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COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP AND PARTISAN POLARISATION: AN INTERROGATION OF SOME SELECTED UTTERANCES OF PRESIDENT BUHARI

K. ASHINDORBE AND E. C. CHINAGUH

Department of Communication and General Studies, Federal University of Agriculture
Abeokuta Ogun State

*Corresponding Author: chinaguhec@funaab.edu.ng Tel: 08034894285

ABSTRACT

Political leadership requires the ability to communicate well, which propels the realisation of national objectives. This study attempts to establish a nexus between selected incendiary presidential utterances and the heightened ethno-regional tensions and polarisation witnessed currently in Nigeria. The paper contends that in a multi-ethnic and culturally diversified country like Nigeria, strong leadership and appropriate communication skills are fundamental towards achieving unity, conflict management and sustainable development. While Nigerian political elite have since independence conducted public affairs in manners that undermine and betray the country's unity, at no time has the country been this bitterly divided and polarised. Although the marauding terrorist and banditry that has engulfed the country's northern half predates this administration, the vehement separatist agitations and catcalls for the dissolution of the country in the southern part have become more strident within the life of the current government. What is responsible for this state of affairs? The study argues that the inflexible/provincial disposition and unguarded utterances of President Buhari is partly responsible. Relying on purposively selected sample texts from newspaper reports and online news medium credited to the President, discourse analysis approach was used to interrogate the potential meaning of such text and their implications for cohesion, unity and peaceful coexistence in the country. The study identified these polarising cues in President Buhari's utterances: anti-ethnic sentiments, us/them distantiation, gender stereotyping and youth denigration; and demonstrated the impact of presidential communication on a country's well-being.

Keywords: Leadership, Partisan Polarisation, Presidential Utterances, Unity, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

The acrimonious nature of elections and their deep partisanship pose a serious challenge to post-poll governance and at the same time present as a litmus test for the leadership mettle and the charismatic disposition of elected leaders, especially towards oppositions and their supporters. Increased democratic participation warrants arduous

competition that is often accompanied by social tension and extreme rivalry. When polls are concluded, those who emerge winners are expected to be magnanimous in victory as they move to heal accruing division and offer to be the leaders of all, both the support block and perceived foes, for the unity and progress of the political territory they vied to govern. This is more so required

of a presidential office, where there is a fusion of executive and ceremonial powers. The office of the president is the highest political leadership position in any country, and particularly Nigeria, imbued with moral and legal authority. A person who occupies such exalted office is metaphorically conceived to be a father figure, regardless of any affiliation, ethnic, regional or political. This is clearly stated in the oath of office sworn to by every elected Nigerian president, as contained in the Seventh Schedule of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, as highlighted below:

I do solemnly swear/affirm that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I will discharge my duties to the best of my ability, faithfully and in accordance with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the law, and always in the interest of **sovereignty, integrity, solidarity**, well-being and prosperity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that I will strive to preserve the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy contained in the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria; that I will to the best of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria;... **that in all circumstances, I will do right to all manner of people, according to law, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will**; that I will not directly or indirectly communicate or reveal to any person any matter which shall be brought under my consideration or shall become known to me as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, except as may be required for the due discharge of my duties as President; and that **I will devote**

myself to the service and well-being of the people of Nigeria. So help me God (1999 Constitution as amended)

The bolded parts of the oath are indicative of the anticipated allegiance of each Nigerian president to national unity, fairness and well-being of all Nigerians. Quite notable is the oath to do right to all manner of people... without fear or favour, affection or ill-will. This demands an elected Nigerian president to resist all trappings of parochialism and provide broad-based leadership in order to deepen national unity and promote peace and progress.

Partisan polarisation refers to cases in which an individual or group's stance on a given issue or policy is more likely to be strictly defined and framed by their identification/affiliation with not just a political party but other identity markers like religion and ethnicity. It is believed that what propels political sectarianism is group identities, especially mega-identities that grow to influence other identities. Such identities have been found to be ethnic and religious in Nigeria, but unfortunately exploited over the years for political gains. Political scientists identify that polarisation can be benign or pernicious: in the case of the former, a certain degree of polarisation is introduced to aid a political system through the formation of political parties; the latter, on the other hand, harms democracy (McCoy and Somer, 2018).

