

## **Nigerian Democracy and the Use of Political Language**

**Oyewale Sulayman Ramat**

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### **Abstract:**

The 2015 and 2019 general elections have come and gone. Those elections nearly broke up Nigeria as a political entity. Reason: the appalling atmosphere of rancour, abuses, curses and ill feelings that had characterised the electioneering campaigns. What was noteworthy was the use of language, especially during political campaigns, by politicians to rally round sympathizers and supporters. More than often, the political language left much to be desired: indecent, abusive words and expressions were the order of the day so much so that waves of tension, hatred and envy heated the socio-political ambience with pre, on and post-election violence and destruction of lives and properties. Since then, language decorum has been thrown overboard as it has now given room for all sorts of language misguidance and rascal expressions from all and sundry. Today, the orthodox and social media have become the hubs of the tagged ‘hate speech’ with its protagonists and antagonists holding sway. As the next elections are scheduled for 2023, there arises the urgent need and deed to re-orientate the minds of the political leadership and followership, to subject them to language decorum, values and culture, processes and usages for a more acceptable attitude, vision and performance in the practice of democracy. This paper sets out to mobilise and sensitise political umpires, commentators, analysts and observers to the ideals of continental language in politics and press for its implementation to safeguard Nigeria’s evolving democratic process from imminent dangers and calamities.

**Keywords:** Democracy, electioneering campaigns, language use, politics, political umpires

## Introduction

It has been observed by political analysts and commentators that socio-political violence, crisis and unrest, have been enacted, caused, by unguarded, misguided and tempestuous use of political language, or eruption of radical, outrageous, indecent expressions in politics, the consequences of which have been the disruption, interruption, or cancellation of the democratic process by the military junta who have staged coups d'état to seize power and control the administrative machinery of the country at one time or the other, since Nigeria became politically independent in 1960 and a full-fledged 'Republic in 1963'. For those incursions, 'military rule accounted for thirty out of forty-seven years of its nationhood' (Opeibi 2009: 94).

Political parties and personalities have had recourse to heating the polity whenever a particular scenario and opportunity do not favour them: they have tongue-lashed anything or anyone not in their favour, prompting military intervention as an excuse to save the situation from deteriorating. The emergence followed by the decadence of the first three Republics in Nigeria, at regular intervals, was mainly caused by 'political instability' (Adeyemi 2008:355), fuelled by lingual insecurity. Alabi (2016: 203) buttresses the stand above, stating that 'the political challenges ravaging the nation were as a result of lack of proper management and civilisation of language'.

Nonetheless, the fourth Republic ushered in, in 1999, has not been an exception to the volcanic avalanche of verbal and non-verbal assaults by politicians against each other, or one another. The 2015 and 2019 general elections are still a fresh and vivid testimony to that effect. Probably if not for divine intervention, the story would have been different by now. This series of unfortunate events in our polity has ignited the reason to bring to the limelight the essential value of political language in the Nigerian democratic system. The paper envisages finding a lasting solution to the unsavoury and unpalatable use of political language to avoid re-plunging the country into unwanted destruction of human and material resources she has often experienced because language can be used as a tool to disintegrate or cause conflicts.

## **Politics**

Politics can be viewed from a pluralistic angle no thanks to its multifaceted contents, elements and features. Broadly, politics is the theory and practice of influencing people. On a narrow scale, politics has to do with achieving and exercising positions of governance, and organised control over a human community, especially a state. Moreover, politics is defined as the study or practice of the distribution of power and resources within a given community as well as the interrelationships between communities. Besides, it is often said that politics is about power acquisition, control and execution. The institution saddled with politics is the government. That is why Ayoade (1982:724) situates language in its political milieu as ‘the conveyor belt of power which moves people to vote, debate, or revolt’.

### **The Nigerian Democracy and its Characteristics**

The Nigerian Democracy is a typical African-Nigerian form of government. Such a government can only exist in Nigeria considering the social and cultural realities of her polity. Thus, the Nigerian Democracy can only be understood based on the following attributes or characteristics peculiar to her statehood since the concept of nationhood is still an anathema herein.

