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Political Hashtags and Resistance: A review of social media activism, state responses and public perceptions in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become significant tools for revolutionising political landscape in Nigeria. Central to this digital political revolution is the use of hashtags which acts as rallying points for promoting campaigns against government anti-people's policies and expressing dissatisfaction against economic hardship. The implications of these political hashtags are often far reaching as most of the mass protests organised recently originated on social media platforms. These protests attracted state repression and clampdown on social media platforms resulting in the violation of human rights and threat to democracy. However, the opinions of the public are usually polarised, while some citizens support these movements, others criticise it for being politically motivated. This study examines the interplay between social media activism, state responses and public opinions in Nigeria. This review relied on primary and secondary sources of data. The study revealed that public opinions conveyed through political hashtags remains a driving force for societal change in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, political hashtags, resistance, social media activism, state responses, public perceptions

1. Introduction

The ubiquitous nature of Information and Communication and Technology (ICT) devices in recent times has profoundly transformed every facet of human lives by reshaping and revolutionising almost all human activities in the world. ICT devices, powered by the Internet in the last three decades have been seamlessly integrated into the daily activities of human beings, creating an interconnected world, where information is accessible anywhere and anytime ^[1]. Information is widely disseminated in this contemporary period on digital platforms typically referred to as social media. These platforms have no doubt made communication more rapid and effective, thus exposing a large number of people to information in real time irrespective of their geographical locations. Examples of popular social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp and Snapchat. These platforms play significant role in the democratisation of information as the exchange of information on social media has transformed individuals from content readers to content publishers ^[2].

Social media play a significant and evolving role in politics globally by remodeling the structures and methods in which the government and citizens interact. For instance, social media platforms are used for campaigns, promoting transparency and accountability, facilitating public engagement and discourse, conducting polls and surveys as well as facilitating political mobilisation and activism. Central to social media platforms is the use of hashtags (#) which play a significant role in shaping conversations, holding leaders accountable, influencing public opinions and connecting individuals around specific events and policies ^[3]. Examples of hashtags in politics include #Arabsprings that was used during uprisings in the Middle East, #ImpeachTrump an advocacy for the impeachment of President Trump in 2019 and 2021 respectively as well as #BlackLivesMatter, a movement opposing racial injustice against the black and police brutality largely in the United States of America.

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The use of social media hashtags in Nigerian politics began as far back as 2009 with the hashtag #EnoughIsEnough (EIE) when there was a leadership vacuum due to President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's prolonged absence in office as a result of his ill health⁴. The immediate trigger for this non-partisan youth led movement was corruption, fuel scarcity, killings in Jos, power outage, youth disenfranchisement and the resistance of the National Assembly to swear in the Vice President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as the Acting President. This hashtag social media driven activism led to the organisation of a peaceful protest to the National Assembly on the 16th of March, 2010⁵. Other remarkable political activism on the social media in Nigeria include #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG), #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance. Nonetheless, these hashtag driven social media resistance have drawn significant national and international attention and also brought to limelight the persistent demand of citizens for better governance as well as the dissatisfaction of the citizens against economic hardship. Unfortunately, the responses of the Nigerian government to these protests usually include the use of force on unarmed protesters by the Nigerian Police Force and Army, shooting and arrest of protesters, international travel ban, freezing of protesters bank accounts and the regulation of social media platforms under the guise of tackling hate speech, images of violence and misinformation⁵. Consequent upon this are the violation of human rights, loss of public trust and threat to democracy. Nevertheless, the perceptions of the populace on this resistance are usually polarised, while some citizens support these movements, others criticise it for being politically motivated. Consequently, this study examines the interplay between hashtag induced social media activism, state responses and public opinions in Nigeria. This is with a view to providing insights into social inclusivity, digital empowerment, civic engagement, advocacy as well as international solidarity. This is in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development and providing access to justice for all individuals at all levels. By elucidating the relationship between social media activism, state responses and public perceptions in Nigeria, this study will contribute to the ongoing discussion on public policy, public actors and the management of the public in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study relies on the networked theory of public sphere formulated by Habermas Jürgen. This theory is used to describe the influence of digital transnational online spaces, especially the Internet and social media on public discourse, political debate and political participation in political processes⁶. The theory emphasises that digital spaces are less censored and controlled but potentially opened to wider democratic participation as well as political, social, economic and cultural issues. Hence, a large number of individuals can share their opinions, create contents, exchange ideas and mobilise other individuals at a very fast speed on digital platforms. This no doubt can lead to the virality of false information across digital platforms, amplification of marginalised voices in the public space which in turn can lead to activism. This theory is related to this study because it emphasises how social media serve as a networked public sphere to shape political discourse and

activism in Nigeria, how the government respond to social media induced activism and how the public perceive the actions of the government.