Fostering unity for national development among diverse ethnic, religious, sociocultural and economic groups in Nigeria has been a major challenge the country is faced with. The country was created with the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates, and the Colony of Lagos in 1914. It was managed by the British Colonials as a

federation of sub-nationalities in recognition of its diverse ethnic nationalities. After the country's independence in 1960, many laudable policies and initiatives of national integration have been introduced, like the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) and Federal Character Principle. As reported in Punch (June 12, 2019), Osibanjo argued that diversity is never a problem in and of itself; but what matters is its management. Since the First Republic, the country's diversity has been sacrificed on the altar of personal ambition by traditional, political, religious and military elite, at the expense of the masses and the nation's stability and progress. This makes leadership a major driver of the country's partisan polarisation.

Leadership, as used in this study, is a process of social influence which utilises/ maximises the skills/talents of others using persuasive communication skills towards achieving the goal of security, unity and national cohesion (Sanders. 2017; Haslam et al, 2017). Some elements of leadership are projected in this definition: (i) social influence; (ii) maximising others' talent; (iii) persuasive communication; (iv) goal of national security and unity. The first feature denotes leadership as involving social influence given that leaders are produced by society and influence members' beliefs and actions through interpersonal skills and persuasion. The second characteristic foregrounds leadership quality as identifying and enabling the full potentials of the people. The third and the most fundamental element is communication, which galvanises the first two features towards achieving the fourth part – to accomplish the goal of national cohesion. Thus, leadership becomes operative with effective communication.

Communication cannot be separated from

leadership. Considering the importance of communication to leadership, Kline (Not Dated) admonishes that whoever cannot communicate should not venture to lead. A leader needs active engagement with his people at all times, observing and attending to their yearnings and constantly reassuring them of shared vision, especially in moments of crisis. Presidential leadership proceeds from the act of persuasion to the ability to identify and maximise existing opportunities to modify attitudes while effectively addressing common or regional challenges for the actualisation of shared goals. If politics is basically a struggle for the control of the hearts, minds, and resources of men and nations, communication is crucial to accomplishing the aim of politics, thereby making language a very important political instrument.

Language is one of the important, if not the most important, system of communication in politics (Oha, 1994). "Politics, which is a public phenomenon, is enabled by language" that functions as "a very strong political weapon" used "to accomplish the control of power" (Osisanwo, 2017). Political actors have come to realise its importance in setting their personality in order to gain the support of the people (Opeibi, 2009). As an input and output factor of political systems, it is used not only to determine whom to entrust with power, but also by those in power or who desire power to accomplish their political goals. Given the impact of language and the import of presidential statements, it is expected that utterances emanating from the very high office will be tailored towards building mutual trust and avert conflict, mutual suspicion and ethnic tensions especially for a heterogeneous society like Nigeria.

Some studies on political communication

have centred on political campaign communication (Aduradola and Ojukwu, 2013; Stromback and Kiouisis, 2014; Ike-Nwafor, 2015.) as creating and sustaining power, manipulating people's perceptions, rhetorically and pragmatically inclined, and characterised by strategic use of information and communication. Others have studied post-election discourses like defeat-concession (Corcoran, 1994, 1998; Ademilokun, 2016; Osisanwo and Chinaguh, 2018, 2020) and inaugural speeches (Akinkurolere, 2015; Osisanwo, 2017; Enache and Militaru, 2018; Jegede, 2020) – that represent election losers' defeat management/mitigation and winners' articulation of their administration plans. Political executive/administration actions as enacted in Independence Day, State of the Union, New Year and Budget speeches have also attracted scholarly attention. Notably, political leaders' utterances at different fora belong to political-administrative communication. However, none of the reviewed works basically addressed the issue of partisanship by political leadership.

Nevertheless, presidential leadership and partisan polarisation have received a fair share of academic consideration. Many such works have examined partisan presidency in the United States. The history of polarised leadership by US presidents can be traced to 1980 beginning with Ronald Reagan, as they started relying on party leaders to mobilise support in congress and among the electorate. Smith and Seltzer (2015) argued that race played a role in the onset of political polarisation in Congress, and thought that the US has become more polarised by presidential partisanship – through the presidents' and presidential candidates' ideologies, rhetoric and policies. Similar works, in relation to Nigeria, are scarcely available.

Rather what exist are studies that examine leadership crisis and national unity, generally, in Nigeria (Yagboyaju and Akinola, 2019; Eme-Uche and Okonkwo, 2020; Awofeso and Odeyemi, 2014; Aluko, 2021).