The Nigerian Government is a democracy: usually, here, political parties are formed to represent various inclinations that could be termed ideologies, rightly or wrongly. The political parties select or choose their representatives that people vote for during elections. These representatives, in turn, make decisions on behalf of their voters and population.

Another attribute reflected in the Nigerian Democracy is capitalism: Nigeria operates a free-market economy where people own their businesses and properties, and by public or private services. However, the Nigerian Capitalism functions as an economic monster, a financial vampire, which keeps on widening and deepening the unassailable bridge, the gap, between the wretched and the wealthy. This is a land, a country where it seems ‘tabooed’, criminal, to aspire to new heights, next levels, social ambitions, preferring the status quo of ‘the poor getting poorer, and the rich, richer’: a sort of capitalism of marginalization and extinction of the poor by the rich.

The presidential system and bureaucracy are cogent proofs of the Nigerian Democracy: both the executive and legislative branches are independent of each other but work with each other for the benefits of the country. How many times have we not witnessed mutual interferences between executives and legislators in Nigeria, when they are supposed to be complementary? We have seen executive impeachment plots and actions carried out by legislators, and also legislative dismissals or sacks via executive fiat! Quite typical of the Nigerian Democracy!

Federalism, federation, and federal republic are inherent to the Nigerian Democracy: the Nigerian Democracy runs a system of government (seemingly) in which sovereignty is constitutionally divided between a central, state and local or provincial authorities, all under a union of authorities called 'federal republic'. How far has Nigeria fared in terms of federalism (concept), federation (realisation), and federal republic (union of authorities)?

Does the attribute of a democratic and constitutional republic fit into Nigeria? This is a context where the country is considered a 'public matter', rather than private property, and state officers are elected or appointed, with all eligible citizens having an equal say in local and national decisions that affect their lives. Besides that, the government's powers are limited by law or a formal constitution and chosen by voting among the populace.

### **The Nigerian Democracy and its Language Usage**

Language cannot be dissociated from any human endeavour or enterprise. So, politics in general, and Nigerian Democracy in particular, cannot be exempted in this context. Language is a sine qua non and indispensable tool and instrument for communication in any sphere and at any level of man-to-man interactions. How is this use of language perceived and practised by political partners and patriots herein? We shall take a comprehensive survey of the history of the political language in Nigeria since she became an independent political entity on October 1, 1960.

Memories hardly die as long as their custodians still live! Who will easily forget the Western Region political turmoil and volcano of 1960-66? All sorts of atrocities and terrors were perpetrated, extensively and intensively so much so that the region was tagged 'Wild, Wild

West'. Ubiquitous utterances like *E wetie!* (Let's pour petrol over him and burn him alive!), *Boba, opa; boo ba obu lese* (If you catch him, kill him; if you can't, injure him!}, and so on,

were the order of the time. These are some of the language expressions that engulfed the whole West, ultimately snowballed to other regions in Nigeria, and culminated in the first military 'putsch' which unfortunately turned bloody.

Fratricidal conflicts in the regions, due to political bigotry and bitterness, were erupted by violent, destructive political slogans, speeches, statements and sermons between regional parties. They later escalated to a national level and plunged the country into lawlessness, barbarism, and jungle justice as well as excessive violation of human rights. Nigeria was in deep and dangerous commotion as hell was let loose, people took the law into their hands, the masses were terrorized, suspects or opponents were burned alive, maimed, or butchered, and no providential help seemed at sight, save-fortunately or unfortunately- the military intervention which came on board to restore normalcy in 1966.

It might not be fortuitous to recall what led to the Nigerian Civil War because, directly or indirectly, it all bore down on the use of language. Both the media and unconfirmed rumours in their language usage perpetrated and sewed hatred into people's minds, hearts, and veins, with the declaration of war caused by the unilateral promulgation of secession as the only mental, emotional and psychological escapade, redress, and balance. This is the sorrowful effect of bad language use or violence-prone inflammatory statements by disgruntled and irate thoughts or tendencies.

