

Research Article

## Buhari's Administration and Leadership Challenges of Managing Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 pandemic caught the entire globe off guard because of the speed and rate of its spread and huge impact on human health and resources. There was no reliable approach to curtail and mitigate the impact both locally and globally. What nations did was at most contingent and experimental. What worked for one country may not at best be applicable to the other. The challenge posed by the pandemic exposed weak and poor governance systems and a litmus test for proactive, reliable and empathic leadership. The situation appears worse for nations that were before the pandemic grappling with issues of resources mismanagement, corruption and poverty as in the case of Nigeria. Given the peculiar political circumstances in Nigeria and that President Buhari was some months into his second term in office when COVID-19 broke-out in Nigeria, it became imperative to examine how his administration responded to the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic amidst perennial leadership obstacles bedeviling the country. The study relied on observation, self-reporting and documentaries to evaluate how Buhari's Administration responded to the pandemic between 27<sup>th</sup> February and August, 2020. The concept of Political Astigmatism served as the framework for the interpretation of the study. The study discovered that Buhari's administration complexity of proxies, manifest leadership weakness of his administration's fight against COVID-19 and decay of Nigeria healthcare system posed as the challenges in response to COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study further revealed that trust and integrity are the basis of leadership without which an administration cannot connect to the citizens.

**Keywords:** Buhari, Administration, COVID-19, Leadership, Challenges.

### 1. Introduction

Deadly and disruptive, as it were, and terribly as it could yet worsen and spread, the 2020 corona virus outbreak also has political effects that could last long after the contagion is contained (International Crisis Group, 2020). The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was recorded on 27<sup>th</sup> February, 2020, an Italian, (Sunday, 2020). The statistics of COVID-19 infection in Nigeria as at 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2020, are: Coronavirus cases: 52, 548, Deaths: 1,004 and Recovered cases: 39, 527 (Nigeria Center for Disease Control, 2020). Buhari's administration on the same 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2020, declared that COVID-19 fatality rate in the country is reducing. According to Mustapha, Chairman Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, COVID-19 Case Fatality Rate (CFR) is on steady decline over the last few months: on April 30, 3 per cent, May 31, 2.8 per cent, June 30, 2.3 per cent, July 31, 2.0 per cent and Aug. 22, 1.92 per cent (Opejobi, 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic poses management and credibility challenges to political leaders, especially countries confronted with mismanagement of resources, existing fundamental distrust between the leaders and the led, severe condition of poverty and corruption. Muhammadu Buhari's second

coming as Nigeria's president five years ago was greeted with a lot of hope and excitement. There was a collective sigh of relief when he took over from Goodluck Jonathan, who symbolized everything that was wrong with the then ruling party (BBC, 2016).

Eighteen months down the line, many Nigerians were openly asking whether Buhari has what it takes to lead Nigeria given the enormous challenges that the country is facing (BBC, 2016), and the outbreak of COVID-19 with the questionable health status of the president that is shrouded in secrecy worsened the situation. As such, the following phrase trended among Nigerians on social media: We are no longer asking President Buhari to develop Nigeria. At this point we are only asking him to return Nigeria to the state it was before he became president (BBC, 2016); Political Scientists refer to that expression as 'Political Astigmatism'. In February 2019, the President was compelled by the growing suspicion about his health status to deny that he had hired a body double to replace him at public events (BBC, 2019). Refusal and denial to disclose the true state of health of public officials characterize the attitude of most government officials in the ongoing fight against covid-19.

One thing common with public leadership in Nigeria is baseline distrust between the citizens and the government and to a large extent, distrust, fake news and conspiracies constituted major obstacles in the fight against COVID-19 by Buhari's administration. In a 2016 Afrobarometer survey on the level of trust citizens hold for their governments in 36 African countries, Nigeria recorded the least score of 31 per cent indicating the level of low trust citizens have towards the government. In addition, in 2018, the World Economic Forum (WEF) found that Nigeria ranked 130 of 137 countries for citizen distrust of government officials (Onapajo and Adebisi, 2020). For Donnelly and Hassan (2020) Nigeria political leaders need to win trust to tackle COVID-19.