3. An Overview of Political Hashtags and Social Media Activism in Nigeria

Political hashtags can vividly be defined as keywords, short phrases or sentences that are preceded by the hash symbol (#) on social media platforms. They are mainly used to classify messages, intensify discussions, express opinions as well as mobilise support and educate people on politics ranging from political movements, election campaigns, equality, democracy, human rights, protest, and social justice for individuals of the same interest⁷. The main objective of political hashtag is to make the retrieval of information on specific subjects or contents easy on social media platforms.

The #EnoughIsEnough hashtag was spearheaded by Chide Jideonwo, the co-founder of Future Awards in 2009 in an electronic mail (e-mail) that he sent to his friends which was titled "Where is the outage?"⁸. Chide highlighted the challenges the country was facing at that time in the e-mail which included the long absence of President Umar Musa Yar'Adua from office without officially transferring power to the Vice President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the persistent violence in Jos, insecurity in the Niger Delta, corruption and power outage. The major objective of the hashtag was to demand for the immediate resolution of the vacuum created in the office of the president, better governance, accountability and transparency. The outcome of this movement was the swearing in of the Vice President as the Acting President of Nigeria on the 9th of February, 2010⁹.

Another prominent social media hashtag movement in Nigeria is the #OccupyNigeria which drew its inspiration from global occupy movements such as #OccupyWallStreet and #ArabSpring. The #OccupyNigeria movement began in Nigeria on the 2nd of January, 2012, in response to the government's removal of petrol subsidy via the deregulation of the oil and gas downstream sector on the 1st of January 2012¹⁰. This was in a bid to reduce corruption and provide infrastructure for the country. However, the removal of petrol subsidy led to a sharp increase in the price of petrol from N65 to N140. The #Occupy Nigeria was therefore created as a platform to demand for the immediate reversal of the subsidy removal. The key stakeholders of this movement were Femi Falana, a prominent human right activist and lawyer, Seun Ketu, the son of legendary musician Fela Kuti, Tunde Bakare, a pastor, and the Convener of the Save Nigeria Group (SNG) and a prominent human right activist, Dr. Fredrick Fasheun, the founder of O'dua People's Congress (OPC) and Abdulwahed Omar, the National Labour Congress President at that period¹¹. Social media savvy youths, bloggers, civil societies and concerned citizens were also major stakeholders of this movement. This movement gained international attention through social media mobilisation and witnessed the highest number of participants, particularly workers and youths, in the history of Nigeria protests as at the time of occurrence. This movement also led to a protest tagged Occupy Nigeria across designated locations including Ojota in Lagos state, Ilorin, Kano and Abuja. The Occupy Nigeria was characterised by strike actions, demonstrations, online activism and civil

disobedience.

The #OpenNASS was launched by EIE Nigeria on social media platforms as a means to demand for an open, transparent and accountable National Assembly in Nigeria^[12]. The key demands of this campaign included the implementation of the e-voting system installed in the chambers of the National Assembly to ensure transparency in legislative decisions, provision of up-to-date information of the members of the legislative arm of government on a website to enhance constituency engagement as well as the transparency and provision of a detailed budget of the National Assembly^[13]. The major goal of the #OpenNASS was to demand for transparency and accountability in budget disclosure, expenditure and legislative processes.

On the 14th of April 2014, two hundred and seventy six female students were kidnapped by the Islamic terrorist group known as Boko Haram at the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State^[14]. Consequently the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls also known as #BBOG was established to serve as a platform for global advocacy to call for the safe return of the girls, pressure the Nigerian government to acknowledge that the girls were kidnapped and develop a plan to rescue them and also contain insurgency in Nigeria. This movement gained both national and international recognition as its popularity on Twitter topped other international news during that time^[15]. Activists such as Oby Ezekwesili and Aishat Yusuf helped the hashtag to go viral. Following the intensive campaign of the #BringBackOurGirls movement, some of the girls were released. Unfortunately, as at the time of this research, this movement is still ongoing as some of the girls are still in the captivity of the kidnappers.

