



**CRITICAL ISSUES IN PUBLIC
RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION**

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**A PUBLICATION OF THE NIGERIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS (NIPR)
AKWA IBOM STATE CHAPTER**

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PUBLISHED BY:

Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR)
Akwa Ibom State Chapter,
Image House off Information Drive,
IBB Avenue, Uyo.
P. O. Box 2437, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
Nigeria

ISBN: 978 - 496 – 686 – 1

Printed in Nigeria

Abaam Press,
Uyo – Nigeria, 08023108979

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THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND CRIMINALIZATION

By

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Introduction

Democracy is globally acclaimed as the best system of government. Inherent in all democracies are rights and obligations of all citizens, and very significantly, periodic free and fair elections. Arguably, the issues of rights and obligations of the citizenry are present in every system of government. However, as commonly observed, periodic free and fair elections constitute the golden linings of democracies. They are, therefore, very vital.

Regrettably, these vital aspects of democracy seem to have eluded Nigeria. This is evident in the skirmishes, brigandage, ballot box snatching and stuffing, falsification and mutilation of results, etc. which amalgamate as the toga worn by elections in Nigeria. It follows that since these vital aspects of democracy are not guaranteed in Nigeria, the entire polity is questionable and kept in doubt. This grotesque reality has been noted by many, and many have also proffered solutions. The intention of the paper is to bring to bare the possible

contributions of the twin strands of criminalization and public relations in the struggle for electoral credibility in Nigeria.

Secure in the belief that Nigeria can work, and that a better future is possible, this paper is structured into: conceptualizations, the current Electoral state, the main issue, conclusions and recommendations.

2. Conceptualizations

Public Relations: A Panoramic Survey.

Public Relations is arguably a diverse whole. As a result, there is a myriad of definitions of this great subject. This situation has enabled a possible abuse of the subject. However, experts in their numbers have risen to grant focus to the subject. Little wonder many attempts at granting borders to public Relations usually begin with attempting to disabuse people's minds as to "what is not Public Relations".

In which case, though erroneously, many pretenders in the field have reduced Public Relations to physiological and linguistic pigeonholes. Others attempt prettifying Public Relations on fashion, financial inducements, and subterfuge. But there has been a sustained struggle to create greater understanding of what Public Relations really is.

In spite of the distortions summarized above, it could be correctly argued that Public Relations is a form of communication primarily directed at gaining public understanding and acceptance, with the ultimate objective of building goodwill with the public. It therefore becomes incumbent on Public Relations professionals and practitioners

to possess a high sense of intellectual judgment, creativity, confidence, and courage (Doma, 2007).

In appraising these qualities, the British Institute of Public Relations handed down a definitive guide to Public Relations:

as the deliberate and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

The American Public Relations Association define it as the *management function which evaluates public attitudes; identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the Public interest, and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.*

Also, the International Public Relations Association (1982) views Public Relations as

a management function of a continuing and planned character through which public and private organizations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned, by evaluating public opinion about themselves, in order to correlate as far as possible their own policies and procedures to achieve by planned and widespread information more productive cooperation and more efficient fulfillment of their common interest.

In the same vein, upon an extensive literature search, Harlow in Folarin (2005) posits that Public Relations is *the distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management to keep abreast of and effectively utilize change serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethnical communication techniques as its principal tools.*

This justifies what the Public Relations world has come to appreciate as the Mexican statement which has it that:

Public Relations is the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programmes which will serve both an organization and its public's interest (WAPRA, 1978).

Though there is no intention to criticize any of the definitions, above, it is considered pertinent to adopt the "Mexican Statement" for a working definition. This is because it is precise, yet comprehensive. While hoping to evaluate the

Mexican statement in due course, it is expedient to note that there is an underscoring consensus by Public Relations practitioners, the world over, that "PEOPLE" are the central factor in Public Relations. Put differently, without people, the practice of Public Relations is incomplete because the people are what is referred to as the "PUBLIC". The centrality of people has made Public Relations such an important factor in contemporary decision-making and management processes.

Back to the Mexican Statement, which serves as the pivotal definition in this paper, it could be said that as an art, Public Relations has style, language, persuasive ability, verve, and is culturally disposed. As a science, it should be objective, empirical, systematic, analytical, logical, factual, replicable, public, and problem-solving. Public Relations, therefore, is not a fire brigade reaction but a well planned and managed function which involves analyzing, predicting, counseling, implementing, etc. It is proactive, not retroactive. A good practitioner has a vital role of looking far beyond the obvious by communicating his or her recommendations to management and planning for an action or series of actions that will earn goodwill or favour from the organization's target public. As advanced by Oshodi-Glover (2007), a Public Relations practitioner must be a specialist in communications who operates on the platform of engineering of consent. Such a practitioner should be well grounded in psychological and sociological studies, since the profession is actually about people.

