

## COVID-19 POLITICS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN NIGERIA, 2020 TO 2021

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### Abstract

Recent history is replete with the outbreak of epidemics and pandemics viz, H1N1 in 2009, polio and Ebola in 2014, Corona virus in 2020 among others. To say that these health emergencies have taken political and economic tolls on the globe is stating the obvious. However, none has recorded more adverse effects than the recent COVID-19 due to its attendant shutdown of the global economy for almost one year. This paper focuses on COVID-19 Politics and local communities in Nigeria, 2020-2021. Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, the paper reveals that the Nigerian government at all levels played and continue to play insensitivity to the plight of Nigerians over COVID-19 issues. Adopting a historical research method, the paper is analytical and concludes that there is plenty of deceit in government approach(s) to the issue(s) of COVID-19 leading to lose of confidence in the government. This deceit, no doubt, informed the level of responsiveness and compliance to the COVID-19 protocols by the Nigerian people. The paper recommends that government should adopt measures to restore the people's confidence to reduce the problem of compliance by the people especially, in times of future emergencies.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, politics, palliatives, political distrust and stimulation package.

### Introduction

In his "Tale of Two Cities", Charles Dickens has written thus:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair (Dickson, 2021).

Times such as this do indeed bring out the best and worst in every society. The year 2020 in Nigeria is akin to Dickson's description above as it saw the outbreak of a global pandemic that is popularly referred to as COVID-19, a virus that started in the city of Wuhan in China in December, 2019, was declared a Public Health Emergency of global concern on January 30, 2020 (Amzat, Aminu, Kolo, Akinyele, Ogundaire and Danjibo, 2019), spread like wild fire to different parts of the globe, leaving no continent unaffected due to the numerous deaths recorded as a result and its attendant lockdown which shut the global economy down for almost one year. The impact of COVID-19 has been described by Oluwaseun Oyeranti and Babajide Sokeye as one unparalleled in history (Oyeranti and Sokoye, 2021) thereby making the year 2020 the most dreaded year in human memory, and reminded the entire world of the song written in 1646, as the First English Civil War

drew to a close and in response to the banning of Christmas celebrations, entitled “The World Turned Upside Down”. Surely it is an appropriate title for the world created by COVID-19 pandemic, for many aspects of man’s daily normality got turned upside down by the Corona virus. Like most developing countries, Nigeria was faced with numerous threats to include health, security and economic crises amidst rapidly contracting fiscal space and global recession. No doubt, government put up different measures as panacea to contain the effects and spread of the pandemic under discussion. The measures ranged from the cessation of movement, shutting down of schools, worship centers among other public places to the introduction of palliative and stimulus packages unveiled by the Central Bank of Nigeria as part of intervention to include the injecting into banking system of 3.6 trillion naira and the designation of 50 billion naira among others as targeted credit facility for Nigerians. (by the UNDP Nigeria, April, 2020)

However, literal implementation of these measures appears to instead clash with the fundamentals that drive the country’s unique economic and social structures and disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable population of Nigeria. (Eranga, 2020) has written that “...lamentation have trailed the distribution of government palliatives by the masses [as] citizens allege that the process has been politicized.” It is therefore, deducible from the foregoing, that lack of objective politics marred implementation of the tantalizing measures rolled out by the government of Nigeria to cushion the effects of corona virus in Nigeria and not only denied people in the local communities benefits intended to accrue from such palliatives but also heightened their economic hardship.

### **COVID-19 and Control Measures in Nigeria**

The first index case of COVID-19 was recorded in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 and linked to an Italian citizen in Lagos, said to be the first to have test positive of corona virus in Nigeria (Amzat et al). March 9, 2020 saw the emergence of the second index case of COVID-19 traced to a man in Ewekoro, Ogun State. This was said to be a Nigerian male who allegedly had contact with the Italian citizen of the first index (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). By August 31, 2020, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control announced that the number of COVID-19 infected persons in Nigeria had risen to 54,008 among which a total of 1013 of the infected persons had died as a result. April, 2020 marked the mode of COVID-19 transmission in Nigeria entering community transmission stage (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control). September, 2021, recorded the total number of infections to had risen to 203, 514 cases. A total of 191, 942 had been discharged while 2608 Nigerians are said to had died. (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2021).

