

POLITICS OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA: A CRITIQUE

Charles Osarenomase OSARUMWENSE, PhD

Department of History and International Studies

Faculty of Arts, University of Benin

Benin City, Edo State

osarenomase.osarumwense@uniben.edu

08023522681

&

Emmanuel Toby, PhD

Department of History and International Studies

University of Benin, Benin City

emmanuel.toby@uniben.edu

Abstract

This paper focuses on the politics of the Nigerian government during the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Nigeria. It explores the impact of the Nigerian government distrust initiatives and how it worsened the already bartered Nigerians during the Coronavirus period. The paper adopts a historical and analytical research method. It utilises primary and secondary sources of information. From what has been done so far in this research, the paper found out that politics of Covid-19 in Nigeria was an addendum to corruption and distrust nature of the Nigerian political class. The paper recommends that the Nigerian government should be totally committed to the Nigerian people most especially in the era of global challenges. It also recommends that during a critical period like the Covid-19, Nigerian government should learn to detached from western ideas and initiatives to establish its own plan of action in tackling global challenges.

Keywords: Politics, Covid-19, distrust initiatives, global challenge

Introduction

The outbreak of pandemics in world history is not new. As a result, the Coronavirus pandemic is not the first of its kind in human history. The world has witnessed a series of pandemics such as polio in 2014, the Ebola virus in 2014, Zika virus in 2016 among others. Toward the end of 2019, humanity was confronted with a virus that the World Health Organisation (WHO) first perceived as an “epidemic” and later was described as a global “pandemic” by the same WHO as a result of the large scale spread and mode of transmission of the virus. The Covid-19 pandemic is the most hyped among the series of pandemic outbreaks in the world. Late 2019 has become world history as a result of the acronym “Covid-19”.

The coronavirus emerged from Wuhan in China and spread to other parts of the world. The Virus outbreak took the entire nations of the world by surprise. The outbreak of the pandemic resulted in a series of political, economic, and social challenges faced by nations. It was a pandemic that confronted the developed, underdeveloped, strong, and weak states of the world. “It was a virus without border”. It affected the international relations of states in the area of politics, economics, and social relations (health). As a result of these developments, countries around the world instituted a policy action aimed at managing their relations with other states during the Covid-19 pandemic era. The Covid-19 era became a critical period in the nation’s economic, political, and social history, and the Nigerian state was not exempted from the Covid-19 surge. Nigeria reported the first case of Covid-19 on February 27 2020 and as a result,

a lot of measures including lockdown, restriction of inter-state movement, social and distancing were instituted in a bid to control the spread of the disease.

Politics of Covid-19 in Nigeria

Politics of Covid-19 in Nigeria in the context of this paper connotes the Nigerian government's distrust initiatives in manipulating the internal as well as the international environment for the gain of a few political elites. The policies and programmes launched by the Nigerian government aimed at bringing the spread of the virus under control became an avenue for corrupt Nigerian politicians to enrich themselves. A clear-cut example of this can be seen in the “palliative” initiative, where some Nigerian politicians hijacked the process for political gains. The establishment of a COVID-19 intervention fund which resulted in various internal and external Covid-19 contributions to the Nigerian government has become history. The internal as well as the external donations did not reflect in the fight against the virus in the country. The palliative initiative which was meant to assist Nigerians most especially the less privileged ones became weapons of political coercion by some Nigerian politicians.

