



Review Article

THE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IMPERATIVE OF NIGERIA'S 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

*Hillary I. Ekemam

Department of Political Science, Imo State University, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the international politics nexus of the media role in the outcome of Nigeria's 2015 Presidential election, harping mainly on the activities of David Axelrod – a world renowned media political strategist. The objective of the study is to attempt to locate the media in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria within the wider apparatus for the realization of the US foreign policy in the sub-Saharan region and to highlight the favorable disposition of the United States towards Buhari's emergence, who, in Washington's view, is more amenable to dispositions compatible with America's foreign policy objectives in the sub-Saharan region. Data for the study is generated from secondary sources while analysis is purely descriptive. Our theoretical conceptions are Classical Realism as employed by Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, Thucydides, and others, respectively, in understanding the object of international politics and relations of states and Media Process and Power as employed by such scholars as Baudrillard, Mcquail, Adegboyega, Habermas, and Castel respectively. The paper concludes that, among others, the media can serve as an instrument of foreign policy since it can serve as an effective tool for propaganda warfare and realization of power. Recommendations is in line with the positions of neo-Marxian and 'Africanists' who suggest a 'constructive engagement' with the western capitalist economies whose interests may be clouded often in altruistic terms.

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INTRODUCTION

Through many previous studies, there could be no controversy as to the role of the media in the direction of public opinion as well as political process. With the rise of democracy and democratic institutions globally, the role of the media in politics and election outcomes has become even more interesting for students of politics and governments. Media participation in Nigeria's political life traces far back into the mid 19th century but precisely in 1859. Since then the media has continued to shape Nigeria's political development even during the military regimes which saw some level of intimidations and harassments. Be that as it may, however, the use of foreign media to influence Nigeria's political process is something of a novel but especially became more manifest during the 2015 presidential election which pitted the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party, (PDP) against the rival General Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress, APC. Muhammadu Buhari. It should be noted, was making his fourth attempt at the presidency in 2015 having held the office of the Head of State through military coup in 1983 but whose regime

was terminated less than a couple of years on the saddle by a counter coup that brought in another military Head of State of General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. This paper is purely focused on the international political imperative of Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. It suggests that the outcome of the election was preordained in Washington ad to a greater degree was facilitated by the activities of AKPD, a media political consulting strategist group founded by an Obama confidant, David Axelrod whose organization played a key role in the emergence of President Obama during his election to the US presidency in 2008 as well as during his reelection in 2012. The paper equally argues that short of the business angle of the Axelrod media engagement with Buhari campaign and subsequent "victory", central to the outcome of Nigeria's election of 2015 was international politics where the national interest of the United States was equally central. Hence to realize its national interest objectives, the media played not only a determinant role, its seeming accidental nature notwithstanding. This is why in his "Media and Political Praxis", Ibrahim *et al* (2015) has noted in citation of Haberman (2006) and Castells (1994) that: there is an underlying assumption of pivotal role of the media in politics and political participation, and in so doing, they raised the question of the media and power process in the society. They also noted that the media mediates, and are rarely independent of a given

*Corresponding author: Hillary I. Ekemam,
Department of Political Science, Imo State University, Nigeria.

national situation as they provide channels of communication and alignments between elements within such societies, and to varying degrees, are instrumental to dominant institutions and interests within societies in which they operate. In Nigeria's 2015 presidential election, the media outfit, AKPD became a platform through which not only Nigerians but most western governments expressed their views about Nigeria during Jonathan's administration. By so doing, it helped to justify for the United States, particularly, and its major allies their anti-Jonathan disposition aimed at emergence of Buhari, who was and is still perceived as more pliant and whose foreign policy would be compatible with both the long and short term objectives of the United States in the sub-Saharan Africa.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is simple: to examine the role of the media, especially the foreign media, in the Nigerian 2015 presidential election; to locate the United States' national interest imperative in the Sub-Saharan Africa in the outcome of Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. This paper is grounded in the assumption that one of the strategy groups, AKPD Message and Media Inc., founded by former Obama campaign manager, David Axelrod, besides operating in its capacity as a media consultancy outfit and represented itself, had objective compatible with the United States foreign policy interest in the sub-Saharan Africa. Such policy is based on the notion and calculation that once Nigeria's government falls into the hands of a party or individuals other than the incumbent Jonathan and his party, the realization of such interest would be a foregone conclusion. This is because there is a belief that once Nigeria firmly 'plays ball', other African states who had equally rejected AFRICOM would easily fall in line. These assumptions are equally premised on Yar'Adua-Jonathan administration's rejection of the proposed stationing of the United States' African Command, AFRICOM in the Gulf of Guinea considered a major naval artery for Nigeria's global economic relations.