The #RevolutionNow was created by Omoyele Sowore, a human right activist, presidential candidate of 2019 election, journalist and founder of Sahara reporters as a way of calling for a revolution against corruption, unemployment, insecurity, bad governance and economic hardship in Nigeria^[16]. The #RevolutionNow movement led to a protest which was used to demand for transparency, accountability and better governance.

Segun Awosanya also known as Segalink, a human right activist initiated the #EndSARS movement on X in 2016 against police brutality using the hashtag #EndSARS. This campaign started as a result of the public outrage of increasing and endemic reports of police brutality, wanton arrests, extortion and extrajudicial killings, particularly by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force^[17]. This movement was catalysed by a video posted on X on October 3rd, 2020 revealing officers of SARS allegedly shooting a young man in Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria, dropping his body by the roadside and driving off in the victim's Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV) car^[18]. The government of Nigeria claimed that the video was a hoax and thus arrested the person who posted the video. This act of the government provoked the citizens of Nigeria and thus Nigerians took to the social media with the hashtag #EndSARS which gained both national and international recognitions from prominent figures such as Jack Patrick Dorsey, an American technological entrepreneur and co-founder of X, Robyn Rihanna Fenty, a Pop and Rhythm-and-Blues musician, popularly known as Rihanna, Onika Tanya Maraj (aka Nicki Minaj), a rapper and Hollywood actress and Mesut Ozil, a German-born footballer^[19]. A clenched fist emoji, painted with the colours of the Nigerian

flag was released by Jack Dorsey as a symbol for solidarity and resistance for police brutality and other unlawful activities in Nigeria. This movement resulted in a youth-led protest against police brutality tagged the #EndSARS protest in October, 2020 which soon resulted in violence, looting and destruction of government properties^[20]. The hashtag #SoroSoke, a Yoruba expression or slang for the term speak up boldly and fearlessly was used by Nigerians during the #EndSARS protest to reach out to the victims of police brutality to speak out without any fear or intimidation. It was also used as a wake-up call to resist corruption, oppression and injustice^[21].

In 2020, the Nigerian Senate introduced two bills which were tagged the National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech and the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation and other Related Offences Bills^[22]. These bills were to prohibit statements that are inimical to national security and prevent the spread of fake news on social media. These bills proposed the payment of fine, imprisonment, and death penalty for offenders. However, these bills were resisted on various social media platforms with the hashtag #SayNoToSocialMediaBill by Nigerians who saw these bills as an attempt by the government to suppress opposition and digital rights as well as censor and punish social media users for freely expressing their opinions online.

The #EndBadGovernance erupted in Nigeria on various social media in August 2024 under the administration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu^[23]. The remote causes for this hashtag include the dissatisfaction of Nigerians against economic reforms such as the devaluation of the Naira, removal of fuel and electricity subsidies, soaring rate of inflation, economic hardships as well as the exponential rise in transportation and production costs. This movement led to a mass protest between August 1st and 10th, 2024 where citizens demanded for measures to curb inflation, stabilise food prices and reduce the price of petrol which had increased as a result of the removal of fuel subsidy.

4. A Review of the Responses of the Government to Political Hash tag induced activism in Nigeria

The responses of the Nigerian government to social media activism in Nigeria is multifaceted ranging from negotiations, state repression as well as the dispersion, arrest, maiming and killing of unarmed protesters through the Nigerian Police Force and Army. The government also responded to these social activisms by restricting citizens' use of the social media. For instance, after a Tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari was deleted on X, the Federal Government of Nigeria suspended the use of X in Nigeria by emphasising the role of X during the #EndSARS movement. Furthermore, negotiations are also made between the government and conveners of the activism. For instance, negotiations were made between the government and the stakeholders of the #OccupyNigeria to reduce the price of PMS from N141 to N97^[24]. In addition, the government under the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari engaged in negotiations with Boko Haram during the #BBOG protest which led to the release of eighty two of the kidnapped girls in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

The response of the Nigerian government to the #EndSARS campaign was multifarious. First, the Federal Government of Nigeria disbanded SARS which was the main demand of

the movement and also announced the formation of a new unit in the Nigerian Police force called the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) ^[25]. The most popular and unfortunate event of this movement occurred on the 20th of October, 2020 when soldiers were ordered by the government to open fire on unarmed and peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos. Consequently, several state governments imposed curfews in their states to curb the wide spread of the protest. Bank accounts of several activists were frozen by the government and some of the protesters were issued travel ban. The government fined media stations which aired the protest across the country and set up a judicial panel to investigate the shooting at Lekki toll gate and police brutality.