Between the end of the Nigerian Civil War and the handing-over by the military to another civilian regime in 1978, remnants of bad blood, bad faith, suspicion, and hatred, persisted on and throughout the land. As a result, when the second Republic took off that year, nothing had practically changed since the fall of the First Republic and its attendant Civil War: the hang-over of outrageous language and its gory impact had not subsided. Again, they raised their ugly heads and brought the country back to square one with all the efforts of reconciliation and persuasion thrown to the wind. All these socio-political whirlwinds

signalled that tempers were still hot and tongue bitter, ready to spit all sorts of venomous words and expressions when the occasion arose.

And it did arise! From 1978 to 1983 ending during which the second Republic lasted, the political scene got highly enflamed between two major political parties which accused each other of gross misconduct, incompetence, corruption, and other founded or unfounded allegations. The country became split into pro and con government or opposition. The line of demarcation was drawn, with the leaders and followers of both blocks taking a side, along with the populace, and the print and electronic media. Nigeria was turned into a battleground of verbal and non-verbal language of abuses, accusations, calumnies, defamations, and provocations, which quite often resulted in manhunts, vendettas, assassinations, murders, bloody fracas or clashes, material damages, arsons, and all kinds of destruction. It became a crime, treason, to pitch one's tent or speak publicly, openly, for or against either camp: death, maiming and kidnapping were awaiting the blunt, the audacious or the fearless ones who were ready to pay for the supreme sacrifice. All these negative, inhuman, explosive antecedences were well-woven by inciting, brainwashing, and comments erupting from either side.

Naturally, in its usual tradition, the military regime struck again to restore some *accalmie* or calmness, and prevent any insurmountable situation that could have degenerated into a national calamity or chaos! Again, the main culprit here was the language usage, in its tone (provocative) and its choice of words (abusive). The *kakimen* were always perceived to act as checkmates, sheriffs, peacemakers, in impossible happenings, and the political language, as a catalyst to such interventions-most often undesirable and avoidable. Such was the situation of things till 1993 when the soldiers appeared to exit for another chance to attempt a democratic dispensation in Nigeria.

The Third republic came on but never lasted: it was a democratic miscarriage or a stillborn. Like a fire sparkle, it appeared and then disappeared. Could language use have been the reason for it? It seemed to have been destined to fail, to die prematurely, though reactions, comments and observations to that effect, were made in very violent terms, and this increased the tensions between the ruling military regime and the Nigerian population, as the perceived

mass protest, disobedience, rejection, ended up in the arrest of the acclaimed winner of the presidential elections of 1993, Basorun MKO Abiola, for declaring himself president in a statement publicly

broadcast nationally and internationally. That statement was considered treason by the military rulers, and Abiola did dearly pay for it with his life. He ‘mysteriously’ gave the ghost while still in captivity and about to regain his freedom. That statement of his might have been the last straw that would have broken the camel’s back. Here too, language was ‘responsible’ for Abiola’s fatal fate!

Six years down the lane, after the botched June 12 Elections- memorable, still ringing bell in many people’s ears, and nursing a big disappointment in many hearts and minds- the Fourth Republic conception was given birth to in 1999: once more, another opportunity to have a taste of democracy! And the process has been on since then. However, how far, we may say, has the political language fared in its display and usage by the rulers and the ruled, the leaders and the led? Let us x-ray that scorecard and analyse the performance of the use of language!

From 1999 to 2015, the display and use of political language in the Nigerian Democracy-still-seems not to have changed much because of the popular observation, deduction and belief that in Nigerian politics, ‘the beautiful ones are not yet born’. Nigerian politicians have not yet learnt their lessons from history. Until May 29, 2015 date of handing over of the political baton to an opposition party, the same party was in power since 1999. The seemingly comfortable and fortified position of the ruling party made them believe they were untouchable, omnipotent, plenipotentiary, doing and undoing at will, and saw no imminent, immediate end to their reign, as they one day dropped a bombshell: ‘We shall rule Nigeria for at least 60 solid years!’

The statement appeared to have signalled the beginning of abuse, recklessness, and impunity of political language in that current dispensation. The opposition parties, particularly the main one, found the pill too bitter to swallow and seized the opportunity to pay the ruling party back in its coin by raining on them, all kinds of verbal attacks such as ‘incompetence’, ‘bribery’, ‘corruption’, ‘insensitivity’, ‘thuggery’, ‘oil theft’, ‘economic sabotage’, ‘money

laundering’, ‘siphoning’, ‘wastage’, and so on. Of course, the ruling party fought back too with verbiages like ‘disgruntled elements’, ‘racists’, ‘ethnic extremist’, ‘religious fanatics’, ‘bad losers’, ‘touts’, and so on.

