

REARTICULATING CORRUPTION: AN ASSESSMENT OF SELECTED NEWSPAPERS' NARRATIVES ON ATIKU ABUBAKAR'S STRATEGIC FOREIGN TRIPS

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ABSTRACT

***T**his study examines the perennial association of Nigeria's former vice president, Atiku Abubakar to corruption in the Nigerian public sphere. The study traces his political career from his retirement from the Nigerian Customs to his last outing as the presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party in the 2019 presidential election. Using the framework of the Agenda Setting theory, the study examines the role of the media in the public perception of Atiku Abubakar vis-à-vis his corruption perception index. Due to the acclaimed relationship between media and politics, the study takes a closer look at the underlining political motives that drive the agenda and coloration of reports on the relationship between Atiku Abubakar and corruption in the Nigerian media space. The method used for this close examination is Critical Discourse Analysis. Two newspapers were purposively selected and one report was purposively selected from each newspaper for the analysis. Findings from the study show that both newspapers served as*

Introduction:

Corruption is one of the causes of underdevelopment in Third World Countries. It permeates most sectors of life in developing countries. It is one of the reasons for the low influence of developing countries on the global stage. Widespread illiteracy and poverty in the Third World can be attributed to corruption and poor leadership (McPhail, 2006, p. 27). Although corruption exists in all aspects of Nigerian national life, one area in which it is deeply rooted is politics. This is because politics arguably determines the nature of other aspects of our national life.

Nigerian political landscape is filled with the history of many men and women who went

unofficial channels for the promotion of the interests of their principals and the denigration of their principals' opponents. Both of them reduced governance to the ability or inability of an individual to visit a foreign country.

Keywords: *Corruption, Nigerian Newspapers, Agenda Setting, Power Relations, Atiku Abubakar.*

Into public office carrying great financial burdens but came out opulent. Curiously, few people dare to question the source of their wealth; instead they are worshipped by the society and traditional and religious institutions who should be the conscience of the nation compete with one another to confer traditional and religious titles on these people. Consequently, they become role models for the youths. Politics is then perceived as the easiest route to wealth and the typical politician becomes willing to do anything and everything to get into public office without recourse to the legality of such actions. While the lives of "successful" politicians marginally improve, the wider society has experience steady degradation in the areas of physical and moral infrastructure. This is one of the reasons why violence permeates our electoral process.

Many influential Nigerian politicians and public officials have lived with the baggage of corruption since our return to democratic rule in 1999. While a handful of them have been convicted – Joshua Dariye, James Ibori, Sambo Dasuki, Tafa Balogun and Bode George are the most prominent of them- and others have been perennially in court – Danjuma Goje, Orji Uzor Kalu, Attahiru Bafarawa, Isa Yuguda, Rashidi Ladoja among others-, many more have slipped through the investigative net of anti-corruption agencies because they are considered to be "small fishes" in the ocean of corruption engulfing the country or because they are sacred cows in the political sector who could bring down the government of the day with their reservoir of classified information and inner workings of the Nigerian state.

It is interesting to note that many others have allegedly been investigated without facing trial. Prominent among this category are former president Goodluck Jonathan, former vice president Atiku Abubakar, former Minister of Petroleum Resources, Dieziani Allison-Madueke, and former first lady Patience Jonathan.

Atiku Abubakar is one of those Nigerians whose name has been synonymous with corruption over the last two decades. This is unconnected to his unending ambition to become the president of Nigeria. It is also connected to his history as

a former top shot of the Nigerian Customs Service – an agency that is perceived as one of the cash cows of the country and one of the easiest places for personal enrichment. It is widely insinuated that the former vice president accumulated illegal wealth from the agency before delving into private business.