Yet, interrogating presidential leadership communication and trends of partisan polarisation in Nigeria is pertinent to addressing the widening divide among different socio-cultural, economic and ethnic groups in the country, the attendant security challenges and vehement separatist agitations. Partisan polarisation, as conceived in this study, extends beyond political opposition to include denigrating utterances against some demographic groups, like youths and women. Since 2015 when the current administration was produced, Nigerians have been treated to several presidential gaffes, many of which have denigrated an ethnic group, a social group like youths or a particular gender. Therefore, this paper will critically examine selected presidential utterances and attempt to establish a nexus between these utterances and the increasing polarisation in the polity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study combines critical discourse and othering theories.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

CDA is an attempt to study discourse interdisciplinarily, which views language use as social practice and studies how hidden power relations are established and reinforced in discourse (Fairclough, 1995). It shares Foucault's view of discourse as dialectical, which considers discourse as socially shaped and socially constitutive. The three major perspectives to the theory are

Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach and Twin van Dijk's socio-cognitive aspect. The third method is

adopted in this paper, especially the constructs of ideological structure and ideological square which present utterances as not only discursive but also social and cognitive. Ideologies are systems of ideas or beliefs that are socio-cognitively defined as shared representations with axiomatic principles. They influence group attitudes and identities. Ideological structures define how ideo-

logies are expressed, enacted and reproduced through discourse structures and strategies. So, depending on context, utterances can be ideologically marked: preferences for specific topics and words can betray the speaker's socio-cognitive frame as sexist, chauvinist or partisan. The ideological structuring of discourses is done as below:

Expression of Ideologies (Adapted from van Dijk, 2006)

- **Context**
Ideologically biased context models: subjective representations of communicative event and its participants as members of categories or groups.
- **Text, discourse, conversation:**
Overall strategy: positive presentation/action of Us, negative presentation/action of Them
- Emphasize our good things, and Their bad things, and De-emphasize our bad things, and Their good things

MEANING

Topics (semantic macrostructures)
Select/Change positive/negative topics about Us/Them.

Local meanings and coherence
Positive/Negative Meanings for Us/Them
Lexicon: Select Positive/Negative terms for Us/Them

FORM

Syntax and overall form: (De)emphasize Positive/Negative Agency of Us/Them

Rhetorical structures: Emphasizing or de-emphasizing Our/Their Good/Bad things

ACTION: Speech acts that presuppose Our/Their Good/Bad

Ideological square

The discursive construction of the “us and them” dichotomy often combines the depiction of others with us (van Dijk, 1998), especially in the discourses of ‘group conflict or competition’ (p. 275). Van Dijk

(1998) proposed the theoretical framework of an ideological square to uncover the discursive reproduction of the ideology of positive us and negative them. The ideological discourse structure (van Dijk, 1998) was detailed in the square diagram below:

Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us;	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them;
Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them;	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us.

Othering theory

First used by Spivak (1980, 1985), othering is described as a principle that cuts across sections, like race, class and gender. It mainly draws on the understanding of self, which generalises Hegel's master-slave dialectic of self-other identification and self-other distantiation, and read as a theory of self and other. In her essay "The Rani of Sirmur", Spivak analyses three dimensions of othering. The first one constructs power relations, presenting self as powerful and the other as subordinate. The second dimension emphasizes inequality, constructing the other as pathological and morally inferior. The third one extends the first and attributes knowledge and technology as the property of the powerful empirical self, and the colonial other. For Crang (1998), othering sets up identities in an unequal relationship. It simultaneously constructs "self or in-group and the other or out-group in mutual and unequal opposition" by identifying some characteristics that are desirable to the self/in-group and is lacking in the other/out-group; and/or projecting undesirable characteristics that are present in the other/out-group but lacking in the self/in-group (Brons, 2015). Thus, othering orchestrates superiority/inferiority in communication, and it is grouped as self-other distantiation, which is perceived a crude form of othering. The other side of the dialectic, self-other identification, describes how self is mirrored in the other; it is perceived as a sophisticated form of othering.

The two theories, CDA and othering, are combined to assess elements of polarisation in the selected utterances. The first theory aids the categorisation of the discourse levels and strategies that are engaged to contextually cue the polarising propensities of

social actors. This helps to identify how certain word choices, semantic expressions, grammatical forms, rhetorical tropes and discourse actions betray the socio-cognitive frame of the speaker as divisive. More specifically, the constructs of ideological structures and ideological square were adopted from the first theory to examine how negative-other presentation or in-group and out-group polarisation is coded in the selected utterances, and creates the us and them dichotomy. This theory is domiciled in language, but straddles discourse and social practice. It is complemented by the theory of othering, taken from the discipline of social sciences, to deeply account for the social representations of polarisation in the utterances. The othering constructs of self-other identification and self-other distantiation were explored to characterise how they orchestrate unequal opposition and superiority/inferiority in public communication.

