

PUBLIC OPINION, PUBLIC POLICY, AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

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Abstract

Modern democracies are premised on essential ingredients, cardinal of which is public opinion about salient public actions or policies. In the absence of official tolerance for divergent views expressed by the citizenry through public opinion, governance might be reminiscent of anachronism and autocracy. The objective of this study is to examine the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion in Nigeria, during the period 2015-2020, in line with similar empirical studies on the United States of America by Burnstein (2003). In the survey, responses by interest groups, elites, the media, etc., to questions on the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion on salient public issues were gathered via a questionnaire.

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In the opinion poll conducted through electronic media, the responses were presented in frequency tables and analysed using percentage descriptive analysis. The results of the study showed, among others, that public policy was highly unresponsive to public opinion, during the period, 2015-2020. It was therefore concluded that the undesirable situation was a carry-over of the vestiges of a long period of military rule and the attendant autocratic character. Accordingly, it was recommended that government should realign the conduct of public policy to accommodate public opinion, in line with contemporary best practices in benchmark democracies obtainable in the USA and UK.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Public Policy, Democracy, Responsiveness, Good Governance.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of government is to provide security for lives and property as well as guarantee conducive atmosphere in which the orderly conduct of activities in the state and society can be achieved. Government is the machinery of the state in which the authority of the people is vested for the maintenance of peace and security in the polity. To enable performance, the major resources, and powers of the state: internal security, military, legislative, financial, judicial, etc., are vested in government by the citizenry. Habu (2018, p.74) provides a succinct description of government as, “the people with legislative, executive and judicial authority to formulate, implement and enforce laws and resolve disputes in a society”.

In the exercise of legislative, executive, and judicial functions, government, as a matter of need, must formulate guidelines, which prescribe the procedures and processes to be followed by all stakeholders, in making and implementing public decisions. These guides, or public policy, can sometimes “play” the role of “legislation” particularly where a gap exists, or where frequent recourse to mother legislation might be unresponsive during emergencies or contingencies.

Modern democracies as practised in the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK), and as contemplated by Nigeria and other Less Developed Countries (LDCs) of Africa, Asia and Latin America, are premised on the existence and guarantee of certain essential ingredients or characteristics. The most important of these characteristics include opposition, divergent opinions, and popular participation in government by the citizenry (Habu, 2018). In essence, government must provide “the guide” to all actions; and the citizens must enjoy the right and privilege of “a say” or opinion in public decision-making and actions. In the absence of these and other ingredients, the form of “democracy” is inchoate, as in most LDCs, Nigeria inclusive. Notwithstanding the centrality of these pre-requisites of democracy, it is known, as a fact, that in the conduct of public policy in Nigeria, public opinion has been considerably neglected. In explaining the reason for the anomaly, it is surmised that Nigeria’s exposure to long military rule, with its characteristic centrality or autocracy, and disregard for public opinion, might have sown the seed of the undemocratic practice. This study is conducted to examine the role of public opinion in public policy in Nigeria; and the implication for the observed lagged responsiveness, using the Muhammadu Buhari’s Administration of 2015-2020 (June) as case study.

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

That public opinion is seldom relevant as a respected input in the establishment of public policy in Nigeria amounts to a truism, just as poor reception to opposition is characteristic of the weak form of democratic culture. Notwithstanding the centrality of public opinion in public policy formulation and implementation, experience shows that government ordinarily tends to abhor, ignore or undermine the input, or give due consideration only in inescapable and inevitable occasions in which total disregard is counterproductive, and therefore harmful to public peace and order. This is largely because public authorities, particularly governments, believe that due consideration for public opinion is tantamount to abdication of government’s innate authority and power. In addition, public opinion is viewed as an expression or manifestation of political opposition. In the circumstance, the safe attitude by the public is usually to acquiesce, through silence, to avoid the consequences of any perceived “opposition”.