Between 1999 and 2019, six general elections took place with the ruling party winning the first four and the opposition, the last two. Each of these elections was characterized by violent and mortal demonstrations, protests, before, during, and after the polls because of the language used by politicians inciting lawless behaviours. According to reports, about 3,000 lives were lost, and properties worth billions of naira were damaged or destroyed, in relation to all elections. Bamgbose (1992) in Aliyu (2018:189) affirms that language differences ‘keep people apart, encourage ethnic hostilities, weaken mutual loyalties and increase the danger of sentiments’.

Despite that entire massacre, the military did not intervene. The reason is that people have been disenfranchised by the soldiers as the saying goes that the worst civilian regime is better than the best military rulership. So, the military has no business whatsoever in politics! Taking the people’s stand in cognizance and the committee of nations frowning and kicking against military intervention in politics, the soldiers have kept away from the political scene, coming on only to safeguard and secure political situations, preventing them from degenerating into an *epo isu atagnan gnan* (irredeemable) scenarios.

Since the 2019 general elections, accusations and counter-accusations have been thriving between the two major political parties, culminating in all sorts of derogatory statements and publications to feather their respective nests and tarnish the image of their respective enemies. Such an ugly trend will definitely go on till the thresholds of the 2023 general elections; however, the menace needs to be knit in the bud in order to avoid a possible plunging of our democratic system into the destructive abyss of oblivion. To do this remains a call to duty from every serious-minded Nigerian to take a second look at the Nigerian Entity and strive to safeguard it for the sake of humanity and posterity. Thus all hands must be on deck. However Olayiwola (1991:44), on his part, believes that since the media has remained the helping hand of the politicians in undermining ‘attempts at national unity and federal survival’ rather than ‘contributing to political stability and national integration’, the press



needs to be re-evaluated for optimal nationalistic vision and mission. Alabi (2016:203) views ‘the political challenges ravaging the nation (as) the result of lack of proper management and utilisation of language’.

### **Pertinent Suggestions**

Nobody and nothing can guarantee the continuous ‘sidon dey look’ attitude of the military vis-à-vis the unfortunate and blatant use of language by Nigerian politicians. As Ogunsiji (2009:35) observes, ‘the ideological gaps that exist amidst politicians across the globe is basically exhibited at the level of language’, implying that political turbulences occur in Nigeria as a result of the blatantly poor or awful levels of language competence and performance. Consequently, in order to forestall, and prevent any impromptu, unexpected military invasion of our nascent democracy- since a stitch in time saves nine- the following suggestions could be effective and efficient as proffered by political analysts and commentators:

- i. Politicians should undergo an induction course for the principles and practice of politicking in faculties of political science or studies in universities, or in other similar institutions in order to acquaint themselves with the rudiments of politics as regards language usage.
- ii. A Code of Language Conduct Bureau should be established and charged with designing and administering a Code of Political Language Conduct.
- iii. Politicians should be made to read, sign and adhere to, the Code of Political Language Conduct with terms and conditions therein.
- iv. Any politician who violates the terms and conditions as stated in the Code of Political Language Conduct should be made to face the penalties accordingly.
- v. The media too should be incorporated into the linguistic renaissance since they are often perceived and used as the ‘right hands’ of politicians to perpetuate the linguistic misbehaviour.

### **Conclusion**

The Nigerian Democracy has seriously suffered from ‘linguistic perjury, *gangsterism* and *maladroiture* by the political class in their attempt and effort to grab power or hold on to a

political position. Since independence to date, the situation seems not to have abated despite interval interventions by the military to assuage the deteriorating situation as this turns back sour

once the soldiers leave the stage. The ultimate solution lies in every Nigerian to guard against making inflammatory statements that could signal doom to the existence of our beloved land, a land of blessings, awashed with flows of honey and milk.

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