In response, government at the federal and state levels adopted measures to curtail and contain the spread of the virus. These measures include lockdowns, restriction of inter-state movement, social and physical distancing measures, as well as public health measures. Despite these measures to mitigate the spread of the virus in Nigeria, compliance became serious challenge largely due to ignorance as well as the reliance of 56 millions of Nigerians for employment on daily engagement which necessitates person to person contact, cash dealings and patronages to survive. (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017) This therefore, buttresses the fact that more than 80 percent of Nigerians earn their living from the informal economy such as petty-traders, waste pickers, taxi drivers, among other artisans. No doubt, these categories of Nigerians have no health insurance and pensions, depend on very low income and that they may have savings, despite how small such savings may be is in serious doubt. However, the lockdown denied them social interactions which shape their identity and serve as mechanism for them to feel good. It is therefore obvious that Nigerians in this class of analysis found it extremely difficult if not impossible to

comply with the COVID-19 protocol especially, the lockdown orders. (Human Rights Watch, 2020) It is worthy of note that while compliance to the lockdown order is important for curtailing and managing the spread of disease, it stood parallel to the economic and social foundations of vulnerable people and threatened their survival. This, however, heightened the problem of compliance to the COVID-19 protocol.

Realizing that what is required for compliance to be achieved goes beyond good public awareness but politics that will leverage the economy of vulnerable people and give them the assurance that they will not die while complying to government directive to stay at home, the federal government, according to (Eranga), “three months interest holidays for those holding.” Tradermoni, loan program of the Federal Government, said to have been created for petty-traders and artisans across Nigeria where an individual can get a loan of minimum of ten thousand naira and a maximum of a hundred thousand naira without interest; Marketmoni, a Federal Government social intervention programs executed by the Bank of Industry where market women, artisans, youths and farmers can access loan akin to Trademoni and Farmermoni loans, another initiative of the Federal Government created to boost the Nigerian economy through leverage and access to finance for farmers (Eranga). The Vice President was regularly shown on TV distrusting monies in the name of these packages.

On April 1, 2020, the federal government announced that it will make cash transfers of 20,000 naira to poor and vulnerable Nigerians using the National Social Register of 2.6 million households. The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs Disaster Management and Social Development announced also that it will provide food ration to vulnerable households to cushion the effect of hunger in some regions in Nigeria (Dixit, Ogundeji and Onwujekwu). Mohammadu Buhari, President of Federal Republic of Nigeria also announced that the number of households to benefit from government distribution of food and cash initially estimated at 2.6 million households had been increased to 3.6 million households (Business Day Newspaper, 2020). This targeted population was described by the President himself as most vulnerable in the society and directed the Ministries of Industry, Trade and Investment; Communication and Digital Economy; Science and Technology; Transportation; Interior; Health; Works and Housing; Labor and Employment; and Education, to jointly develop a comprehensive policy for a Nigerian economy functioning with COVID-19 pandemic (Eranga).

States government followed suit on making arrangement for distribution of palliatives in food items to their citizens. In Ebonyi state for instance, government palliative measures preparation appeared to give the people hope as the government engaged some individuals to move from house to house throughout the pulling units to collate data of all households to determine the number of the citizens to make the palliative available to. Just like the Federal government, states were not left in getting donations from NGOs both local and international as well as companies and good spirited individuals. The citizen’s awareness of the donations received by the government tended to increase their hope and expectation from government.

### **Politics of Deceit and its Effects on the People and Government**

(Fisher, Languilaire, Lawthom, Nieuwenhuis, Petts, Runswick-Cole and Yerks), have written that “Vulnerable communities face significant risks in times of COVID-19. Communities with deeply entrenched poverty, overcrowded housing and limited employment flexibility (e.g. communities where individuals are unable to work from home, miss a day of work, or face long and crowded commutes), face greater immediate risk of COVID-19.” More than 50 per cent of the Nigerian population qualifies for the Fisher et. al’s description above. Aside that, other vulnerable

populations such as the homeless, disable, aged and people with poor mental health also form part of the Nigerian population and can increase the level of risk and spread of the pandemic especially, when confronted with severe hunger, and may had informed government efforts at rolling out the measures mentioned above to cushion the effects and spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

To say that the Nigerian government had tantalizing measures to cushion the economic effects of COVID-19 on the Nigerian people is stating the obvious. The foregoing analysis has however, revealed these effects cushioning measures. But it is obvious that while proposing these measures, government was aware that the desired population that are supposed to benefit from these measures were going to miss out during implementation. The Nigerian government's antecedents of politicizing everything in the country lend credence to the above and the COVID-19 situation in Nigeria was not left out. (Eranga) fin tunes this as he writes that "there are lamentations trailing the distribution of government palliatives by the masses." He writes further that;

It is lamentation and bitter wailing in Lagos and parts of the country as Nigerians complain that the stimulus packages announced by the Federal ...government to cushion the effects of the lockdown imposed on some States and the Federal Capital Territory to contain the further spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have not been sincerely deployed (Eranga).