In contradistinction to this position, this paper contends that, acquiescence is counter-productive or injurious to the well-being of the citizenry, whose right to popular participation in government, for good governance, might be jeopardized when they are “gagged”. Accordingly, the paper contends that the growing demand for political participation, through public opinion in public policy making, remains unsatisfied by government and public authorities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As a corollary to the problem, pertinent questions that arise include whether public opinion plays a significant role in public policy in Nigeria, and whether public opinion is acceptable to and incorporated by public authorities as a major ingredient in public policy-making, in line with the dictate of modern democracy. There is also the need to ask whether governments or public authorities are responsive to public opinion by adopting public policies that are dependent upon changing situations, in line with contingency approach to leadership (Sharma, Sadana & Kaur, 2012).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Arising from the problem statement, the major objective of this study is to examine the status of the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion, during the study period. Another objective is to examine the “degree” of responsiveness of public policy to contingent situations and public opinion thereon.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In order to provide the setting in which the literature review has been conducted, it is imperative that the key concepts employed are clarified. The concepts include democracy, public policy, and public opinion.

DEMOCRACY

Several definitions of democracy have been provided by scholars. However, of direct relevance is the one offered by Bentham (1748-1832), and

cited in Habu (2018, p.72). The researcher posits that democracy is a system of government that vests the people with the power not only to disagree with the decisions of their elected officials or leaders, but also to recall them when their actions in office go contrary to the yearnings and aspirations of those they represent.

This form of government is contrary to the counterpart military, totalitarian, fascist, and communist systems, in which the fundamental right of freedom of the citizens is denied or abridged. To delineate the key feature of democracy, Sotori (1987), cited in Habu (2018, p.72), suggests that democracy is a system of government that is defined by three important attributes:

Competition for public office by individuals and organized groups (like political parties) at periodic intervals without the use of force, a high level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, and a level of civil and political liberties-freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of association-sufficient to guarantee the integrity of political competition and participation.

Without doubt, Sotori's definition places emphasis on competition, freedom, and participation by the citizens in the selection of leaders and policies. To be sure, the foundation of governance is laid on freedom, fundamental human rights, political opposition, varied opinions, and popular participation. The question to answer, however, is how well has public opinion been respected and accepted by government in Nigeria? Put otherwise, what is the level of the participation of the citizens (public opinion) in the selection or implementation of public policies in Nigeria, as evident during the study period?

PUBLIC POLICY

In search of a suitable explanation of the concept of public policy, several views have been expressed by different scholars. Dye (1966) explains that public policy is a decision on what to do in a given situation by government. The same researcher provides a more precise definition of public policy as "anything government chooses to do or not to do". Johnson's

(1997) definition is that public policy is a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors, concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle, be within the power of those actors to achieve.

In another contribution, Ikelegbe (1994) simply defines policy as “the decision”. Similarly, Habu (2018) views policy as a decision about what to do, or not to do, in a given situation. It is generally agreed, from the foregoing, that public policy is also a decision by government to do nothing in a given situation (Sharma, Sadana & Kaur, 2012).

As for who makes public policy, two channels of policy-making are followed: from the people through elected representatives in the parliament or legislature; and from the administrative officials to the state’s chief executive. Whereas in the UK, the executive and legislative channels converge at the Cabinet, in presidential countries as the USA and Nigeria, the channels are divergent all through, terminating at the chief executive officer, the President.

PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion is the collection of beliefs, judgments, assessments, or views held by majority of citizens about the action(s) of government. It is indeed what the public thinks or feels about government’s proposed policy or action already taken. Public opinion is an expression of interest by the citizenry to participate in governance; and it can be determined by several factors including the literacy level, form of government and extent of freedom of action or expression by the citizens, and the responsiveness (positive or negative) of government to divergent opinions (Sapru, 2012). Typical examples in Nigeria included the debate as to whether or not abortion should be legalised during President Shehu Shagari’s regime; and whether or not Nigeria should procure IMF loan during General Ibrahim Babangida’s military regime. On both issues, majority of Nigerians expressed “No” as their answer.

Generally, public opinion is dynamic, focused on specific issues, concerned with issues of public importance, shared by a wide majority of the people,

facilitated by rapid or effective information and communication flow among governmental agencies, among other characteristics (Anyaele, 2003). Several institutions play diverse roles in the formation of public opinion. In Nigeria, as elsewhere, the major institutions include the mass media, pressure groups, political parties and members, government, elites, academia through lectures and seminars, social groups, public response and rumour or grapevine, as well as prominent individuals, etc (Anyaele, 2003).