Theoretical and Conceptual Orientation

Two theoretical perspectives, respectively originating from Mass Communication and International Politics are employed to give direction to this study, namely, the *Media and Power Processes* and *Classical Realism* theories.

The Media and the Electoral Process: A Theoretical Reflection

It is not a gain saying that the media plays a very important role in the democratic process. This is the reason, perhaps, Akinfeleye (2004), work described media as the "Fourth Estate of the Realm". This notion suggests that outside the main realm of government as represented by the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches, is another branch whose activities influence not only political participation but the direction of policy. This is why Olukotun (2005), (cited in Adegboyega, 2015:4), opined that "communication and information flows are viewed as the nerves of government." During elections, particularly in advanced democracies, the electorate relies heavily on opinions formed by media organizations. It is therefore through the media that the manifestoes of different parties are articulated for the mass public who may be swayed

or otherwise reject such parties and their candidates. Although it is expected that the media be 'apolitical' or neutral if a credible election could be had, but unfortunately, the media has always aligned itself with one party ideology or platform as opposed to another. Thus, according to Denis Mcquail (2005) the media is inseparable from sources of power since in doing so, it serves the interest of individuals seeking power as well as the citizenry to whom its activities are directed. According to Jean Baudrillard, (cited in Douglas Kellner): "the media is a simulation machine which reproduce images, signs, and codes which constitute an autonomous realm of (*hyper*)reality – (more real than real) - and which come to play a key role in life and the obliteration of the social (<https://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>). As it relates to the interest of individuals and power seekers, Paletz and Lipinski (1994), (cited in Adegboyega 2015:4), has noted that:

This is perhaps the reason why rulers, public officials, leaders of organization, and their advisors have always been aware of the importance of the media in advocating and advancing their views, and attacking the argument and positions of their opponent. The control by the leaders of the organ of communication is often essential in building and sustaining a political group or movement.

It was both Habermas (2006) and Castel (1994) who reasoned that there is an underlying and pivotal role of the mass media in political participation such that the media mediates rather than stand independent of a given social system. To this effect, media also acts as instruments of dominant organizations, interests, institutions, whether private or public (Randall, 1998). As Adegboyega (2015:1), rightly pointed:

The media are universally referred to as agents of power and political control, such that those who hold sway of political power and authority are always conscious of the fact that information management and control is central to capturing and, retention, and exercise of political power. The largest implication of this is that the ownership, control and accessibility to the media are considered to be critical to the wielding and sustenance of political power

In considering the international politics imperative of this essay, we find the *Classical Realism* as equally appropriate for the discussions that follow but more so within the understanding of the role and phenomenon of *power* in both the study of international politics as well as in the relations of nations. *Classical Realism* has been associated with such scholars as Hans Morgenthau (1965), Thucydides (1972), Machiavelli (1995 – George Bull's trans.) and even Thomas Hobbes (1971). *Classical Realism* as a theory of international politics subscribes to an international political system conceived of as exhibiting endemic conflict of interests and hence anarchic. For Hobbes (cited in Bowling and Sheptycki, 2012:13), "the natural state of humanity is poor, nasty, brutish, and short" thus underscoring the nature of relationships among states. On its part, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace* is widely acclaimed in the scholarship of political science for having brought the greatest influence on analysis of international politics among succeeding generations of known scholar in the field. For Morgenthau, human nature must be given considerable recognition in fathoming the relations of states. This human

nature must be understood within men's/nations propensity to seek for survival as they compete for scarce resources on the global stage. Because of this self-interest disposition of man or even nations, they are at all times power-seeking just because the acquisition of power is a natural sine-qua-non to survival. In seeking for this power, aggression may be its logical tool. This theory has traditionally been based, according to Jackson and Sorensen (2007:312), on (1) a pessimistic view of human nature; humans are self-interested and egoistic; (2) a conviction that international relations is conflictual and can always lead to war; (3) a high regard for values and national security and state survival; and (4) a basic skepticism that there can be progress in international politics. The theory subscribes to the "high politics" as opposed to "low politics" conception of the international political system as noted by Kenneth Waltz (cited in Ekemam 2015:57).