Donnelly and Hassan further reiterated that:

*The Crisis of Trust with denominators as corruption, lack of transparency and accountability, repression and separatist agitations constituted obstacles to Buhari's administration response to COVID-19. Even though, Epidemic Preparedness Index of Nigeria at 38.9% is higher than African and global average due to experience garnered during Ebola virus outbreak in 2014.*

But without trust, the administration may find it difficult to deliver information, support, testing and treatment, the reason many Nigerians initially considered the pandemic a hoax, some describing it as a 'rich man's disease', while others see it as another conspiracy by politicians to loot the treasury (Donnelly & Hassan, 2020). The fact remains that as at now the greater percentage of Nigerians - of all class - do not believe there is COVID-19 in Nigeria of the sort in Asia, Europe and America, rather what we have is a rebranded COVID-19 which is a byproduct of 'malaria and typhoid'.

In this regard, Bello, Kogi State Governor, reacted thus:

*Let us stop this game, Nigerians are suffering, instead of lockdown with its attendant negative effects on the people, why can't we turn it to employment opportunities, providing cloth brand of face mask to be exported to those countries that have the disease. Covid-19 is not a new disease in our climate, we have our own way of treating it, that is what we should be exploiting rather than subjecting our people to hardship, hunger and starvation through lockdown (Odogun, 2020).*

Otoohhiaus Cyril, a Professor of Genetics and Animal breeding, at Novena University Ogume, Delta State, described COVID-19 pandemic as a scam (Obahopo, 2020). Against these surroundings, the concern of this study is to examine how Buhari's Administration responded to the challenges of COVID-19 pandemic amidst perennial leadership obstacles bedeviling Nigeria.

## **2. Method of study**

The triangulation method of study was adopted. This involves the use of multiples sources of research such as observation, self-reporting, official and non-official documentaries of COVID-19 in Nigeria.

### **2.1 Conceptual Clarifications**

#### **2.1.1 The concept of leadership and Political Astigmatism in Nigeria**

There are as many definitions of leadership as there are many authors. There is no ideal leader much as there is no ideal leadership style (Fiedler, 1967). According to Ciulla (2004) leadership is not a person or a position. It is a complex moral relationship between people, based on trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good. However, all of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common; it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership (John Kenneth Galbraith) in Forbes Quotes (2015).

In trying to establish the concept of leadership in Nigeria, we shall extract from the views and emphasis of Ciulla (2004) and John Galbraith quote in terms of ‘Trust and the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of the people in time’.

Leadership in Nigeria runs on thread of mistrust between the governments and the governed, given to constant failure and disappointment of the citizenry by successive regimes, such that it has become a norm not to expect any positive change from any government. The idea of leadership in Nigeria is the opportunity or turn of a given group or section of the country to exploit the national privileges both in cash and kind. Leadership in Nigeria, to a large extent is ‘Pestilential’ every new regime leaves the citizens worse than the previous regime. This trend is what Political Scientists have christened ‘Astigmatism’. By this, “they mean that citizens are so progressively disillusioned by the poor performance of any extant regime that they openly pray and wish for a re-crudescence (or return) of the immediate past regime, which ironically had been so irretrievably disparaged. This is the true situation in Nigeria today (Onyishi, 2020 pg 15)”.