This was therefore the result of politics without objectivity leading to political distrust between the government and the people.

As mentioned earlier, government was aware from the point of initiating the stimulus packages that the desired population was not going to get such packages but went ahead with the programs as to use them as conduit pipes to siphon the national and state treasuries. This was mad manifest in the lamentations that trailed their implementations. If such lamentations can come from the urban populations of Lagos and Abuja for instance, where the Nigerian Vice President was often seen in the markets distributing such stimulants, one can imagine the fate of the rural populations where the bulk of the slums, the poorest of the poor and most vulnerable are and who needed and still need such packages. According to the UNDP brief, "there are 90 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty with less than US\$1.9/day... Thus, the number of those already vulnerable is significant (UNDP Brief 3, 2020). On paper and in principle, they are made desired targets to benefit from such government programs but are completely forgotten during implementation. The food items as were distributed by government to cushion the effects of hunger during the lockdown were more of an eye service. In the rural communities, households were given food items that cannot make three meals for a household of four for one day. Fine tuning the assertion, the COVID-19: Fiscal Support, Palliative Analysis and Institutional Response team add that "one 'Derica' of rice, one 'Derica' of beans and one sachet of tomato paste were given to a street with more than 30 houses." (Fiscal Support Report, 2021) Even the COVID-19 survival fund program where some Nigerians, especially young people have received certain amount of money to cushion economic hardship, the population of rural communities are also alienated directly or indirectly. Bulk of this population cannot afford android phones and do not have access to the internet to enable them to access such funds.

It is either government intentionally alienated the rural population in the COVID-19 stimulation programs or the people employed by government politicized the entire arrangement, deceived the people and perpetrate corrupt activities. For instance, in April, 2020, the Minister of Finance announced that 2 trillion naira had been distributed to the poor. The National Assembly

had demanded for the names and how the Ministry of Finance arrived at its data base as well as the demographic spread; records, the Minister claimed were available and in custody of the Accountant General of the Federation only for the Accountant General's office to be gutted by fire nine hours later. The Accountant General had after the incident, announced that the Treasury House lost nothing to the fire. But it is interesting to know that nothing has ever been head of the matter.

Diversion of COVID-19 palliative of food items was also common in Nigeria. A total of 1,958 cartons of noodles, part of the donated COVID-19 palliatives was, on September 10, 2020, reported by the Kano State Police Command to have been diverted from Benue state to Kano state (Ibrahim, 2020). This is just one example of the lots of such diversions that were perpetrated during the period. There were also reports of politicians diverting COVID-19 palliatives and sharing them among party members and associates (Bello, 2020); a contravention of the guideline that separated people with salaries and allowances from sharing in the palliatives. COVID-19: Fiscal Support, Palliative Analysis and Institutional Response team write further that:

In most monitored local government areas, including Agege, Mushin, Ikorodu, Surulere and Epe, we discovered that palliatives were hijacked and diverted by politicians and shared among party members. Some residents who are not members of the party lamented the hijack and their exclusion from the whole distribution process. (Fiscal Support Report, 2021)

Two non-governmental organizations, BudgIT Foundation and Connected Development (CODE), leading advocacy for fiscal transparency and accountability in public finance got worried over abuse and mismanagement of public resources especially funds and materials related to the provision of relief and succor to the vulnerable Nigerians facing the brunt of COVID-19 pandemic; in a petition dated October 31, 2020, had requested the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission to investigate one Honorable Mojisola Alli-Macaulay of Amuwo Odofin 1 Constituency in Lagos and the entire members of the Lagos state House of Assembly on allegation of abuse of public office and diversion of COVID-19 palliatives for personal gain. (BudgIT Foundation and CODE joint Petition to ICPC, 2021)

The EndSARS protest that rocked Nigeria in the last quarter of the year 2020 further exposed the diversion of COVID-19 palliatives when irate Nigerians or should one should one call them hoodlums broke into warehouses in Lagos, Oyo, Ekiti, Ogun, Kaduna, Plateau states as well as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja among other places, and carted away palliatives, food items that were meant to be distributed during the corona virus lockdown. A Civil Society Organization, the Civil Society Coalition for Audit in Nigeria (CSCAN) in a letter to the Auditor-General for the Federation, dated 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2020 and entitled "Reports of the Auditor-General for the Federation not yet Published", have listed among other things, the 'Audit Report on COVID-19 Expenditure' as one of the Auditor-General's report that had been submitted to the National Assembly for consideration but was yet to be published for citizens access (CSCAN Letter to Auditor General, 2020). Despite all these, it is interesting to note that the government has neither arrested nor prosecuted any official for diverting or mismanaging palliative packages.