The lack of government accountability resulted in a call by Nigerians who began to demand from the government that assistance from individuals, companies, and International Non-Governmental Organisation by the Federal and State Governments, towards effective containment of the Coronavirus (Covid-19 were not being appropriately accounted for¹. The politics of the Nigerian government on Covid-19 resulted in corrupt practices among political elites in Nigeria. Most of the assistance from the international governmental organisation and non-governmental organisation were not accounted for. Among the biggest donors in Nigeria during the pandemic were the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and Alhaji Aliko Dangote, both of whom donated 25 billion Naira each². The European Union (EU) one of the external contributors gave the sum of 50 million Euro, which amounted to 21 billion naira towards the implementation of the coordinated response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria³. The non-manifestation of Covid-19 financial support in the fight against the spread of the virus in Nigerians has led many Nigerians to ask questions on how the Nigerian government spent or distributed the financial as well as materials assistance received from internal and external donors. The Social-Economic Right and Accountability Project (SERAP) have requested that the Federal government of Nigeria should make public the funds received from public and private donors. The interplay between politics and corruption has relegated the call for accountability.

According to Professor Oyewale Tomori, a Professor of Virology, at Redeemer University, stated that in a situation like this, there should be transparency and accountability. People should be how much was received and publicly how much was spent and on what, including who received the money and confirmation that he or she delivered⁴. The federal government's response to the call for accountability in the Covid-19 internal and external donations has further proved the distrust policies of the Nigerian government during the Covid-19 period. Listed below are 16 top corporate internal donors to the Federal Government of Nigeria to combat Covid-19.

S/N	Donors	Amount (billion NGN)
1	Central Bank of Nigeria	2,000,000,000.00
2	Dangote Industries Limited	2,000,000,000.00
3	Floor Relief Fund	1,500,000,000.00
4	Bua Sugar Refinery Limited	1,000,000,000.00

5	Guaranty Trust Bank Plc	1,000,000,000.00
6	United Bank of Africa	1,000,000,000.00
7	First Bank of Nigeria	1,000,000,000.00
8	Zenith Bank	1,000,000,000.00
9	Famfa Oil Limited	1,000,000,000.00
10	Nigerian Deposit Insurance Corporation	1,000,000,000.00
11	Access Bank Plc	1,000,000,000.00
12	GLOBACOM	1,000,000,000.00
13	Amperion Power Distribution Ltd	1,000,000,000.00
14	African Steel Mills Nigeria Limited	1,000,000,000.00
15	MTN Nigeria Plc	1,000,000,000.00
16	Flour Mills of Nigeria Ltd	1,000,000,000.00

Source: Abara Benson (2020): Available at: <http://nairametrics.com/2020/04/18/list-of-all-companies-and-billionaires-that-have-contributed-to-covid-19-fund/> accessed 24 March 2022.

Apart from the above-listed corporate bodies, some corporate bodies also contributed in millions to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It is on record that about one hundred and seven (107) corporate organisations and individuals contributed to the Covid-19 relief funds. The sum of ₦25,893,699,791.00 billion was donated⁵. The justification of Nigerians who believed that the Covid-19 contribution fund may have been embezzled by some corrupt Nigerian politicians can be seen in the unimproved health and education sector during a pandemic and may likely remain so after the pandemic.

Health Sector: Politics of Covid-19

Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, Nigeria's health sector has been battling with a lack of government funding. Nigeria ranks among the top ten countries heavily affected by COVID-19 in Africa⁶. The deplorable nature of the health sector in Nigeria has been nothing to write home about. Corruption in the health sector has compromised the capacity of healthcare providers to deliver public good⁷. The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak has exposed the high level of decay and neglect in the Nigerian health sector.

The health sector was the most affected during the Covid-19 surge in Nigeria. The reason is that the country's health sector was very weak as a result of the non-commitment of the Nigerian government to the development of the health sector. Due to the weak nature of the health system in some African states, member states of the African Union of the Africa including Nigeria, met in April 2001 in Abuja Nigeria “the Abuja Accord” on the funding of the health sector in member states. During the meeting, member states pledged to allocate 15% of the country’s annual budget to improve the health sector in a bid to secure more financial resources to address the challenges facing the health sector in their respective countries. It was recorded that years after the Abuja Declaration, only one African country met this target⁸. In Nigeria for example, the budget allotted to the health sector is very low and the implication of this is the continual fall in the standard of the health sector in the country. It was recorded that in the year 2015 budget, the sum of ₦257,543bn was allocated to the Nigerian health sector. Also in the 2016, 2017, and 2018 budgets, the sum of N 347,26bn was voted for the Nigerian health sector. In 2019, the Nigerian health sector was recorded at 365,77b⁹. In spite of the entire budget; the health sector has not witnessed any improvement. This situation has not only retarded the hope of health sector development in Nigeria but has also resulted in what latter became known as “Medical Tourism”. Dr. OsagieEhanire, Minister of Health during the period stated that Nigeria losses 1 Billion Dollars yearly to medical tourism¹⁰.