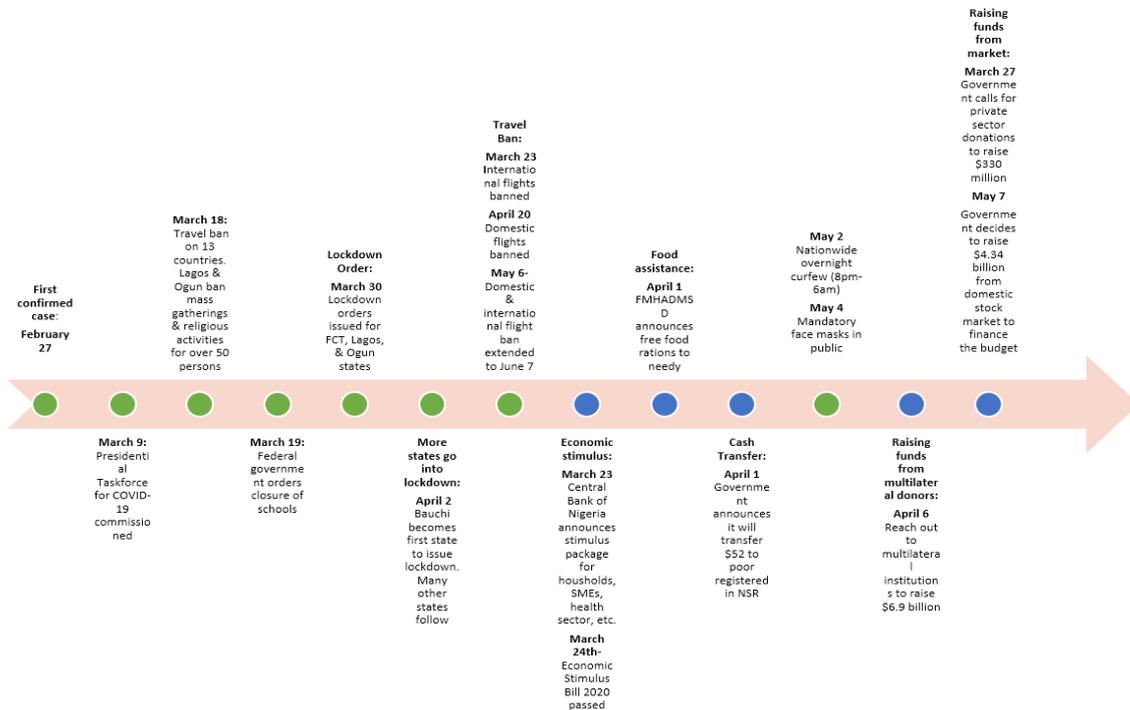
### **3. Buhari’s Administration Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic**

Sequel to secrecy that surrounds the health status of president Buhari and being hedged from the public by the presidency, Nigeria’s Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, headed by the Secretary General of the Federation, in fulfilling its mandate, developed guidelines and policies for combating Covid-19 and briefed the nation daily (Etim, 2020). Buhari in his first belated address instructed that as a nation, Nigeria’s response must be guided, systematic and professional, and emphasized the need for consistency across the nation. All inconsistencies in policy guidelines between Federal and State agencies should be eliminated (The Guardian Editorial, 2020). However, from (Dixit *et al.*, 2020 and PremiumTimes, 2020) the following strategic responses were made by Buhari’s administration in response to covid-19 pandemic:

- ✓ March 24: The House of Representatives passed the Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 to provide support to businesses and individual citizens of Nigeria.
- ✓ March 27: Federal Government released N10 Billion to Lagos State, and N5 billion special intervention funds to NCDC to equip, expand and provide personnel to its facilities and laboratories across the country.
- ✓ March 30: President Buhari signed Covid-19 Regulations, 2020 into law and Lockdown began in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun States.
- ✓ April 1: the government announced that it would make transfers of N20, 000 (\$52) to poor and vulnerable households registered in the National Social Register (NSR). Currently, the NSR has only 2.6 million households (about 11 million people) registered on its platform. The government hopes to include 1 million households during the COVID-19 crisis.

- ✓ Central Bank of Nigeria stimulus package: The Central Bank of Nigeria’s stimulus package offers a credit of N3 million to poor families impacted by COVID-19.
- ✓ Food assistance. After President Buhari imposed the lockdown in Abuja, Lagos and Ogun states, the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development announced that it would provide food rations to vulnerable households in these states and Abuja.