METHODOLOGY

Sample texts from newspaper reports were purposively selected for the study. The selected texts are utterances credited to President Muhammadu Buhari from different fora. For a descriptive analysis, the researchers subjected the various speeches to critical discourse examination for context and motives, by examining the discourse levels of the selected utterances to interrogate how they code for underlying ideologies and contextually cue for polarisation. These levels are the global and local meanings, lexical choices, syntactic structures, superstructure, rhetorical structures and discourse actions. The analytical framework adopted the constructs of ideological structure and ideological square complemented by othering principles to highlight the polarising cues that are frozen in the utterances.

Data Analysis

The selected presidential utterances, which are elicited responses to questions that were asked in different fora, are presented within salient themes and discursive patterns to interrogate possible presidential leaning to partisan polarisation.

Promise of Non-partisan Leadership During Inauguration

The current administration commenced after emerging victorious from a highly polarised and contentious election in 2015. The election saw politicians exploiting existing division for their political gains, leaving in its wake a more polarised polity. In the months leading to the election, longstanding tension between the North and South was re-awakened through vitriolic rhetoric by politicians that mobilised voters along ethnic lines (Afolabi and Avasiloae, 2015). Against this background, the new leader, President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB, henceforth), promised during his inaugural address to provide non-partisan leadership to everyone, as contained in this excerpt from the speech:

Extract 1

At the same time, I thank our other countrymen and women who did not vote for us but contributed to make our democratic culture truly competitive, strong and definitive. I thank all of you. Having just a few minutes ago sworn on the Holy Book, I intend to keep my oath and serve as President to all Nigerians. I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody. A few people have privately voiced fears that on coming back to office I shall go after them. These fears are groundless. There will be no paying off old scores. The past is prologue (PMB, 2015).

The above discourse starts with a positive othering – a self-other identification that is not predisposed to harm the other. This, instead, references election-engineered polarity that is only mentioned to reassure the other of nonpartisan leadership. It is important to explain the referential strategy that is operationalised to achieve positive otherness. The referent is identified inclusively – as fellow countrymen and women – with the inclusive pronominal form “our”. Nevertheless, the word “other” that follows identifies the existence of this opposition, as are former foes who had “privately voiced fears” of vindictiveness in PMB’s administration in order to settle “old scores”. Meanwhile, PMB engaged rhetorically with the other party, precisely, through his popular antistasis “I belong to everybody and I belong to nobody” and the alliterative aphorism “The past is prologue” to deepen the meaning of his message, incline them to believe and accept his assurance of nonpartisan leadership. However, whether PMB has lived up to the dictates of his rhetoric will be determined in subsequent sections of this paper.

Presidential Leadership and Partisan Polarisation

This interrogates utterances credited to PMB that have polarising effect, and monitors the fulfilment of the president’s inaugural speech promise of nonpartisan leadership. The segment trifurcates into these sub-segments: anti-ethnic sentiment and polarising cues, gender stereotyping in presidential discourse, and youths’ denigration.

Anti-ethnic sentiment and polarising cues

The South-east has been at the receiving end of certain anti-ethnic utterances by PMB as excerpted below:

Extract 2

“I hope you have a copy of the election results. The constituents, for example, that gave me 97% of the vote cannot in all honesty be treated on some issues with constituencies that gave me 5%...I think these are political reality.”

Extract 3

I was encouraged by what I heard, nobody told me. Two statements from the South South: one by the elderly people, they said this time around there would be no (secession). And again the youth made the same statement; such encouragement so that IPOB is just like dot in a circle. Even if they want to exit, they'll have no access to anywhere and properties. I don't think IPOB knows what they are talking about. In any case, we say we'll talk to them in the language that they understand. We'll organise police and the military to pursue them.

The president gave the response in Extract 2 on 22nd June, 2015, less than two months after promising nonpartisan leadership during his inaugural. Notably, the utterance does not provide a coherent answer to the question asked, which presents it as preconceived and seems to betray PMB's mindset and subjective representation of some regions that massively voted against him. These geo-political zones are South-south and South-east. It is also disingenuous that such contentious statement was given at the United States' Institute of Peace. These utterances are further interrogated at different discourse and ideological levels.