The condition of the health sector in Nigeria gave rise to Nigerians must especially the political class to seek medical attention abroad. There are several instances, were the president has to travel abroad for medical treatment. It has been proven that the States House Clinic in Aso Rock has also been a victim of underfunding. The justification for this was the visit of the Nigerian first lady, Aisha Buhari in 2017 to the State House Clinic in the Presidential Villa confirmed the poor and weak state of the Nigerian Health system despite the huge budget been allocated to the sector.

With the Covid-19 outbreak, the Nigerian Health sector could not keep up with the challenges posed by the virus. The restriction of movements (lockdown) measures of nations of the world including Nigeria prevented the rich most especially the political class from traveling overseas for medical attention because the Nigerian public health sector lacked the primary facilities to tackle the virus spread in the country. Most of the testing equipment was mostly in private hospitals. The number of infected persons in the country increased that some government facilities like stadiums were now converted into isolation centers. The major issue confronting every aspect of the Nigerian state today including health sector is the politicalisation of everything and anything by the Nigerian political elites. Even in the face of Covid-19 that led to the death of many Nigerians, the country health sector was still be politicized instead of taking up the challenges posed by Covid-19 to develop the health sector. The palliatives and substantial amounts from private, public, and international donors have not been accounted for. The government promised its citizens palliatives most especially those who were badly affected but failed in its promise. It was recorded that palliatives such as food items and household materials were hidden by some Nigerian politicians for selfish interests. This development resulted in wide protests across the country.

Education Sector: Politics of Covid-19

Education is very critical to the development of a country. A country with well-funded education tends to strive toward a better society. Nigeria before the coming of the military into the Nigerian political space, Nigeria's educational system was robust. But with the coming of military into the Nigerian politics, the Nigerian educational system has been bartered with underfunding. But that is not to say that successive civilian government has done better in the development of the Nigerian educational system.

The outbreak of Covid-19 has exposed the government's lack of commitment to the development of the education sector in Nigeria and this has impacted negatively on the education system in Nigeria. The negative impact of the outbreak of Covid-19 on Nigeria's educational sector is a fall out of the Nigerian government not keeping pace with the digitalization of teaching and learning that has been in practice in the most advanced countries of the world. Before Covid-19, some countries have been practicing online teaching and learning which enable teachers to teach and students to take classes online without physical presence or coming to class rooms to take lectures from their teachers. But the Covid-19 outbreak which resulted in the "social distancing" measures resulted in the closure of schools and collapse of the Nigerian primary and tertiary schools. The Covid-19 outbreak interrupted teaching and learning all over the world.

The closure of schools occasioned by Covid-19 in Nigeria impacted negatively on the Nigerian education system because of the government lack of funding. For example, before the Covid-19, most of the Nigerian primary and tertiary institutions have no online facilities for distance learning because of the politicalisation of everything and anything in Nigeria by the Nigeria political elites. The online teaching and learning facilities were only common in the Nigerian

private primary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The outbreak of the virus exposed the poor state of the Nigerian education system as a result of government neglect over time.