He or she should be frank and open; give the facts (as necessarily as possible) to the media; show care (by itemizing

what is being done to cope with situations); give the media the best access possible; and pre-empt a situation when and where possible. In sum, the relevance of Public Relations cannot be over emphasized. It is, however, sad to note that most Public Relations Officers in organizations do not occupy such offices because they are professionals in the field; rather they veer into the profession because they have found themselves in Public Relations-related offices. This is quackery.

It, thus, behoves on governments, organizations, institutions, and the publics to conscientize along for successful social, civic, national, and otherwise enterprises. The Independent Electoral commission (INEC), the Nigerian publics and the 2011 elections are herein placed in focus.

Crimes and Criminalization

Simply put, crime is any human (mis) conduct in violation of the criminal laws of a State, the federal government, or a local jurisdiction that has the power to make such laws (Schmallerger, 1995). It follows that without a law that circumscribes a particular form of behaviour, there can be no crime, no matter how deviant or socially repugnant the behaviour in question may be. This situation raises a debate between the legalistic and the sociological definitions of crime. Legalistic apologists insist that the nature of crime cannot be separated from the nature of law, as the one explicitly defines the other. This position is, however, limiting because of the fact that formalized laws have not always existed, and new laws cannot retroactively apply to past behaviour.

For purposes of criminology, however, the legalistic definition becomes expedient. Hence, Sutherland (1937) said of crime that:

...its essential character... is that it is behaviour which is prohibited by the State as an injury to the State and against which the State may react...by punishment.

In a sense, the society secretly wants crimes, and gains definite satisfactions from the present mishandling of it! We condemn crime; we punish offenders for it; but we need it. The crime and punishment ritual is part of our lives (Minninger, 1988).

Theorizing on the possible causes and consequences of crime, Ronald Clarke in his Situational Crime Prevention theory explains the environment, rational choice and routine activity as the underlying assumptions. The environmental thesis holds that crime only occurs when four things come together, namely: the law, the offender, the victim or target, and a place. Added to this is the fact that criminals think about their decisions before they commit crime. Crime is therefore a rational choice. As a routine activity, Clarke argues that in order for crime to happen, there must be three things in place, namely: an offender, a suitable target, and no one watching the target and the offender (Clarke & Eck, 2003). In which case, if we want to make a big difference in crime, we must make fundamental changes (Wilson, 1983).

It should be noted that on a practical note the legalistic perspective is persuasive, since only those prohibited acts that are committed after effective date of any new statute can be prosecuted as crimes. We must also note that a serious shortcoming of the legalistic view to crime is that it grants moral high ground to powerful individuals who are able to influence the making of laws and the imposition of criminal definitions on lawbreakers (this could explain why Nigeria is yet to criminalize electoral fraud even against the tide of public opinion). The cases of June 12, 1993, the Chief Justice (Rtd) Mohammedu Uwais' Committee Report, and the aftermath of the 2011 general elections are clear examples.

Nevertheless, pressure from the public has mounted and the process of criminalization has begun. Criminalization, it should be noted, is the process of making illegal any actions, and allotting corresponding and appropriate sanctions to such actions.

3 The Current Electoral Situation

Indeed the Nigeria electoral situation calls for criminalization. Understandably, the law has not kept pace with the activities of people, political parties, and institutions in our electoral processes. This is because our democracy is still toddling. Though fifty-one years as an independent sovereign entity, thirty (30) of such years saw her in a variety of military regimes. The remaining forty (40%) percent of the time found her intermittently experimenting democracy. Something to

cheer is the fact that this present attempt at democracy is the longest, but is capable and determined to do more.

It is important to note that though the legislature presents the fulcrum of democracy in terms of organs of government, periodic free and fair elections hold the key to its entrenchment (Brown, 2010). Unfortunately, history holds that apart from the first elections of 1923 and perhaps the controversial June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, every other general election in Nigeria has been coloured with massive rigging and fraud including but not limited to: multiple registration, ballot materials snatching, ballot box stuffing and multiple voting, falsification of figures, disenfranchisement, violent conducts, to mention but a few. Hence, the challenge for credibility. In the main, this paper contends that the issue is hydra-headed, but emphasis is on Public Relations and criminalization.

4. The Main Issue: Public Relations and Criminalization to the Rescue

Regarding the sordid realities that trail elections in Nigeria which culminated in the Late President Umaru Musa Yar' Adua admitting in his Inauguration Address on May 29, 2007 that the process that produced his presidency fell short of fairness and the subsequent determination of the administration (over which he presided) to combat electoral fraud, it becomes necessary for all hands to be on deck. In which case, the INEC as an institution, the political parties, the police, the media, churches and mosques, private and public establishments, as

well as the electorate and the general public are all called to duty.