Other important social, economic and public health policy responses of Buhari’s Administration are illustrated below:



**Figure 1. Timeline of important policy steps taken by Buharis’ Administration**

The green circles indicate public health policies while the blue circles represent social and economic policies (Source: Dixit *et al.*, 2020).

The policies in Figure 1 can be narrowed into two strands of niche i.e. economic and human resources needed and deployed to curb the COVID-19 scourge, for instance; on March 9, Presidential Taskforce, on COVID-19 was commissioned, on April 1, Federal Government announced that it would transfer \$52 to the poor registered in National Social Register (NSR), on March 27, Government called for private sector donations to raise \$330 million, on May 7, Government decided to raise \$4.34 billion from domestic stock market, and on April 6, Government reached out to multilateral institutions to raise \$6.9 billion.

As will be seen later, government had fund in excess of 30 billion Naira but disbursement and general implementation of the policies became enmeshed in ethnic controversy, lack of transparency and corruption. The Human Right Watch Report (2020) - indicated that the economic assistance that the government had announced in response to the virus has exposed inadequacies in Nigeria’s social protection systems and risks excluding the country’s poorest and most vulnerable people.

### 3.1 Funding to mitigate the impact of COVID-19

According to the Federal Government of Nigeria, it will require \$330 million to procure medical equipment, personal protective equipment, and medicines for COVID-19 control (Dixit *et al.*, 2020). To this end, public spirited individuals, local and international organizations made generous donations to the Federal government which undoubtedly surpassed its estimation. For instance; a

Coalition against Covid-19 (CACOVID) drawn from Nigeria private sector donated over \$72 million cash to government (Eribo, 2020). The World Bank also approved the sum of \$114 million to assist Nigeria in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic (Olisah, 2020). Also, the United States Government, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of State, announced on April 17 that new funding for Nigeria for prevention and mitigation of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has reached \$21.4 million (U.S. Mission Nigeria, 2020). Only these three donations amount to \$207.4 Million. According to Thisday Editorial (2020) the money (COVID-19 donations) in the accounts of the federal government alone is in excess of N30 billion. However, managing the funds is surrounded by the issues of looting and lack of transparency. The National Chairman of African National Congress-ANC (Leonard Nzenwa) recently noted that no government official has been able to respond positively and satisfactorily to query directed at ascertaining the exact amount received for the fight against COVID-19. Even the distribution of palliatives to the vulnerable in society is riddled with tales of looting and diversions (ThisDay Editorial, 2020). The Director of Operations, Independent Corrupt Practices Commission, Akeem Lawal also acknowledged that there were cases of diversion of COVID-19 logistics and contingency emergency fund into personal accounts. True to the situation, (Falana) a Human right lawyer, in line with the Freedom of Information Act, on the 17<sup>th</sup> August wrote the Governor, Central Bank of Nigeria, demanding information on how the N338.6bn COVID-19 fund was spent (Akinkuotu, 2020).

### **3.2 Buhari's Administration Challenges in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic**

**i) President Buhari's Manifest weak disposition in leading his administration's fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria:** According to Ibrahim (2020), in Nigeria, it took the President five weeks to address the Nation on the COVID-19 pandemic after Nigeria recorded the first case. Before, during and after the lockdown was eased, Buhari addressed the nation only thrice i.e. 29<sup>th</sup> March, 13<sup>th</sup> April and 27<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 (Channels, 2020). The government as (Amaechi, 2020) observed, has been anything but honest in the way and manner it has handled this existential threat. When it all started and as world leaders rose to the occasion, providing direction, President Muhammadu Buhari went into hiding. His aides said it was not his style to address the citizens in matters of grave national emergency. The weakness was so manifest to the extent that the president's third speech was leaked to the public on the eve of making the speech depicting his administration as ineffective. In this regard; Thisday Editorial (2020) affirmed that for years, the machinery of government in Nigeria has found it difficult to protect the confidentiality of information used in policymaking and administration. Unauthorized release of information discredits government and weakens the decision-making process. Some had observed that the President lost control of his administration to proxies due to protracted ill health and no longer in charge, to which the President's wife (Aisha Buhari) attested to (BBC, 2019).