Notwithstanding the possibility of being misused for selfish ends, public opinion directs government in discerning the position and wishes of the public. In addition, it puts government on their toes to decide public policies based on majority interest and enables government to promptly rescind actions or policies, which are vehemently opposed by the majority of the citizens. It also holds government to accountability and popularity during elections.

Unfortunately, public opinion remains at work-in-progress stage in Nigeria, as it is in other LDCs, because of factors, which include high level of illiteracy, inchoate nature or level of democratic governance, heterogeneity of culture, “irrelevance” of public opinions in deciding election outcome, poverty, “democratic autocracy” or authoritarianism and press censorship, among others.

Various methods have been adopted by government in measuring public opinion. Generally, however, public opinion can be measured through opinion polls (asking questions from a sample of people and collecting their views to gauge the opinions of the entire populace by using a questionnaire or oral interviews), elections, referendum, the mass media and public reaction or response. The last of these can be expressed in the form of mass protests, for or against a policy, programme, or action of government (Anyaele, 2003).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many scholars interested in public policy analysis in democratic nations believe that there is an influential relationship between public opinion and public policy; and that the strength or influence depends on the degree of importance, which the public attaches to the issue. Notwithstanding the

influence that public opinion may exact on public policy, the relationship can be weakened by the interplay of the power of interest organisations, political parties, and economic elites (Burnstein, 2003; Aldrich 1995; Dahl, 1989; Mueller, 1999 & Page and Shapiro, 1992).

Indeed, only a few people believe that public opinion plays significant role in public policy, not even in democratic governments who sometimes ignore the public (Shapiro & Page, 1983). Nevertheless, those who believe that the public wields some measure of power accept that government sometimes considers and bows to public opinion (Block, 1987; Korpi, 1989). Thus, the distinction between advocates of the triumph of the “people’s power” over government’s power is the belief in the degree of the power or influence of public opinion in shaping public policy.

Page and Shapiro (1983) in their piece titled “Effect of Opinion on Policy”, provide a clear separation of the controversies about the impact of opinion on policy as are well entrenched in some theories. To Page and Shapiro (1983), while some theories dominated by economists believe in strong impact, others, which attribute great powers to interest groups, believe otherwise. The empirical conclusion of the work of Page and Shapiro (1983) is that opinion changes are important causes of policy changes.

Stimson, Mackuen, and Erikson (1995) argue that democracy works, as it should when public officials consistently respond to shifts in public opinion. Although others believe that modern politics had become so complex that responsiveness is becoming problematic. Those who hold such positions (Jones, 1994; Zaller, 1992) contend that such issues requiring public opinion can be addressed straight away by the legislature.

Against the backdrop of the controversies about the need or otherwise of government’s responsiveness to opinion, it is important to examine the relationship between the salience of public issue and degree of government’s responsiveness. In democracies, how salient an issue is has determined the degree of government’s responsiveness to public opinion. Citizens who are affected by issues will likely address their displeasure at the polls during elections (Arnold, 1990; Jones, 1994). This threat of being sanctioned at the polls compels elected officials to be responsive, particularly

on very salient issues concerning their constituents. Overall, therefore, when issues are highly salient to the generality of the public, responsiveness is correspondingly very high and prompt; and vice versa (Jones, 1994). Even when salience is adjudged as low today, policy will still be responsive, because the salience might grow high at a future date.

As for who exerts much influence on public policy changes in response to public opinion, those who control resources: economic elites, political parties, and interest organisations do (Domhoff, 1998; Wilson, 1990; Wright, 1996), because they deploy the resources to get what they want. Thus, ruling political parties enact policies, which mostly favour their strong supporters rather than the public (Aldrich, 1995). With regard to interest organisations, they rarely impede responsiveness; rather they enhance it. Hansen (1991) is of the view that interest organisations may be influential partly because they furnish lawmakers with useful information, particularly information about what the public wants. In this way, they function as intermediaries between the public and government.

On their part, political parties often position themselves to serve the interest of their ardent supporters, not the generality of the public; although electoral competition compels government's responsiveness to the public. From the foregoing, it is discernable that a relationship exists between public opinion and public policy. It is expected that more often, depending on the relationship, interest organisations, elites, and political parties might influence public policy, even when public opinion is opposed to such policy.