In explaining this theory on his part, E.H. Carr in his *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, (1964) cited in Jackson and Sorenson (2007:37) noted that:

"We should assume that there are profound conflicts of interest both between countries and between people. Some people and some countries are better off than others. They will attempt to preserve and defend their privileged positions. The underdogs, the 'have-nots', will struggle to change that situation, international relations is in a basic sense about the struggle between such conflicting interests and desires.

While classical realism is pessimistic, neo-realist paradigm (though not of our special interest here) accepts both the notion of "high politics" as well as "low politics", arguing that international politics is not always and at all times conflict natured as nations do, at times, cooperate in areas of mutual interest (Nau, Henry, 2009). This theory is appropriate for this study when one juxtaposes and/or tries to explain the United States interest in sub-Saharan African as an attempt at acquiring both "soft power" explained in terms of its economic interest as well as hegemonic power explained in terms of maintaining military presence capable of offsetting possible Russo-Chinese verifiable and respective interests in the African sub region in the last decade. This is especially in light of Nigeria's acquisition of "largest economy" portfolio within the African region - a status the United States would obviously not allow to fell exclusively into the Russo-China sphere of influence both militarily and economically.

Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election and the AKPD Factor

Be that as it may, the central focus of this paper relates to the role of AKPD in bringing about the emergence of Buhari through against the incumbent Jonathan in the 2015 election, something political observers have seen as an aberration in the history of Nigerian presidential election – given that hitherto, no incumbent President in Nigeria had lost a reelection bid. To do this we shall be looking at two major variables principally employed by Mr. David Axelrod's media outfit, AKPD, to make Jonathan's administration seem ineffective and to that extent, unelectable. These variables are the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag or Propaganda, the deafening Anti-Corruption Vuvuzela and the Human Rights Violation accusation.

The #BringBackOurGirls Propaganda

Perhaps in no better area was the activity of the media more damaging to Jonathan's presidential project as was the case of the hashtag, #BringBackOurGirls. As the Nigerian presidential election was nearing, AKPD, the political consulting group founded by an Obama confidant David Axelrod was brought in 2014 to assist the Buhari camp with the state-of-the-art propaganda information dissemination network. It should be noted that David Axelrod had been the principal strategist who brought about Obama's election victory in 2008 and during his successful reelection project in 2012. Axelrod is renowned globally for his media savvy and therefore very effective in using e-media including the now its popular social variant to dilute if not to drown its target's area of strength. When Axelrod was confronted with making a choice between Hillary Rodham Clinton, Barack Obama, and other Democrats running for president in America in 2008, having been their respective friends before that time, Axelrod was to finally decide to work for Obama and was quoted to have stated on *Washington Post* that "I thought that if I could help Obama (a black man in a racist America which wasn't quite ready for a president of Color) to get to Washington then I would have accomplished something great in my life" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Axelrod).

It would be germane to add here that in selling Obama, (a one-term senator from the state of Illinois), to the Americans, Axelrod had taken advantage of the mood in Washington that America had gotten cynical of establishment politics and politicians which his closest rival Hillary Clinton represented. Thus while Hillary Rodham Clinton – a former First Lady - was harping on "experience", AKPD embraced the strategy of "change" for its client. This "change" mantra sold so well during the Democratic primaries that Axelrod thought it wise to sustain it as Obama faced the state-of-Arizona-born senator, John McCain who had won the Republican ticket on the same "good old Washington establishment candidate mind-set." Thus Mr. McCain, (a long-serving senator and war Veteran of renown) was to hammer Obama campaign away with ads of inexperience especially on account of his supposedly minimal grasp of American foreign policy. Similarly, as the Republican candidate for that 2008 presidential election exuded experience-based confidence as well as the erroneous belief that America was not yet ready for a "black president", Axelrod fired relentlessly on the message of "change".

Also during his reelection campaign in 2012 against the Republican Mitt Romney, Obama's campaign slogan, yet on the consultancy of AKPD, was garnished with both "Forward" and "The Change We Can Believe In" suggesting confidence that America was still on tow with the "change" message as well as the real change he had brought to bear in American national political economy as well as its foreign policy. It is therefore not surprising that when AKPD was hired by the Buhari campaign organization, this "change" slogan was sold to the opposition by AKPD for the prosecution of Muhammed Buhari's presidential project. Before working for Buhari campaign, Axelrod's AKPD had worked for Mario Monti's campaign in Italy, was simultaneously a Senior Strategic Adviser to the British Labor Party leader Ed Milliband of the United Kingdom in the run-up to the 2015 British general election. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Axelrod).