Diversion of palliatives by government officials appears not to be new in Nigeria and did not start with COVID-19. April 2018 for instance, saw the House of Representatives Committee on Emergency and Disaster Preparedness investigation of alleged disappearance of 6,779 metric tons of rice donated by the Chinese Government to support Internally Displaced Persons in the North-East. The period also coincided with states in the south west especially the APC controlled

states boasting of producing rice. Lagos state for instance, boasted of the Eko rice that flooded Lagos state markets and disappeared shortly after. There were speculations that the IDP missing rice were shared among the APC states, rebagged and rebranded as rice produced by such states. This may have accounted for the disappearance of the so called Eko rice of Lagos state. The panel was also said to be investigating alleged violation of Public Trust in NEMA over the expenditure of 17.8 billion naira said to have been incurred by the agency within one year (Punch Newspaper (Online), 2020). Interestingly, nothing was heard of those investigations.

All these conspired to heighten political distrust between the people and the government. Political distrust of government was made manifest in the disobedience and disregard to government order of sit at home and other COVID-19 protocols (Ezeibe, Ilo, Ezeibe, Oguonu, Nwankwo, Ajaero and Osadebe, 2020). Citing Donnelly, (Ezeibe et al) have written that “building citizens trust... is relevant for mitigating the spread of COVID-19.” Trust between the people and government especially in emergency situation as was the COVID-19 era, presented chances for the best of desired result (Gyimah-Boadi and Logan, 2020)

(Bertsou, 2019) describes political distrust as:

a relational attitude that reflects perceptions of untrustworthiness specific to the political system in its entirety or its components. The evaluative part of distrusting attitudes is distinctly negative and entails the expectation of harmful outcomes. Distrust is an attitude held by an individual citizen. ‘Perceptions of untrustworthiness’ are the internal cognitive judgments that give rise to this attitude.

Political distrust is very high in Africa. In fact, the year 2018 saw the World Economic Forum identify Nigeria among countries with highest level of distrust of government officials by the citizens (World Economic Forum, 2018) This, no doubt, triggers disobedience and protests among such citizens and manifested during the number of escapes recorded at different COVID-19 isolation centres and pretests among COVID-19 patients. (Hans and Curtis, 2020), have identified distrust as a major factor that triggers rejection of quarantines and other control measures introduced by government during epidemics. (Ezeibe et.al) added that political corruption, inefficiency of government institutions, political, economic and social exclusion, and deceit of the public among other factors to motivators of distrust of government.

Compliance to the lockdown and other social control measures introduced by government as low, to the effect that, aside deploying security agents to various locations to enforce compliance, government also adopted strategies that were abusive. The Ebonyi state governor, David Umahi’s directive to the Ebounyi state COVID-19 Task-Force to use can on Ebonyians and the Rivers state Governor, Nyesom Wike’s order leading to the destruction of two hotels, the Etemete and Prudent Hotels in Rivers state are just few of the examples of government abusive and draconic strategies to enforce compliance (Ezeibe et al) strategies that would not have been necessary had there not be distrust of government officials by the people.

## **Conclusion**

Combating emergency situations requires synergy between the people and the government. This, in the Nigeria covid-19 era, was lacking due to distrust of government officials by the Nigerian citizens and as (Dicksons) observes, launched a season of despair in Nigeria. From the foregoing analysis, insincerity of government officials in handling the COVID-19 palliative and other stimulation packages rolled out by government may have informed the distrust and poor compliance to the lockdown and other COVID-19 protocols. The politicization of the COVID-19 situation, the diversion of palliatives, the exclusion of a large number of the vulnerable and the unwillingness of government to prosecute officials that were alleged to

have diverted the palliatives for personal gains all contributed to make the people feel that COVID-19 may have been propagated to swindle the national treasury and divert the humongous volume of funds donated locally and internationally in the COVID-19 direction.

Be that as it may, COVID-19 is real and people must stop living in denial. To achieve this, the paper therefore recommends that the Nigeria government must do the needful by adopting measures to restore the people's confidence. Emergencies cannot be avoided and government needs to prepare adequately. To ensure an effective framework for COVID-19 accountability in Nigeria, the government must include groups and individuals with integrity. Traditional rulers and religious leaders should be included in emergencies task-force committee.

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