Answers to the puzzle about this influence can be obtained from an understanding of the long history of the struggle for democratic responsiveness, particularly as it affects institutional reforms directed at increasing responsiveness. Garrow (1978) posits that such reforms brought about changes, which were intended by the initiators; and as such, it was expected that the responsiveness by government would increase. Garrow's position was supported by Stephens (1992) and Haskell (2001). Unfortunately, the influence of public opinion on policy has waned, because politicians have discovered new ways of avoiding accountability to the electorate (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). The writers noted that since the 1970s, policy decisions of the average US President has become less responsive.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Given the democratic setting in which Nigeria's political system is premised, this study is underpinned by the democratic theory of governance. Democracy has been variously defined by numerous scholars and authors. However, the widely adopted definition by Abraham Lincoln, which described democracy as a form of government of the people, by the people and for the people, holds the popular appeal, particularly because of its precision and exhaustiveness, with regard to content and subject matter.

Appadorai (2004, 138) and Laski (2008) provided very insightful explanations on the essential ingredients of democracy... "The process of law making should therefore allow full scope for the consideration of different and opposing viewpoints". For democracy to work successfully certain conditions are necessary; and foremost among them is the widespread habit of tolerance and compromise among members of the community, a sense of 'give and take' (Appadorai, 2004). Furthermore, the citizens must be well equipped to perform their civic duties by being provided with proper education. Above all, tolerance, and an unselfish devotion to public interest, rational conduct, active participation, the intelligent understanding of public affairs, independent judgment and public opinion, among other attributes, are essential for the smooth and successful working of democratic governance, as is well exemplified in Switzerland, a model of modern democracy (Appadorai, 2004).

To Laski (2008), the state government needs to regulate and direct its affairs in order to secure the common needs at the level viewed by society as essential to the fulfillment of its general end. In performing this function, public opinion, which reflects the diverse views of the citizens, must be well considered, and respected in the decision, which produces the desired end. To ignore public opinion, therefore, is to exercise power in such manner and habit that corrupts even the noblest of those who exercise it (Laski, 2008).

To account for the rigidity in leadership, which makes government and the political class unreceptive and impermeable to public opinion, Fiedler (1967) developed the Contingency Theory of Leadership at the Univer-

sity of Illinois (Sapru, 2018). The cardinal thesis of the theory is that successful leaders must change their leadership styles as they encounter different situations. Implicit in the thesis is the relative importance of the leader-group relations, which is determined by the degree of confidence, trust, and respect shared by group members with the leader. In effect, leadership performance depends as much on the organization as it depends on the attributes of the leader. A rigid leader will maintain a poor reception to varied positions or views expressed via public opinion, when a need arises to review a position on public policy or action on a given issue.

While the usefulness of the democratic theory derives from its vivid explanation of the key tenets of successful democratic governance, the contingency theory is relevant in understanding the need for flexibility in leadership, by adopting the suitable course of action contingent upon the changing situations.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed in this study is descriptive. Descriptive analysis is often adopted in empirical research studies involving variables with qualitative attributes. Several methods of measuring or gauging public opinion have been devised: public opinion poll, elections, referendum, mass media, etc. Most of the variables possess qualitative characteristics. Opinion poll is adopted in this study.

In the survey research design, a questionnaire was posted on two media platforms: Facebook and WhatsApp over a period of five months, March-July, 2020. The choice of the response gathering media is premised on the capacity for extensive coverage and relative convenience for respondents. Interest groups, media, elites, and individuals were invited to rate the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN)'s responsiveness to public opinion on identified salient public policy issues that came up during the study period.

At the expiration of the response-gathering period, feedbacks were collated and presented in frequency distribution tables. Respondents were required to rate the degrees of responsiveness on a scale of three, namely "High", "Low" and "Poor". Response analysis was conducted using percentage tool, as was employed by Modibbo (2017), Mahmud, and

Ogwuzebe (2019). Oral interviews were held with a cross section of the elites and middle level segments of the society, to clarify and validate feedbacks obtained through the questionnaire. It should be noted that the analytical method is adopted due to its simplicity and ease of comprehension. Furthermore, the method provides an opportunity for “communizing”, and ease of comparison.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of the responses. At the end of the response period, 2,500 responses were obtained, traversing the entire strata of the target respondents across Nigeria. Table 1 presents some salient public issues in Nigeria on which respondents were requested to rate Government’s policy responsiveness to public opinion during the study period.