During the lockdown of schools, Nigeria strived for learning continuity despite the lockdown¹¹, the online learning methods introduced by the Nigerian government were less effective due to a lack of online facilities. Before Covid-19, most Nigerian education institutions relies more on physical interaction with students in classrooms even when the classroom teaching was poorly funded by the Nigerian government. Covid-19, and the introduction of online learning and teaching, posed a greater challenge to the Nigerian education system.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the socio-economic inequalities of the Nigeria education system; many wealthy families in Nigeria send their children to private schools leaving the poor resources and facilities in public schools all because of the increase in mismanagement of resources allocated to the education system¹². The Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) kicked against the Federal Government attempt to reopen schools because of lack of health facilities in Schools. The Academic bodies, began to press for improve in teaching and learning facilities in Nigerian schools most especially the online facilities in public schools.

Conclusion

The year 2020 has constituted a significant period in the history of the world. Significant in world history because it was when the Coronavirus broke out. The virus was without border. The magnitude of spread of the virus was alarming and threatened the political, economic and social existence of states and nations of the world. The virus held the world: the strong, weak countries to a standstill. The nature of the spread of the virus and mode of contamination disrupted the social-political and economic relations of states. As a result of this, states and nations of the world began to development various means and strategies in a bid to survive in the era of the corona virus.

The Nigeria state was not exempted from the virus spread. The first case of the virus infection was recorded in Nigeria on February 27 2020 and as result, the Nigerian government began to put containment measure and strategies to control the spread of the virus. The lockdown, social distancing among others were some of the measures put in place by the Nigerian government to control the spread. The lockdown measure led to the introduction of the palliative which resulted in the distribution of humanitarian materials to the vulnerable citizens. Material like, food items, household items and to some extent cash packages (Covid-19 funds) were lunched by the Nigerian government during the coronavirus.

The introduction of these measure and strategies were politicized. The Covid-19 funds that led to the realization of billions of cash donations from internal and external bodies were not accounted for. This huge donation or assistance to the federal government has not reflected in the improvement of the health and education sectors even after the end of Covid-19 because of this, there have been speculations that these donations must have be embezzled by the Nigerian politicians. The manner by which the government handled the Covid-19 palliative is clear justification that the Covid-19 funds may have been embezzled because most of the palliative met for vulnerable Nigerians were hiding in warehouses without distributing them to Nigerians and to a large extent, some of the palliatives where found in the private custody of politicians who began to use them as a weapon of political coercion.

Endnotes

1. <https://guardian.ng/features/health/controversy-shrouds-accountability-for-monies-materials-donated-to-contain-covid-19/>. Accessed 21 March, 2023.
2. <http://www.channelstv.com/2020/04/18/documents-to-nigerians-covid-19-fund-top-n25bn/>
3. <https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/nigeria/eu-boost/assessed> March, 2023.
4. Ibid.
5. <http://www.channelstv.com/2020/04/18/documents-to-nigerians-covid-19-fund-top-n25bn/>
6. Fasan, O. (2020). COVID-19 is a fertile ground for aggravated corruption in Nigeria:<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/04/covid-19-is-a-fertile-ground-for-aggravated-corruption-in-nigeria/amp/>. Assessed 24 March, 2023.
7. Ezeibe, C. C. ABC of Political Economy: A Beginner's Guide to understanding the State and Economy, in "Political Distrust and the Spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", by Christian C. Ezeibe, ChukwudiIlo, Ezinwanne N, Chika N, Nnamdi A, Chukwuedozie K, Ajaero and Nnabuike O. *Global Public Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice*, vol. 15, No. 12, 2020, p. 1756.
8. 10 WHO, 2020
9. Budget Office, 2020, cited in OnyedikachiMadueke, AllensIheonu and Ololo F. Emmanuel, *Journal of Public Administration and Social Welfare Research* Vol. 5, no. 2, 2020.
10. Punch, 2016
11. Rising to the Challenge of Nigeria's Covid Response. *World Bank Group*, 2020, p.5.
12. AdalakunIyanuoluwa Samuel, "Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Nigerian Education System: Impact, management, Response and Way Forward" *Educational Journal*, Vol. Volume 3, Issue 4, 2020.