Atiku Abubakar's foray into the political space was as a protégé of retired General Shehu Musa Yar'adua. Although the retired General was the Second-in-Command during the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo (the first Nigerian military ruler to hand over power to a civilian administration), he became a fierce critic of successive military governments and demanded for the return to democratic rule. He formed a political pressure group called the People's Democratic Movement (PDM). General Yar'adua was killed in detention under General Sani Abacha's regime and the People's Democratic Movement formed the nucleus of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which emerged as the ruling party at the return to democratic rule following General Abacha's death in 1998. After the death of General Yar'adua, Atiku Abubakar became the leader of the People's Democratic Movement. Although he had contested and won the gubernatorial elections in Adamawa state, the President-elect contacted him and asked him to serve as his vice president and Atiku Abubakar obliged. It was rumoured that the experience of Atiku on the nation's number two job increased his appetite for the top job (he had aspired on the platform of the Social Democratic Party in the early 90s). Grapevine had it that he had perfected plans to defeat his boss in the presidential primaries of 2003 and it was said that President Obasanjo literally begged Atiku Abubakar to drop his presidential ambitions in 2003. Obasanjo had his way, but that was the beginning of Atiku Abubakar's political voyage with corruption. President Obasanjo disrupted the balance of power within the PDP and ensured that most of Atiku's loyalists were removed from strategic positions and replaced with Obasanjo's loyalists. Obasanjo used heavy military tactics to ensure the loyalty of the leadership of the party. In his eight years as president, the PDP had four national chairmen; they are Solomon Lar, Barnabas Gemade, Audu Ogbe and Ahmadu Ali.

The next four years were spent in mutual suspicion and when it became apparent that president Obasanjo was not going to support his emergence as the PDP's candidate, Atiku Abubakar decamped and ran on the platform of one of the opposition parties (Action Congress) and lost. He ran again in 2011 following the death of Umar Yar'adua and lost. Atiku Abubakar then moved to the All Progressives Congress in 2015. He ran during the presidential primaries and lost

to the incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari. He stayed to ensure victory for the party but soon fell out with the leadership of the party when it was clear that President Buhari would run for a second term against the promise which he made to leading party stakeholders in 2015. Atiku then moved back to the People's Democratic Party to seek the presidency in 2019 and he emerged victorious at the party's primary election.

Following his emergence, the Lords of the ruling party and their banner-men were quick to remind Nigerians that Atiku Abubakar is synonymous with corruption. They claimed that he was a wanted man in the United States of America. They said he would be arrested, tried and convicted (like James Ibori in the United Kingdom) should he set foot on American soil and that was why he had not visited the country since he left office as vice president.

Atiku Abubakar admitted his inability to visit the United States for a long time but attributed it to reasons best known to the American embassy and the American government. He alleged that President Buhari was also "barred from the U.S. for 15 years, until 2015" (Ojo, 2017). However, investigations in the United States of America had linked him to bribery for the expansion of a multinational technology firm into the Nigerian market (Fabiya & Folarin, 2019). Following intense lobbying in the build-up to the 2019 presidential election, Atiku Abubakar visited the United States of America in January and held meetings with influential individuals and groups in the country.

The media plays a crucial role in the association of Atiku Abubakar with corruption. This is because the media is an indispensable tool in the political process. The political history of Nigeria is filled with media warfare. Media organizations are "used by political elites to spread ideologies which would enable the creation of political hegemony" (Onifade, 2016, p. 76) in their favour. The media is a creative and powerful force of public opinion and it is important for anyone who desires to influence public opinion to have a measure of control over the media space. This control could be in form of direct ownership of a mass medium, and it could also be in form of alliance or friendship with owners of powerful media organizations. Established news organizations are considered more credible sources of information in Nigeria and people are likely to believe their contents more than they would believe social media content. While some media organizations hailed the campaign trip of Atiku to the United States of America, some have questioned the process and cost of making the trip.

Statement of the Problem

The fixation of the Nigerian public on the ability of Atiku Abubakar to visit the United States of America raises questions on the value which Africans in general and Nigerians in particular have placed on themselves. African leaders regularly seek endorsement of their ambitions, plans and programmes by western leaders, governments and institutions. It is considered a privilege for African leaders to address the Royal Institute of International Affairs (better known as Chatham House) or the American Council on Foreign Relations. Media advisors of such African leaders or politicians often acceptance by foreign governments as vital credential. Some even use the occasion of their foreign visits to announce key plans, policies and programmes which are meant for their people at home. An example is the announcement and official launching of Nigeria's botched national carrier Nigeria Air in the United Kingdom in 2018.

