

CYBERSPACE CACOPHONY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

The internet has changed for good the ecology of communication across the globe. And Nigeria, the largest black nation, is no exception. A number of politicians in this country are already swimming with the tide of online applications for interactive exchanges. Leading the pack of social media-compliant actors of political information in

Africa's most populous nation is President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Other public figures on Facebook and using other social networks before the last May elections include Vice President Namadi Sambo, Senate President David Mark, his House of Representative counterpart Dimeji Bankole and Lagos State Governor Babatunde Raji Fasola. In a recent study we analysed President Jonathan's exchanges with participants on his Facebook wall.

Jonathan became the President of Nigeria following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua after a protracted illness. He was Yar'Adua's deputy. Controversy trailed his assumption of office and his candidature in the subsequent elections in 2011. Some politicians in the northern geopolitical zone insisted he stepped down for another northerner in line with the zoning arrangement of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP).

Although he had tactically avoided a discussion on the issue of his presidential ambition in the initial dialogues, a lot of people saw Jonathan's Facebook page as a scheme for his political communication. Within a few weeks of its debut, more than 100 000 Nigerians, mostly youths, had reacted to it. Current estimates put Jonathan's Facebook fans at over 500 000. This places Jonathan second after United States' Barack Obama among world leaders on Facebook. The Facebook interaction also provided him a platform to mobilise the youth in support of his candidacy.

Of the 335 respondents whose comments we analysed, 294 were male and 41 were female, reflecting the male-dominated nature of the Nigerian politics and political discourse in the country. In terms of geographical origin of the respondents, we found that the North was overwhelmingly under-represented. Northern participants numbered 19 (5.7%) while there were 252 respondents from the South (75%).

The issues that dominated discussion ranged widely. They included development, national unity, youth employment, infrastructure, education, the Niger Delta Crisis, security (kidnapping, armed robbery), banking and finance, elections, sports, agriculture and food.

Addressing these issues, Jonathan used patriotism and nationalistic themes to lay down the terms of dialogue. However, the respondents' reactions showed indications of alternative premises. An example: when the President defined the country's problems as a lack of national unity owing to the the negative attitude of the people, a good number of the respondents attributed the country's problems to bad leadership and corruption.

When the President discussed the re-branding Nigeria campaign in terms of "how thoughts influence action", he got this response from Tunde Obajolu: "Mr President, please focus on main issue... you rulers of Nigeria are looters and try to hide behind 'DISTRACTIONS', Distraction ko,



distraction ni...What has the executive arm achieved? All we know is that billions are budgeted and Nigerians are suffering and dying more everyday... Is it possible to have a functioning NEPA and the generator and diesel barons to still make their billions? Is it possible for police to have good pay without collecting bribe or kill all danfo drivers because of 20 naira?"

Responses like this are rife in Nigeria's social media and they indicate that unlike in the industrial media, the Nigerian ruling class has been unable to exercise total hegemony in this emergent public sphere.