Table 1: Salient Issues of Public Opinion on Public Policy

S/No	Issue
1	Farmers – herders clash and the raging feud occasioning decimation of human lives and property
2	The skewed nature of appointment into public offices
3	Confirmation of the appointment of Ibrahim Magu as Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)
4	Amassing of public external debt by the Nigerian Government
5	Boko-Haram insurgency in North East, banditry in North West and North Central Zones; and calls for review of counter-insurgency strategy, including military leadership
6	Confirmation of Judicial Officers, based on established protocol of seniority (Justices Walter Onoghen and Monica Dongban-Mensen as Chief Justice of Nigeria and President, Court of Appeal, etc).
7	Calls for immediate closure of international borders, to check influx of COVID-19 infested people into Nigeria, to minimize the level of importation and infection
8	Protracted Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU)’s industrial action and its disruptive effect on education
9	Industrial action by National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) at a most critical and inauspicious period of global epidemic (COVID-19), in spite of NARD’s repeated demand for provision of essential and critical work tools and personal welfare (personal protective kits, insurance, etc.)
10	Lingering proposed hike in electricity tariff by electricity distribution companies (Discos)

Source: Drawn by Researchers

In Table 2, the perceptions of respondents about the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion on the issues highlighted in Table 1 are expressed in the ratings presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Perception-Rating of Responsiveness of Public Policy to Public Opinion.

S/No	Issue	Perception Rating		
		High	Low	Poor
1	Farmers – herders clash and the raging feud occasioning decimation of human lives and property	0	300	2,200
2	Skewness of appointment into public offices	0	500	2,000
3	Confirmation of the appointment of Ibrahim Magu as Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)	0	300	2,200
4	Amassing of public external debt	200	400	1,900
5	Boko-Haram insurgency in North East, banditry in North West and North Central Zones; and calls for review of counter-insurgency strategy, including military leadership	0	150	2,350
6	Confirmation of Judicial Officers, based on established protocol of seniority (Justices Walter Onoghen and Monica Dongban-Mensen as Chief Justice of Nigeria and President, Court of Appeal, etc)	0	0	2,500
7	Calls for immediate closure of international borders, to check influx of COVID-19 infested people into Nigeria, to minimize the level of importation and infection	0	350	2,150
8	Protracted Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU)'s industrial dispute and its disruptive effect on education	500	400	1,600
9	Industrial action by National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) at a most critical and inauspicious period of global epidemic (COVID-19), in spite of NARD's repeated demand for provision of essential and critical work tools and personal welfare (personal protective kits, insurance, etc.)	0	0	2,500
10	Lingering proposed hike in electricity tariff by electricity distribution companies (Discos)	550	750	1,200

Source: Field Survey, 2020.

From Table 2, it can be observed that majority of the responses to the opinion poll rated the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion “Poor” across board during the period. To discern a clearer picture of the responsiveness of public policy, percentage analysis of the responses is presented in Table 3. The analysis provides a “common-size” and vivid picture of the respective responses as proportions of the totals, and thus elucidates the rating across the issues.

Table 3: Percentage Representation of Perception-Rating of Public Policy Responsiveness to Public Opinion

S/No	Issues	Percentage (%) of Frequency Distribution of Responses					
		High	%	Low	%	Poor	%
1	Farmers – herders clash and the raging feud occasioning decimation of human lives and property	0	0	300	12	2,200	88
2	Skewness of appointment into public offices.	0	0	500	20	2,000	80
3	Confirmation of the appointment of Ibrahim Magu as Chairman of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)	0	0	300	12	2,200	88
4	Amassing of public external debt	200	8	400	16	1,900	76
5	Boko-Haram insurgency in North East, banditry in North West and North Central Zones; and calls for review of counter-insurgency strategy, including military leadership	0	0	150	6	2,350	94
6	Confirmation of Judicial Officers, based on established protocol of seniority (Justices Walter Onoghen and Monica Dongban-Mensen as Chief Justice of Nigeria and President, Court of Appeal, etc.)	0	0	0	0	2,500	100
7	Calls for immediate closure of international borders, to check influx of COVID-19 infested people into Nigeria, to minimize the level of importation and infection	0	0	350	14	2,150	86
8	Protracted Academic Staff Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU)’s industrial dispute and its disruptive effect on education	500	20	400	16	1,600	64
9	Industrial strike by National Association of Resident Doctors (NARD) at a most critical and inauspicious period of global epidemic (COVID-19), in spite of NARD’s repeated demand for provision of essential and critical work tools and personal welfare (personal protective kits, insurance, etc.)	0	0	0	0	2,500	100
10	Lingering proposed hike in electricity tariff by electricity distribution companies (Discos)	550	22	750	30	1,200	48