**ii) Decay and mismanagement of Nigeria healthcare system:** The major challenge in this regard is the structural neglect of healthcare infrastructure across all spectrums throughout the federation as a result of decades of underfunding by all tiers of government in the country (Ibrahima and Odah, 2020). Presently, as a result of ill-equipped medical facilities and the resultant massive brain drain of Nigerian medical professionals to Europe, America and the rest of the world, the Pandemic is coming at a time that the country is ill prepared to handle a major health crisis. Following the relaxation of UK visa entry requirement for medical professionals, 58 Nigerian medical doctors in the midst of covid-19 pandemic attempted jetting out of the country but were turned back at Murtala Mohammed International Airport (TheGuardian Editorial Board, 2020). Even the Presidential Villa Clinic is alleged to be a decrepit as a result of siphoning or mismanaging about N10.98bn of the clinic budget from 2015 to 2017 (Ameh, 2017). According to the President's wife, Aisha Buhari, there is no single syringe and others in Villa clinic (Adetayo, 2017). In the views of Ibrahim (2020) the main issue is that we are in crisis today because we have allowed our health system to collapse as our elite became completely reliant on foreign systems and now they cannot go abroad as everyone is in crisis.

**iii) Buhari's Administration Complexity of Proxies:** Covid-19 pandemic by its very nature required that all hands be on deck in order to prevent the spread and get the nation out of its impact of health and economic crisis. Observation from Nigeria experience in this regard, revealed that most of the ministers and leaders of agencies in the frontline of managing the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria were all caught in the web of competing to either speak or act in protection of the sagging image of Buhari's administration due to obvious manifest weaknesses of the administration. Hence; complexities of proxies ensued as they sometimes dish out different or conflicting statements on behalf of the administration on the same issue, thereby heightening the perception Nigerians have of corona virus as a scam (Amaechi, 2020). For instance; the supposed 18 medical doctors from China to aid Nigeria in curtailing COVID-19 pandemic against the advice of Nigeria Medical Association (NMA) that had publicly and completely rejected the idea of the Chinese doctors coming for anything at all (Ishiekwene, 2020), were on April 8, received by the Minister of Health at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport (Abioye, 2020). For the National Orientation Agency; the 18-man Chinese medical team are coming to Nigeria to share their experience with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Abari (2020). According to the Minister of Health, the Chinese doctors, nurses and medical experts would assist Nigeria in the fight against COVID-19 (Atoyebi *et al.*, 2020). The Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 on 6<sup>th</sup> April acknowledged that the Chinese public health experts, not doctors, were being sent to help Nigeria. Their purpose was to strengthen the public health capacity and advise on processes and procedure (Ayeni, 2020) and finally the Minister of Interior (Aregbesola) narrated that the 15 member team of Chinese medical personnel came into the country to assist in building and equipping isolation centres (Adebowale, 2020).

However, more than one month after, nothing was heard of the team, nobody saw them at work, and the Nigerian medical doctors they were supposed to interact with never saw them (Amaechi, 2020). On the 14<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, the Minister of Health while responding to questions at the daily Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 briefing, pleaded that he would be grateful if Nigerians stopped asking him about the whereabouts of the Chinese medical team (Ajayi, 2020). According to him, not all of them were doctors, some of them were technicians and staff of China Civil Engineering Construction Company (CCECC), the Ministry of Health is not their host. So, he cannot always explain what happened to them or where they are. According to Ishiekwene (2020) it's disgraceful that the mixed messages about the actual mission of the Chinese left the public feeling swindled. The CCECC's statement was clear: 'the medical team's assignment in Nigeria does not include treating coronavirus patients and they have not done so at any instance'.