6. Perceptions of the Public to Hashtag Social Media Activism in Nigeria

The perception of the public on hashtag activism on social media in Nigeria ranges from admiration to criticism. Hence, the opinions of the public are usually polarised on issues relating to social media activism in Nigeria. For instance, some citizens believe that hashtag social media activism in Nigeria are used for amplifying marginalised voices as a result of the open access nature of social media platforms ^[26]. Hence, citizens who could have been shut out of political activities are given opportunities to share their experiences, advocate for their rights, offer solidarity and support to political events and call the government to take action. This was evident in the #EndSARS movement which spotted police brutality, human right violation and corruption within the police force and gave Nigerians the privilege to amplify their voices. Some Nigerians according to Okocha and Dapoet have the perception that the hashtag movement makes the participation in civic engagement easy by providing citizens with information on their rights, social issues and government policies ^[27]. Some also perceive that hashtag social media activism in Nigeria facilitates the organisation of protests and rallies ^[28]. For instance, #EndSARS, #OccupyNigeria and #EndBadGovernment movements were largely coordinated on social media platforms. There is also a public believe that social media activism results in Nigeria has led to international solidarity. For instance, prominent international figures such as Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai joined the #BringBackOurGirls movement to push the campaign for the release of the girls on a global stage. In addition, foreign countries like United States of America, United Kingdom, China and France provided intelligence and military support for the #BringBackOurGirls movement. More importantly is the public perception that hashtag induced social media activism results in the spirit of collective responsibility and unity. This is evident during the #EndSARS movement when citizens across diverse ethnic groups came together to address the common grievance against police brutality and oppression in Nigeria. The #SoroSoke a Yoruba expression became a slogan across the nation symbolising the end to police oppression in Nigeria. In addition, protesters demonstrated collective responsibility by providing food and water, medical services, fund and legal assistance to protesters and other supporters of the movement. The public perception of collective responsibility and unity is also sparked by the #EndSARS movement which unified individuals of the Islamic and Christianity faith, who were seen praying together and protecting each other at various

sites of the protests.

On the other hand, some citizens believe that social media activism in Nigeria results in slacktivism otherwise referred to as clicktivism or arm chair activism. This term refers to the practice of supporting a political or social cause on social media without taking any tangible step or commitment to effect changes. Some critics also believed that social media activism leads to the rapid spread of false information which could heighten political and ethnic tension in the country ^[29]. For instance, some claims on the social media in 2020 which led to #EndSARS protests across the nation were false and unproven. For instance, Umar emphasised that a popular actress, Obianuju Catherine Ude, popularly known as DJ Switch fueled the #EndSARS protest by claiming that she witnessed the killing of unarmed protesters by the Nigerian Armed Forces, a claim which she could not substantiate ^[30]. Furthermore, there is the perception that some hashtag movements are politically motivated. For instance in 2015, #SaiBaba was used to promote General Mohammadu Buhari during the presidential campaign of 2015 general elections. Furthermore, the #Obidients was created by the supporters of Peter Obi, a Labour Party presidential candidate of the 2023 general election to ensure his electoral victory in the 2023 general elections ^[31]. Largely, the digital divide that exists between Nigerians in the urban and rural areas is also believed to restrict the use social media for political processes.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that political hashtag movement on social media have transformed the way the citizens of Nigeria amplify their voices on critical societal issues, demand accountability and better governance from the government and expose injustices. These hashtags movements no doubt make the concerns of the citizens more visible locally and globally and thus spur actions from the government. The Nigerian government has adopted diverse means to respond to social media activism through arrests and intimidation, issuance of international ban, freezing of bank accounts and the organisation of dialogues and negotiations to address the grievances of the citizens. This study revealed that social media activism has significantly shaped the perceptions of the public in Nigeria which often leads to the polarisation of public opinions which include the use of social media to empower citizens, advocate for their rights and serve as a platform for the spread of fake news. However, as Nigerians continue to embrace social media platforms, hashtag activism will remain a significant tool for civic engagement and societal transformation

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