Thus while working for Buhari campaign, Axelrod and his AKPD were already collectively an internationally acclaimed media guru of the type often derisively branded the “media spin doctor” - a name tag appropriately befitting its modus operandi. The use of Axelrod’s consultancy and the BringBackOurGirls hashtag to bring about a change of government in Nigeria favorable to Washington and Buhari campaign, exploiting the chances of breakdown of law and order in any event of Jonathan’s refusal to accept defeat, was seen in many circles as no longer a question of how but a question of when. This is so because when Boko Haram insurgency abducted nearly 300 school girls from their school at the town of Chibok of the northeast border state of Borno, the first international ‘hashtag’, #BringBackOurGirls was shown carried by Michelle Obama through an unnamed ‘e-rats’ suspected to have been planted by AKPD. Within a 48-hour time piece, the news of the abduction of the school girls went viral. Through so many non-traditional or “laptop” media outfits like the *Sahara Reporters*, *Premium Times*, *Facebook*, *Tweeter*, etc., coupled with *The Nation* newspaper (owned by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, who it was that labored to bring about the merger of hitherto rival political parties and ultimately the creation of the opposition party, APC), Axelrod’s anti-Jonathan campaign became both more suffocating as well as insurmountable. The Cable News Network, CNN also latched on the news-worthiness of phenomenon in its frequent re-broadcasts. At a point during the 2015, the story of the abducted girls and the responsibility of the government in their needed release became seemingly a sine qua non, synonymous, and/or indispensable factor for the successful realization of Jonathan’s reelection project. The implication and end game of this media activity was not only aimed at blackmail but an attempt at portraying President Jonathan’s administration as not only ineffective but to ultimately deny his campaign the much needed support and followership.

The Anti-Corruption Propaganda

Fighting corruption had been the central catch phrase of Buhari cum APC win-the-election project in Nigeria in 2015. Similarly, the issue of indiscipline and war against it had equally defined Buhari’s military administration in the early 80s when he overthrew the government of an elected civilian president, Alhaji Shehu Shagari through a military coup de’ e’-tat. Thus it was politically expedient and understandable that Buhari’s campaign re-awaken the psyche of the electorate about the seeming Buhari’s zero-tolerant disposition to official corruption. Again, because quite a few member of the incumbent president’s ministers like Stella Oduah, (Aviation), Diezani Allison-Madueke, (Petroleum), Arunma Oteh, (Nigerian Stock Exchange), and Godsdan Orubebe, (Niger Delta Affairs) had been enmeshed as well as touted for activities bothering on corruption, an opportunity was inadvertently created to build an anti-corruption platform through which AKPD would sell Buhari to the electorate as a man of integrity who would bring the scourge of corruption in Nigeria to a standstill. Its implication is that President Goodluck Jonathan had been running a corrupt government necessitating a change. To do this, AKPD began a concerted anti-corruption personality mantra around candidate Muhammed Buhari through the local and international media. For example, while the official data of the Transparency International for the years of Jonathan administration showed a

steady and marked improvement on the global Corruption Perception Index, CPI, *vuvuzela* of Nigeria’s alarming corruption index became deafening around the world. Indeed, under President Jonathan, Nigeria was for the first time not in the list of 10 most corrupt countries in the world yet the Axelrod’s group continued painting contrary but negative picture of Nigeria’s global corruption status. In the 2014 Transparency International’s CPI issued in December, Nigeria was ranked 136 out of 175 countries surveyed. This ranking placed Nigeria of Jonathan’s last 5 months in office alongside five other countries as 39th most corrupt country globally. With this ranking, Nigeria leap-frogged positively against eight countries within a space of one year - from the 31st most corrupt in 2013 to 39th in 2014 (www.reportsafric.com/2015/05/transparency-intl-rates-president-jonathans-govt-...).