Source: Computed from Table 2 by Researchers

A perusal of Table 3 shows that on the lingering issue of farmers-herders frequent clashes, FGN was unresponsive to public opinion on the pragmatic and enduring solution, given that ultimately, security rests on the shoulders of the central government. This is evident from the high percentage rating of 88 for “Poor” and the zero rating for “High” policy responsiveness. In addition, out of all the respondents, only 500, or 12 percent, rated responsiveness as “Low”.

The responsiveness to public opinion on the lopsidedness in appointment into key public offices and the appointment of Ibrahim Magu were rated either “poor” or “low” at 80 per cent and 88 per cent respectively. With regard to the disturbing growth rate and volume of external debt and insurgency, the respective poor ratings of 76 per cent and 94 per cent revealed the undesirable policy responsiveness to opinion.

Similarly, ratings for policy response to public opinion on issues relating to the confirmation of Judicial Officers, based on the established protocol, and the prompt closure of international borders to check importation of COVID-19 disease through the influx of infested people into Nigeria were poor at 100 per cent and 86 per cent respectively. This indicates an undesirable level of policy responsiveness.

The situation was equally unimpressive for the rating on policy responsiveness to issues on the protracted industrial unrest initiated by ASUU, since 2009, over agreed, approved but unimplemented proposals and requests; as well as the industrial action by NARD over non-provision of personal protective kits, and welfare-related matters. The respective “Poor” ratings of 64 per cent and 100 per cent provide evidence to support the perception.

A higher impression is, however, discernable from the rating on the policy responsiveness to the lingering contemplation of a hike in electricity tariff by Discos. In this regard, the respective ratings of 22 per cent, 30 per cent, and 48 per cent for “High”, “Low”, and “Poor” were considerable improvement in favour of policy responsiveness.

Arising from the analysis and oral interviews, the major findings are summarized as follows:

1. During the study period, the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion was pervasively low on most of the issues, as was reflected in the opinion poll.
2. The poor responsiveness of public policy was ascribable to historical antecedent of long military rule, and the attendant autocracy; “immateriality” or “irrelevance” of votes in elections; weak form or inchoate status of democratic governance culture as evident in literature.
3. The weak role of the opinions of elites, leaders and shapers, who were more on the side of Government, was a considerable factor in the drastically diminished influence of public opinion on public policy.

DISCUSSION

Scholars of democratic governance: Almond & Powell (1966), Ball (1981), Appadorai (1974) and Laski (2008), etc., believe that democracy works better when the citizens and people to whom power and sovereignty belong are enlisted as partners in the governance project. To achieve this, the citizens must be involved or included in decisions, which may affect their well-being. Such inclusion is often in the form of opportunity to participate in elections, as well as the right or privilege to express their opinion on salient public issues. They expect government to respect and consider these opinions.

Unfortunately, in Nigeria, as in most emerging countries, this convivial relationship seldom existed between the people and government. For one reason, governmental authorities believe that when government actions defer to public opinion, such “concession” amounts to abdication of power or authority. Therefore, when critical issues arise, government’s initial reaction to public opinion has been to remain unresponsive. More often, government’s concern is aroused only when escalation is pushed to a boiling point, with the attendant threat to public peace and order.

The foregoing analysis characterized government’s position and response to public opinion on the protracted clashes between farmers and herders,

which degenerated into “inter-tribal war”, particularly in Benue and the adjoining States. Consequently, numerous lives have been lost in the attacks. Public calls on FGN to declare a state of emergency or provide a clear policy direction on the way forward remained unheeded. When government is unwilling to be responsive to issues, excuses such as the issue falling on the Concurrent Legislative list, etc. are given.