Nigerian media has been a part of the problem. They should hold the government accountable to the people at all times as enshrined in the constitution. Journalists and media managers have failed to rise above the whims of the political interests of media owners in the discharge of their professional duties. They have legitimized the periodic visits of Nigerian political leaders to seek validation by Western powers. If Western politicians and leaders would not address the Nigerian institute of International affairs about their aspirations and programmes for their people, why should the Nigerian media make much fuss about the foreign trips of Nigerian politicians?

While the journalists and media managers were engaging in speculative yellow journalism on the foreign trips and the corruption of Atiku Abubakar, the nation was faced with tough challenges which were either unreported or underreported. These problems include armed banditry in Zamfara, regular kidnapping and killing of minorities in Kaduna, poor welfare and death of Nigerian soldiers fighting Boko Haram in the north-east, non-passage of the national budget as well as the lingering minimum wage bill at the national assembly. All these topics arguably have greater impact on the average Nigerian than the foreign trips and perceived corruption of a presidential aspirant.

Objectives

This work seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the association of Atiku Abubakar to corruption in Nigerian newspapers.

2. To compare the narratives on the relationship between Atiku Abubakar and corruption in the selected Nigerian newspapers.
3. To examine the factors that shape the narratives employed by each of the newspapers in their articulation of Atiku Abubakar's alleged relationship with corruption.

Research Questions

1. How do Nigerian newspapers project the relationship between Atiku Abubakar and corruption?
2. Are there differences in the narratives by different Nigerian newspapers on the relationship between Atiku Abubakar and corruption?
3. What are the factors that shape the narratives employed by each of the newspapers in their articulation of Atiku Abubakar's alleged relationship with corruption?

Theoretical Framework

Agenda Setting

This theory was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972/73 (Lane, 2001) to explain "the relationships between the emphasis that the mass media place on issues and the importance that media audiences attribute to those issues" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 31). The summation of the theory is that the media possesses "the ability to tell us what issues are important" (University of Twente, 2019). It suggests that the media tells us what to think about and not what to think. In relation to this study, the Nigerian media space has been filled with stories either linking or distancing Atiku Abubakar to corrupt actions over his long career in public office. This is agenda setting. The reports have varied and readers have believed the narratives than resonates with them and dismissed those narratives that do not resonate with them.

Whatever the case, the media has consistently made the corruption perception index of Atiku Abubakar by the Nigerian and international community a key issue each time he makes an attempt to run for the presidency of the country. The public often goes quiet on the issue too until it is time for another presidential election and the media brings up the issue of corruption about the former vice president.

Agenda setting theory recognizes the differences in individuals unlike the Hypodermic Needle Theory which claims that people act as they are programmed

to do by the media. The Agenda Setting Theory says that the media can give the public topics to think about, but it cannot tell the public what to think about the topics. The reaction of the public to the agenda set by the newspapers would depend on the social experiences of the audience as well as the history and reputation of the media organization that is setting the agenda (Onifade, 2015, pp. 20-21).

Therefore media literate readers are likely to evaluate sources cited by newspaper reports on the culpability or innocence of Atiku Abubakar in corruption scandals as well as the owner of the medium. This is because media owners largely set the agenda for public discourse. Most Nigerian newspapers are directly or indirectly linked to politicians and they do all within their powers to ensure that they protect the images and interests of their political patrons in their reports. They also seek to destroy the reputation of the political opponents of their owners or patrons.

Media owners and professional journalist are closer to the elite class which Eric Louw calls the insiders (Louw, 2005, p. 17). This closeness gives them the professional freedom and license to determine the topics of public discourse as well as the narratives on them thus making them “symbolic elites”. This elite position provides them with the skills required for the manufacturing of “public knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, norms, values morals and ideologies” (Ademilokun & Taiwo, 2013, p. 442).