First, the Public Relations practitioners in all the institutions concerned – the INEC, the political parties and the police should be guided by the driving forces of Public Relations which include the ability and preparedness to analyze and predict events; counsel their various establishments; and positively impact upon the implementation processes of electoral concerns. This calls for expertise – hence – training and retraining towards professionalism. It should be noted that professionalism is devoid of glorifying misfacts, illogic, and sentiments; but “openness”, frankness, and proactivity on an essential note.

Second, the Public Relations professionals in such places should possess a high sense of intellectual judgment, creativity, confidence, and courage. With these attributes, the professional would hold his own, even in the face of unyielding establishments. In doing this, formal records as informed by official lines of organizational communication should be secured. This would ensure vindication and/or conviction before posterity.

Third, time should be considered as the denominator by Public Relations professionals. Thus, currency of facts and what is let out to the public through the mass media should be granted a pride of place. A critical appraisal of the various election-oriented campaigns is needful.

Fourth, the analytical, predictive, counselling, and implementative functions of Public Relations are predicated on

data (collection and analysis). The profession is therefore research-based. On this strength, surveys and pilot studies should be considered at all times. It could be argued that the gray areas emanating from the system and personnel ineptitude during the voters registration and election exercises would be spotted and dealt with before the actual exercise. A stitch in time, obviously serves nine!

Fifth, the institutions should consistently share their issues, policies, ideals, and information with the publics. Their plans should also be shared. This will ensure understanding and acceptance, or cause a modification of the said plans for the ultimate goal of building goodwill with their publics.

Sixth, to regulate human conduct during the elections, it is posited that it is not just enough to legislate rules without corresponding sanctions. Rules without sanctions (appropriate punishments) are not laws; and violations of such rules are not crimes. Criminalizing fraud in the entire electoral system is therefore a necessity. This is made more necessary when one considers the fact that punishments are intended to serve as deterrents to prohibited behaviour.

By criminalizing fraud in the entire electoral system:

- i) Candidates who benefit from electoral frauds;
- ii) Party Polling agents who initiate, collaborate, and perpetrate electoral fraud;
- iii) The polling booth officials – including the law enforcement agents;
- iv) The staff of the electoral body at all levels;
- v) Those in the Bar and Bench (particularly the latter): and

- vi) Any identified corporate citizen; should all be variously considered for appropriate punishment when undoubtedly identified with electoral fraud.

It should be noted that this would not end electoral fraud. After all, armed robbery though visited with death sentence is still on the alarm. When one, however, considers a possible Nigeria without death sentence on armed robbery, then the offence would have become a norm. This paper contends that the deterrence argument would hold sway because of the socio-economic attributes of the initiators and beneficiaries of electoral crimes. On the corollary, those found to operate within existing electoral laws (particularly in extraordinary resistance against electoral fraud) should be rewarded. This is in the spirit of positive and negative reinforcers.

Finally, a serious thought should be given to the establishment of Electoral Crimes Court in Nigeria. This would enhance specialization and make the laws more tangible.

Criminalization of electoral fraud would attempt answers to the following questions:

- i) What happens to a State Governor whose fraudulent approach to the government house is undoubtedly proved after three and a half years of his constitutional four-year term?
- ii) What become of the party officials who initiate, collaborate, and perpetrate the fraud?
- iii) What about the INEC officials who seal approval to the fraud?

- iv) What about the security agents who work counter to the electoral laws?
- v) What does professional ethics hold to that reactive Public Relations officer who conceals hard facts and produces pseudo truths to consciously misinform the public? This situation calls for professionalism. The institute (NIPR) should mandatorily press for the professionalization of the Public Relations Officer(s) in Nigeria. People should be Public Relations Officers because they are professionals; not professionals because they are officers, which seems to be the case here. Professionalism would be greatly enhanced if we insist that only professionals occupy Public Relations Offices in public institutions.

Conclusion

Nigeria's fledging democracy needs credible elections to steer its drive to sustainability. This paper has considered the sordid situation, and has blamed electoral credibility challenges on quackery in Public Relations practice and the dearth of and willingness of enforcing enabling laws that would criminalize electoral fraud. It recommends professionalization of Public Relations practice, and the criminalization of electoral fraud (across the entire electoral system), and the establishment of Electoral Crimes Courts in Nigeria. The lack of credible elections in Nigeria is man-made, the solution is also in man. It is incumbent on man to consider the above recommendations,

and electoral fraud would be a relegated phenomenon in Nigeria.

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