Us and them distantiation

These utterances instance “us and them” *distantiation* between the president and some

sections of the country he had sworn an oath to do right to without ill-will. The president makes clear his intention to exclude these zones in some areas of governance and makes to defend his position as a “political reality”. The remark only further sedimented the social cleavages that have always threatened the country's unity, and, rightfully, many disproportionate decisions by PMB against some sections of the country have been tagged sectional since then. Some examples are brazen acts of herdsmen, who are mostly Fulani (the president's tribesmen) and openly graze their cattle, kill and maim farmers that prevent them from grazing on their farms; the president's failure to frontally condemn the vicious attacks and killings that have claimed more than 2500 Nigerian lives between 2017 and 2020 (Bazan, 2020); and PMB's directive to the Attorney General to reclaim grazing routes in an exclusive interview with Arise TV on 10th June, 2021.

How polarising has PMB been in the discharge of presidential leadership? This is answered in his utterance in Extract 3. The president attempted to pitch two neighbouring regions against each other – the South South and South East. Meanwhile, his repetitive use of the word “encourage(ment)” generates more troubling questions like “Why is the president encouraged that the South-South did not want to secede with the South East?” An attempt to answer this only shows how crudely PMB has othered the people of the region and propelled separatists' agitation, and this is further manifested in his attempt to approximate the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) to the South-East zone and his lexical choices that dismissively reduce an entire ethnic population to “a dot in a circle”. This negative representation and more unconscionable act of reminding a people of their horrific war past – through war rhetoric

like “they’ll have no access to anywhere and properties”, “we’ll talk to them in the language that they understand”, “We’ll organise police and the military to pursue them” – are polarising cues in PMB’s utterances that point to his anti-ethnic sentiments and polarised leadership.

Gender stereotyping in presidential discourse

An extended concept of partisanship in this study incorporates gender stereotyping in presidential discourse. On a state visit to Germany in October 2016, President Buhari, during a joint press briefing with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, miffed at being asked about criticism of his government’s performance by his wife Aisha Buhari, responded by reminding Nigeria’s first lady where her place was:

Extract 5

“I don’t know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen and my living room and the other room.”

His comment came just three days after the International Day of the Girl Child that was meant to focus on the plight of disadvantaged girls all over the world. Although, this was excused by his spokesman as a joke, it demeans and reinforces the warped perception of women that relegates them to positions of servitude. As world leaders continue to seek opportunities to advance gender parity, it is disingenuous for the president of a nation with 101 million female population to represent the roles of his wife as only domestic. This could negatively impact on the girl-child and socialise her towards accepting that she has a limited role to play in the society. Some women groups, like the Nigerian Feminist Forum, that condemned

this presidential gaffe perceive it as diminishing their contribution to national development and “an invocation of historical patriarchal oppression and subjugation of Nigerian women, which has over the past alienated and denied Nigerian women access and a level playing ground to compete equally with their male counterparts” (Ugwuanyi, 2016).

Denigration of youth population

The youth population is an important component, if not the backbone, of any country. Its characteristic energy, vigour and drive can galvanise social change and facilitate nation-building. Realising their potentials in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations have incorporated goals, targets and instruments for increased opportunities that will advance youth development. However, governments have failed to provide meaningful life to a large percentage of this demographic group as it is plagued with poverty, under-employment and poor education. Sadly, this has made them willing tools in the hands of self-seeking politicians who use them to cause mayhem during election and to obstruct democratic processes. At the business forum of Commonwealth Heads of Government in London in April 2018, President Buhari was asked by a journalist to explain why he did not sign the African Continental Free Trade Agreement in Rwanda. His reply was as follows:

Extract 6

About the economy, we have a very young population; our population is estimated to be 196 million in 2018. This is a very conservative one. More than 60 percent of the population is below 30, a lot of them haven’t been to school and they are claiming, you know, that Nigeria is an oil producing country, therefore, they

should sit and do nothing, and get housing, healthcare, education free.”

