attention. On his part, Peter Obi advised Nigerians to choose a president who is physically and mentally capable of addressing the vast array of problems confronting the nation. He averred that Nigeria, being ill itself, cannot afford to elect a sick President.

Joining the negative rhetoric fray, he indirectly attacked the APC flagbearer by stating that "here in Nigeria, somebody wants to contest an election, we don't know his real age, ... and he is pushing to lead everybody" (cited in Wahab, 2023). During the LP's campaign rally in Lagos on 11th February 2023, Peter Obi boasted about the youthfulness of the leadership of his party, putting their average age at 55, while he disparaged the PDP's candidate as being over 70, and launched a veiled

attack at Tinubu: "the other one we don't know his age" (Punch newspaper Online)

National Security as an Indicator in 2023 Electoral Rhetoric

The management of national security by the governing party also became a rhetorical motif in the 2023 presidential campaign. All geo-political zones are affected by different forms of insecurity: a surge in herder-farmer crises, cybercrime, secessionist agitations, and wanton killings in the south; ethnoreligious killings, banditry, terrorist attacks and humanitarian crises in the north. Given these national instabilities, Nigeria is said to be engaged in a low-intensity civil war by the International Index of Failed States (Fund for Peace, 2022).

The opposition parties have held the ruling party liable for the national instability and therefore seek its replacement. The opposition opines that the Tinubu campaign cannot be exonerated from the failure of the present administration in tackling security threats. Atiku camp describes any promise to tackle insecurity by BAT as an APC campaign against itself, wondering why the same idea could not be sold to the current administration. Atiku during a presidential campaign rally in Plateau State described the APC, inability to end the company's security problem as a measure of its incompetence in governance.

Other party candidates also seized on the current national instability to promote their national security plan, while overtly or covertly condemning the APC-led government's handling of the nation's security. In Peter Obi's 7-point manifesto, tagged "Our Pact with Nigeria", security is one of the priority matters. He articulated a strategy to stabilise Nigeria, put an end to piracy and insurgency, and unify the country. Rabiu Kwankwaso of NNPP also joined other opposition forces to accuse the Buhari-led government of mismanaging the security problems of the country. He made this position public following the kidnapping and murder of passengers on the Abuja-Kaduna train. Being a former defence minister, he pontificated on the security situation promising that he has the antidote to insecurity (Ibeh, 2022). Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a veteran politician and widely regarded as a kingmaker and godfather was declared winner of the 2023

presidential election by the electoral management body. The election outcome is currently been challenged at the presidential election petition tribunal; they are expected to have a final say on the election. What is certain at the moment is the reality that a defacto government is in place and has gone ahead to roll out a slew of policies including the removal of the controversial and contentious subsidy on petrol which has invariably increased the miseries of a large proportion of citizens.

Conclusion

This paper probes the nature of campaign rhetoric deployed by leading presidential candidates in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections using three indicators: the identity of the candidates, their health status and national security considerations. This campaign rhetoric had two main characters; the principal actor who may be the presidential candidates or their supporters and the principal target who in this case will be their opponents and object of political attack. While politicians deploy diverse persuasive strategies—both positive and, especially negative in the quest to achieve the end goal of attaining power, it is uncertain the exact impact of campaign rhetoric on the outcome of elections. This is especially because of the enduring role of factors such as ethnicity, religion, region, money and in Nigerian politics. However, the negative and vile campaign rhetoric often set the tone for electoral violence.

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