Methodology

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the methodological approach. From all the national dailies in Nigeria, two newspapers were purposively selected for their political bias. The newspapers are *The Nation* and *Vanguard* newspapers. *The Nation* newspaper is owned by the national leader of the All Progressives Congress (Bola Tinubu) and it is a medium for the promotion of the party’s ideal and the de-marketing of the major opposition party People’s Democratic Party (PDP). *Vanguard* newspaper on the other has strong ties to the People’s Democratic Party and it has been very critical of the government of President Muhammadu Buhari and the All Progressives Congress.

Two news stories were purposively selected for analysis in the two newspapers because they have elements of propaganda on the recent trip of Atiku Abubakar to the United States of America. Both stories were written just after the strategic trip by the PDP’s presidential candidate.

Analysis of The Nation's Narrative

The entry by *The Nation* newspaper for this study is titled "Atiku paid his way into the US, says report". From the title, the disposition of the newspaper to the candidacy of Atiku Abubakar is evident. The title brings to mind the 13-year wait for the former vice president to visit the United States of America even though he owns properties over there and one of his wives is an American citizen who lives there. The story has no identifiable by-line, it simply says "By our reporter". This is an indication that the story is an effort to de-market the aspirations of the former customs officer.

A temporary suspension of a travel ban linked to decade-old bribery scandals paved the way for former vice president and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) presidential candidate Atiku Abubakar to make his Washington DC trip last month, a report in Reuters said on Monday.

The extract above states that the visit of Atiku Abubakar to the United States of America is a product of a temporary suspension of a travel ban. The lead of the story also alleged that he was involved in a number of bribery scandals which were decades old.

Atiku's visit to Washington was put together with the help of two U.S. lobbying firms Holland & Knight.

The firms were hired by Atiku personally in December to help him secure a visa, in part by enlisting members of Congress to request one on his behalf, according to a lobbyist for the firm. It has been paid \$80,000 so far, the report said.

Ballard Partners was hired by the PDP at a rate of \$90,000 per month in September, before Atiku emerged as the party's candidate, according to U.S. disclosure filings.

The extract above attempts to explain how Atiku Abubakar managed to make it to the United States despite an alleged long term ban. It states that the visit was facilitated by a two United States based lobbying firms at huge financial cost to Atiku Abubakar and the PDP. The allegation if true shows an obsession for foreign products and services by the Nigerian people in general and the Nigerian elites in particular. With so many indigenous public relations practitioners, it is shameful that a frontline presidential aspirant would pitch his tent with foreign companies in a local war.

Several U.S. government officials said the travel ban was waived temporarily by the U.S. State Department after lobbyists mounted a campaign among

congressional lawmakers arguing that the administration should not snub the leading challenger to President Muhammadu Buhari in the Feb. 16 election.

A source said Atiku was allowed to enter the U.S. because the authorities saw no need to antagonise him

The opening statement of the extract above attributed a statement to “several US government officials”. This attribution was loosely done because one or two key officials of the United States’ government would have given the story greater legitimacy. The extract also alleged that the American government opened her borders to Atiku Abubakar out of diplomatic courtesy.

Analysis of Vanguard’s Narrative

The entry from *Vanguard* newspaper is titled “Your fixation on Atiku’s US visit is defeatist, PDP replies Buhari”. The title suggests the favourable disposition of the newspaper to the political aspirations of Atiku Abubakar. The story is a direct message from the PDP to the presidency and the newspaper was a willing messenger. Also the news item has no by-line which is an indication that it is a propaganda effort.

The People’s Democratic Party Presidential Campaign Organization (PPCO) describes President Muhammadu Buhari’s fixation on the success of its Presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar’s trip to the United States, as defeatist and smacking of a pre-defeat hallucination.

The extract above is the opening paragraph of the news story. It alludes to a successful visit to the United States of America by Atiku Abubakar. It also openly attacks President Buhari by saying he is fixated on the unquantifiable success of his opponent which has made him hallucinatory. This name-calling is bad for nation building and the political process of a budding democracy like ours.