Public opinion expressed about the Skewness or lopsidedness of public appointments has been widely supported by public analysts, politicians, and senior citizens. In reaction to the unfavourable and unacceptable situation, retired Col. Abubakar D. Umar, former Military Governor of Kaduna State, wrote an open letter to President Buhari in early 2020, drawing the President’s attention to the constitutional infraction, and advising that the situation be remedied forthwith. Similarly, the Pan Niger Delta Forum (DANDEF), a socio-cultural association of the people of the Niger Delta region, has challenged the marginalization of the region in the distribution of political appointments by the Buhari-led administration in court. In the same manner, the confirmation of the appointment of Mr. Ibrahim Magu as Chairman, EFCC received disapproval of public opinion. Nevertheless, Government ignored all opinion and has retained the appointee in acting capacity for over five years, the opinion and reasons notwithstanding.

Regardless of the hues and cry of public opinion about Nigeria’s ineluctable trajectory of amassing public external debt, FGN’s action has been sustained. The adverse situation created by COVID-19 pandemic has added the needed “credibility” and impetus to the policy option. As it is, the duo of IMF and World Bank, which have resumed active lending to Nigeria and other emerging countries for COVID-19 support, already advised loan beneficiary-countries to consider deeper reforms in order to enable their economies survive the aftermath of COVID-19 syndrome. Without doubt, the advice is also a signal to the likelihood of the lender’s demand for some structural adjustment programmes as conditions to precede lending.

A copious and classical example of unresponsiveness of public policy to public opinion is the call for FGN to review the on-going approach to Nigeria’s counter-insurgency and banditry plaguing the country, particu-

larly around the North East, North West, and North Central zones. Numerous calls by the media, interest groups, legislators, and security analysts have been unheeded. In the circumstance, Boko Haram and related banditry remain active while heavy casualties are recorded by both sides, in the protracted war.

When the COVID-19 pandemic index was reported in Nigeria in February 2020, public opinion supported and advocated immediate closure of all Nigeria's international borders, to forestall the preponderance of further penetration and rapid spread. Perilous as the situation was for the health of Nigerians, lagged policy responsiveness was observed. When concrete actions were taken to effectively stem the tide of the spread by April 2020, the then epidemic had made appreciable in-roads into the nooks of the major cities of Nigeria, including Lagos and Abuja, where social interactions are very high. Even the attitude of public agents towards the enforcement of the lockdown subsequently imposed was allegedly deplorable. It is not certain whether proven cases, if any, of reported malpractices or infractions arising from or associated with the lockdown enforcement have been conclusively resolved.

The protracted ASUU strike and the unfortunate industrial action by NARD at such critical and very inauspicious time, over basic necessities for the risky assignment, such as personal protection kits and welfare issues, can only be best described as unresponsive public policy. To be sure, the protracted disputes, which culminated in the withdrawal of service, had remained unattended to, in spite of the "intervention" of public opinion. As an aftermath, huge loss of lives and valuable academic time, through avoidable industrial actions, characterised the behaviour of public policy.

Even in the wake of abysmal performance, Discos have relentlessly pushed for increases in electricity tariff. Interestingly, Government's action has been relatively "responsive" to public opinion on the issue. Government has consistently intervened in the inordinate push by Discos to hike tariffs. Government's effort was recognized and appropriately rated, as could be discerned from Table 3, where the ratings are relatively more favourable.

CONCLUSION

As observed, not even in the USA and Britain, the architects of modern democracy, is public opinion readily accorded good place, particularly because political leaders often wish to have their ways, on all issues, irrespective of the salience to the public. The situation is exacerbated in emerging democracies where long military rule, illiteracy, and poverty interplay to undermine the collective ability and capacity of the people to press their position conclusively, through higher responsiveness of public action to public opinion. Nigeria, like most LDCs, was therefore down in the doldrums of Government's unresponsiveness during the period, as reflected in the opinion poll. To leapfrog "public opinion" out of the deep pit, policy recommendations are prescribed in the concluding session.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are made:

1. Government should increase the degree of responsiveness to public opinion, in keeping with the tenets of democratic rule, away from military autocracy.
2. Public opinion leaders should be self-re-educated and re-oriented through credible internal mechanisms, to enable them play their crucial role in shaping and pushing public opinion through governmental system.
3. Political parties should step-up their traditional role of political socialization of members for better education on public policy and for higher participation, while impressing it on government to provide greater opportunities for citizens' participations in the discharge of their role has intermediaries.

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