From every indication and as was alleged, these Chinese nationals were nothing but technicians who came for undisclosed technical assignment in the presidential villa. The question remains why introduce technicians as doctors? It all shows the degree of deception, distrust, manipulation and complexities of proxies that characterize Buhari's administration. Till now, whether these Chinese technicians supposed to be medical doctors are still around or not is not in the public domain, yet they came to help Nigeria fight against the ravaging COVID-19. Meanwhile, the Minister of Interior (Aregbesola) explained that the Chinese have been unable to return to their country due to the restriction placed on air travels globally (Adebowale, 2020). This response heightens the doubt that pervades governments' integrity in the response to covid-19 pandemic as there was global restriction on air travels as at the time they were flown into Nigeria.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 There is an existing baseline of mistrust between leaders and citizens in Nigeria:**

The deficit of trust has become an insurmountable albatross to Buhari's administration in the fight against COVID-19. Buhari's administration has been unable to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of the citizens even in the face of ravaging COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the administration's responses to the covid-19 pandemic are better perceived as another conduit to siphoning the treasury and restrictions imposed are no more than distractions to legitimize the

squander and looting of COVID-19 budget by the representatives of the authorities concerned at the expense of the suffering populace.

#### **4.1.1 Corona virus disease in Nigeria is perceived as a scam:**

This perception is caused by no other factor than government itself. In fact, it is the inconsistencies between State and federal government and their agencies that gave Nigerians the clue that the fight against COVID-19 is a hoax. For instance; the faceoff between Kogi State Governor and Nigeria Center for Disease Control - NCDC (Ukwu, 2020) and abetting of the Federal government interstate movement restriction directive by security agents (Eze, 2020). According to the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, at least 60% of the people in the South-East region believe COVID-19 is a scam (Nwachukwu, 2020).

#### **4.1.2 When government fails, both leaders and citizens suffer the consequences:**

COVID-19 pandemic has thought leaders in Nigeria that when the chips of governance are down, it is not only the citizens that suffer the consequences. Most of the political class who died during lockdown were as a result of inability to access medical services abroad due to ban on international flight and long years of neglect of our health sector.

### **5. Conclusion**

COVID-19 opened up the long years of rot in governance of Nigeria. It also opened the yawning gap in trust and accountability between the State and citizens, and collaboration between the administrative and political leadership in the long years of mismanaging public assets, which backfired on Buhari's administration efforts to curtail COVID-19 pandemic. The socio-economic hardship that Nigerians are undergoing since the return of Muhammadu Buhari as a civilian leader due to poor governance and COVID-19 Pandemic has subjected Nigerians to illusionary wish for Ebele Jonathan's Presidency, President Buhari's predecessor attesting to Nigerians' 'Astigmatic' syndrome. Be that as it may, a deeper reflection on leadership and governance in Nigeria will show that poor governance and failure of leadership is not about a particular administration, rather the problem is systemic. The occasioned hardship and frustration has given rise to growing insecurity and armed agitation for dissolution of Nigeria into ethnic republics. As such, the study recommends as follows:

**5.1 Winning citizens' trust:** Trust and integrity is the basis of leadership without which an administration cannot connect to the citizens. The antecedents of various political leadership in Nigeria indicate that none had ever won the trust of Nigerians and it paid off woefully for Buhari's administration in its response to COVID-19 pandemic. As bad as the situation is, COVID-19 pandemic provides the best opportunity for Buhari's administration to win the trust of Nigerians by being empathic and transparent in their responses to COVID-19 pandemic and adequate implementation of economic policies that will mitigate the impact on the wellbeing of Nigerians for now, in the near future and in the remote future of Nigerians. This will keep the hope of nationhood alive.

**5.2 Restructuring of Nigeria Political System:** This is the most trending clamour among Nigerians of all classes as a way to redeem the nation from implosion and assuage the frustration of agitators and Nigerians at large. It is the thought of a wide section of Nigerians, including these authors, that in a restructured Nigeria, Buhari's Administration would have done better in managing COVID-19 Pandemic. Therefore, surmounting leadership challenges for good governance in Nigeria will be a difficult if not impossible task without restructuring.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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