The PPCO says the Buhari Presidency should hide its face in shame that after spending billions of naira in propaganda to stop the trip, Atiku Abubakar, freely travelled to the United States, where unlike President Buhari’s wasteful trips, he engaged in fruitful sessions with critical international business entities on ways to revamp our economy ruined by President Buhari.

In the extract above the story amplifies the PDP’s attack on the president that he should be ashamed of the outcome despite efforts to stop Atiku from making the trip. It would be recalled that the minister for information Lai Mohammed, had allegedly written to the American embassy asking them not to grant the opposition candidate entry visa. The PDP alleged that millions of naira was spent

on the propaganda effort. The story also makes reference to the frequent medical trips of President Buhari abroad at the expense of Nigerian tax-payers. The trips were called wasteful by the PDP in the story. A swipe was also taken at the president's seeming lack of understanding of economic issues. It suggests that the president has mismanaged the economy and Atiku Abubakar has the ability to fix same if given the opportunity given his acclaimed success in the international business world.

President Buhari and the APC were so disturbed about Atiku Abubakar's acceptance by the international community that they wasted billions of naira from the coffers of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to organize a failed protest in the United States... Today, Atiku Abubakar has a global support, unlike President Buhari, who, as a pariah President, has no friends all over the world. This is the reason President Buhari has gone into frenzy over Atiku Abubakar's global acceptance. The PPCO notes that President Buhari's failure in all his plots against Atiku Abubakar signposts his eventual failure before Atiku at the February 16, 2019 Presidential election, as Nigerians have since reached a consensus to vote him in as their next President.

The extract above attempts to break down the alleged efforts by the presidency and the All Peoples Congress to influence public opinion against the aspirations and personality of Atiku Abubakar. It alleged that money was diverted from the coffers of a "juicy" government agency the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) to sponsor protests against the political aspirant in faraway America. This claim is unsubstantiated but due to the nature of politics and corruption perception in Nigeria, the claims cannot be waived off.

The paragraph also claims that Atiku Abubakar has a global acceptance while President Buhari is a political pariah in the international community. This is an extreme form of criticism because the president is one of the symbols of the nation. Calling him unsubstantiated names is an undesirable way to play politics. The paragraph concludes that Nigerians had reached a consensus to vote Atiku as their next president. This is a clear propaganda message.

If President Buhari has anything to tell or ask our candidate, Atiku Abubakar, he should be bold to meet him at an open debate any day, any time and at any venue.

In the extract above, the story reports that the PDP challenged President Buhari to a debate with the Atiku Abubakar. The aim was to show the deficiencies of the president to the world especially in the areas of public speaking and economics. Interestingly, Atiku Abubakar had pulled out of a debate with other presidential

aspirants on the excuse that President Buhari was not at the event. There were allegations that Atiku pulled out of the debate (even though he was already at the venue) because he could not withstand the intellectual and oratory powers of the younger aspirants on the platform. They are Fela Durotoye, Donald Duke, Kingsley Moghalu and Obiageli Ezekwesili.

Conclusion

The media has been a theatre for attempts to validate or disprove the corruption credentials of Atiku Abubakar. One of the ways of acquiring power is the determination of public opinion through the production and dissemination of news (Castells, 2009, p. 155). Both the All Peoples Congress (through *The Nation*) and the People's Democratic Party (through *Vanguard*) made efforts to propagate "the good" about their presidential candidates and "the bad" about their opponent. The "truth" about corrupt credentials of Atiku Abubakar lays somewhere between the two narratives. This is because media reports are cultural productions and they reflect the political culture dominant in a society at a point in time.

The media fireworks linking Atiku Abubakar to corruption or distancing him from it are propaganda efforts targeted at influencing public opinion for or against him and his quest for political power. Although reports from the United States indicate that he was prevented from entering the country for a long time, the narrative by his opponents that he would be arrested should he step on American soil was an exaggeration. Also, the narrative from his camp that he had been totally innocent is also far from the truth because some of his allies had been indicted in the United States.

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