In fact, Nigeria’s corruption rating stood a better contrast from all the civil government years of Obasanjo and the military regimes before it. The revelation of the Executive Director, UN Office on Drugs and Crimes observed that “our (Nigeria’s) past leaders stole \$400 million” ...but “five years into his (Obasanjo’s) administration, Nigeria was rated the number one corrupt country in the world with the presidency leading the table by this same organization. There were roars and uproar by the top members of OBJ’s cabinet, with Oby Ezekwesili and co., proffering all sorts of explanations and defense that couldn’t stand the test of this period”. The subsequent year in that administration (Obasanjo’s sixth year in office), Nigeria was ranked 4th most corrupt nation by Transparency International (*Dikko, Abbas:www.gamji.com//article 6000/NEWS/7729.htm*). Accordingly, “the report so far indicated that from May 1999 when Obasanjo was in office till mid 2006, the monies stolen within the period ... was more than what our past leaders stole put together from independence” before handing over to President Olusegun Obasanjo. Obasanjo expended over N1.3 trillion in the power sector, N700 million on our refineries, N300 billion on our roads. If one matches these with returns in terms of achievements and results, the economic variables look a downward slope” (ibid). These statistics underscore the true picture in contrast with the contrived image of Nigeria’s standing on global corruption watch during Jonathan’s administration painted by Axelrod’s media propaganda machinery which intensively carried damaging reports to create a loathsome image of that administration to a point where it seemed as though official corruption was novel in Nigeria. In an attempt to pit it into its proper context in his “*Revisiting Transparency International’s Verdict on Corruption in Nigeria*”, Kelechi Onyemobi (2015), had put it more aptly this way:

I have met many people who were as surprised as myself, indeed, deeply shocked, by the TI’s comparative data on Nigeria. The surprise and shock stems from a deep realization, once again, of the big difference between perception and reality in public affairs – and the immense power of the media in shaping both. According to Transparency International’s data from 1979 till date, the tenures of both General Muhammadu Buhari and former President Olusegun Obasanjo were more corrupt than the tenure of President Goodluck Jonathan. ... Nigeria is actually much less corrupt today than it had been in the last 35 years (dailyindependentnig.com/2015/02/revisiting-transparency-internationals-verdict-corruption-nigeria/)

Another point worthy of mention here is that while Obama administration continued to pay lip service to Nigeria under Jonathan, they however used both public and private channels (including Axelrod's AKPD, a known Obama's associate) to undermine the administration's positive achievements while at the same time magnifying every setback of the Nigerian government to realize Washington's already ordained Buhari emergence. This disposition was further demonstrated by the statement from the American Secretary of State, John Kerry, who in reaction to the postponement of the date of the presidential election noted that:

"the United States was deeply disappointed by the decision to postpone Nigeria's presidential election" adding that "it is critical that the government not use security concerns as pretext for impeding the democratic process".

Accusation of Human Rights Violation

The media outfit of David Axelrod, AKPD also took advantage of the United States' disposition to a change of government in Nigeria favorable to Buhari to hammer away on Jonathan's administration's alleged human rights violation due to the activities of the Nigerian military in the insurgency-infested areas of the northeast. It should be recalled that in denying several Nigerian arms request, Washington had said ... "it is barred from supplying weapons by the so-called Leahy Amendment which forbids foreign states that have committed gross human rights violations from receiving aids" (www.premiumtimesng.com/headlines). In light of such statement and in consideration of the terrorists held by the U S at Guantanamo Bay Maximum facility at Cuba, Erica Guevera Rosa, Director of Amnesty International Americas Program was to ask: "What is human right about a facility holding humans outside the jurisdiction of law?" (Rosa, G. 2014).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to marry the role of the media, particularly the AKPD associated with David Axelrod, an Obama confidant, in the outcome of Nigeria's presidential election of 2015. It suggests that the outcome of the 2015 election was ordained in Washington in attempt to further the realization of the United States foreign policy in the sub-Saharan Africa of which the establishment of AFRICOM is compatible. It also examined the deception which the media was capable of considering its lack of independence of the power play that goes on in a volatile political atmosphere such as Nigeria's highly contested 2015 presidential election. The role of the media, especially that of AKPD in Nigeria's 2015 election, further justifies the theory propounded by Habermas (2006) and Castel (1994) who reasoned that there is an underlying and pivotal role of the mass media in political participation such that the media mediates rather than stand independent of a given social system. To this effect, media also acts as instruments of dominant organizations, interests, institutions, whether private or public (Randall, 1998). Finally, this paper concludes that the media – including the social sub-current – is a form of social control and power and its role in the Nigeria's 2015 presidential election is compatible with the notion that media is capable of destroying information which according to Jean Baudrillard can come in four historical phases, the one our interest here, he calls "masked unreality" which manifests in

the dissemination of information that are not true colored in sensational, catchy titles and innuendos ultimately aimed at replacement of reality. To this extent, the media, especially foreign media, can be an instrument for the realization of the foreign policy objectives of their home countries just as the Multinational Corporations can serve as agents of foreign policy of their home countries.

Recommendation

In light of the conclusion above, the paper recommends that Nigeria's government should adopt a policy of *Constructive Engagement* in its dealings with the United States as America's disposition to a change of government in Nigeria is suspect and may not necessarily be in the overall interest of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

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