The response provides a different answer to the question asked, and it is yet another pointer to PMB’s poor communication skills that reflect on his leadership. The statement shows how the president regarded the youth without considering how successive governments have undermined and alienated them to worsen their woes. As projected in the utterance, the president distanced himself from Nigerian youths while denigrating them on foreign soil. Leaders are known to promote the image of their country and citizens abroad in order to create and maintain positive perception internationally and improve global standing. Moreover, as the country’s reputation keeps waning on account of few criminal-minded citizens – who peddle drugs, engage in Internet fraud, and other crimes – a statement by Nigeria’s president disparaging its youths stands the risk of further discrediting those in the diaspora and exposing them to worse ill-treatment by their host countries. PMB’s remarks led to angry backlash and prompted an online protest which autonomised the utterance with the satirical hashtag #LazyNigerianYouths on Twitter and other social media platforms as it was inferred that the president had tagged Nigerian youths as “lazy”.

However, as evident in a polarised discourse, there is a disclaimer by the publicity team of the president, cashing in on the phrase in the statement “a lot” to deny that the president was referring to all the youths. So, as indicated in ideological square, the team emphasises PMB’s good as “father of the Nigerian nation..., who equally has biological children of his own in the youths age bracket”; and emphasises the supposed bad

of the other, as playing “irresponsible politics” and acting as “manipulators and twist-ers of statements of Mr. President, who lie in wait to make mischief”. The media team was also quick to suppress the revolting thought around the denigrating utterance and change the narrative to mean that “every country has its share of idle population, and it is bounden duty of government at all levels to create an enabling environment for them to actualize their potentials”. In other words, the presidency did not disclaim that some youths are idle, and neither did he condemn them as a result – a positive self-representation strategy.

Partisan Polarisation and its Implications for Unity, Peace and Sustainable Development

In 1999, Nigeria transitioned from military autocracy to civilian rule and in 2015, the country experienced the first-ever peaceful transfer of power to an opposition candidate. More than two decades after the initial democratic opening and six years since achieving the milestone of alternation of leadership between political parties at the national level, the country continues to be plagued by debilitating crisis that continues to test the leadership capability of those at the helms of affairs. The hope expressed in 2015 that the first-ever peaceful transfer of power to an opposition candidate would deepen the substance of democracy, entrench equity and promote national unity has largely been dashed. Rather the country has been treated to arguably the most blatant and egregious manifestation of parochialism ever witnessed in the history of the country. It is pertinent to add that the actions/conducts from the highest office in the country set the template for the country and when such conducts in action and in speech gives the impression of a leadership that is provincial in

outlook, it creates the environment of distrust among different ethnic, religious and social groups, thus making the task of forging peace and national unity almost impossible.

The responsibility of leadership in every clime is to create a political, socio-economic, religious and cultural ambience of justice, egalitarianism and fairness. When in 2015 inauguration President Buhari declared that “I belong to no one and I belong to everybody” that declaration sounded good and noble, and projected the determination to be a leader of all Nigerians regardless of ethnic, religion or social background. It has turned out that the phrase was woven into his address to reinforce the myth the president was truly a changed and reformed democrat, despite his better-known reputation from the 1980s as a dictator. Series of utterances and events in the last six years has since shown those words to be hollow and false. Apart from the selected utterances analysed in this study, the actions of this administration as represented in the lopsided and skewed nature of political appointments in a diverse country like Nigeria has further polarised the country along ethnic and regional lines. Taking a cue from the body language of the president, political demagogues and ideologues have been emboldened to constantly stoke the fires of ethnic strife and threaten those who stand on their way. Groups like the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria have been very vocal in their supports for murderous activities of herders and pastoralists as they wreak havoc to lives and farmlands across the country. In 2018, the Global Terrorism Index compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace ranked the activities of the murderous herders militant group operating in Nigeria as the fourth deadliest

terror group in the world. Only Boko haram, Islamic State terror group and Al-Shabab were ranked higher. There is little doubt that the lack of leadership and statesmanship provided the fertile ground for these groups to operate unchallenged. The security agencies are overwhelmed – overwhelmed by chronic incompetence, overwhelmed by the fifth columnists in their ranks, overwhelmed by inadequate infrastructure, and overwhelmed by the politicisation of purely criminal activities.

CONCLUSION

Drawing from selected presidential utterances, the study has demonstrated the weight/effects of presidential communication on a country’s wellbeing. While it may be difficult to eliminate, completely, presidential utterances that will be considered partisan and controversial, it is possible for leaders to be more circumspect, sober and strategic in their communication. Communication is strategic when it is completely consistent with the mission to purposively advance the cause of an organisation or in this case a country. Further studies can examine the issue of leadership and polarisation in expanded corpora, and compare other presidents’ utterances with those of PMB.

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