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BRIEFING

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria: new media, party politics and the political economy of voting

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SUMMARY
This Briefing argues that social media evidently did not provide the platforms for democratic struggles and the transformation of the political economy of voting during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Arguably, only the trade union movements such as the Nigerian Labour Congress formed a vibrant vanguard for democratic struggles challenging neoliberal policy and state hegemony.

Nigeria's March 2015 general elections ushered in a historic moment – for the first time since the country gained independence in 1960, the opposition won a national election. The challenge came from the All Progressives Congress (APC) and its candidate Muhammadu Buhari. Given Nigeria's history of electoral flaws and violence from 1999 to 2011, the peaceful conduct of the elections has opened up the possibilities for electoral legitimacy. The elections were the fifth since the 1999 transition from military rule, with presidential balloting on 28 March 2015 and state elections following on 11 April 2015. The election due to be held on 28 February 2015 was postponed by six weeks on security grounds – specifically threats to disrupt the elections by the jihadist group Boko Haram in the northeast region (International Crisis Group 2015). Critics considered the postponement of the election to be a ploy by the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the hope that the APC would run out of campaign funds. On 7 February, Professor Attahiru Jega, the Chair of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), announced that both national and state elections would now be held on 28 March and 11 April respectively.

Despite its decade in power, the ruling PDP of former president Goodluck Jonathan conceded defeat at the ballot box to the main challenger, Buhari. Buhari scored 54% of the votes and the incumbent garnered 45%. The constitutional arrangement requires a simple majority or 51%. Buhari also met the constitutional requirement to be declared president-elect by winning more than one quarter of the votes in 27 out of the 36 states. Lewis and Kew (2015) noted that several factors accounted for the shift in Nigeria's political equilibrium: perceived failure of leadership in crucial policy areas such as the economy and security, or the fighting between the army and Boko Haram that resulted in thousands

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of civilian death and massacres; the increased relative autonomy of the INEC, especially its use of electronic voting which made ballot-box stuffing more difficult; mass elite defections from the ruling PDP as a result of fragmentation and infighting within the opposition; and the increased capacity of civil society to help monitor elections (95) – all converged to drive the success of the APC. Thus, this success represents a major gain for the historically fractious opposition segment of the Nigerian ruling class (Ikechukwu 2015, 75).

The purpose of this Briefing is to track and explain the role of social media in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The argument that social media has increased political participation is one which has gained a lot of attention in the last few years. A growing body of literature has emerged to account for the positive impact social media has had upon increasing engagement in politics through political campaigns. Popular discourse attributes the use of the social media as revolutionising aspects of election campaigns online (Abbott, MacDonald, and Givens 2013; Boulianne 2015; Fuch 2013). In the Nigerian context, key explanations have essentialised the role of social media – particularly pervasive amongst these parochial explanations is the emphasis on the growing use of the social media as even 'deepening' and 'consolidating' democracy and its emergence as an indispensable tool of sensitisation and conscientisation in advancing political engagement and mobilisation (Isaac and Adesola 2015; Omojuwa 2015; Oseni 2015). This Briefing seeks to critique early work on the role of social media in Nigerian elections, in particular the 2015 general elections. It argues that, while social media is frequently celebrated for its positive impacts, as a digital space for political mobilisation and social activism, there are growing concerns in Africa that it can be used at times as a space to perpetuate hate speech and that it lacks the capacity to stimulate a platform for social struggle focusing on challenging neoliberalism and state hegemony.

The Briefing is based on data collected through focus-group discussions and responses to 70 questionnaires which were distributed to voters after the election. Respondents were randomly selected through purposive sampling drawn from academia, the civil service, trade union movements and civil society groups. In the focus-group discussions, data were obtained during a series of four focus-group interview sessions. Each of the group-discussion sessions consisted of eight participants chosen based on their socio-demographic characteristics, occupation and level of education.

Social media, party politics and the political economy of elections

Social networking platforms are undoubtedly popular and have the potential to enhance participation in civic and political life (Boulianne 2015). A diverse and growing body of research on the role of social media in democratisation exists in the literature (e.g. Abbott, MacDonald, and Givens 2013; Fuch 2013; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Abbott, MacDonald, and Givens (2013) argue that social media has democratising effects in two distinct ways: (a) democratisation of information and (b) expansion of participation and mobilisation. Social media here is defined as a group of Internet-based applications or platforms that allow information sharing and co-ordination among its users (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, 59). Examples of social media platforms include applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and other interactive options on these websites such as the 're-tweeting' option on Twitter. These instruments can be used for

the storage and dissemination of information. However, unlike traditional media such as television and radio, most social media tools allow their users to interact, as 're-tweeting' on Twitter or the 'comment' option on Facebook illustrate (Sweetser and Lariscy 2008, 175).

There are many competing theories on the emerging role of social media in political participation (Goffman 1983; Murthy 2012). Specifically, Goffman's theoretical work on 'corpus of interactionism' provides a set of tools which can be developed to understand social media. It focuses on the role of social media in creating social networks ties that can be mobilised. It places primacy on interactions in social situations. From one vantage point, to understand social media interactions, Goffman conceptualises 'interactions' through three themes: 'ritualisation', 'participation framework' and 'embedding' (Goffman 1983) that relate to social networking among groups. Social ritualisation refers to raising the level of vocal behaviour through socialisation – including signatures for advocacy using social media platforms for mobilisation. Participation refers to how social media platforms potentially draw large numbers of individuals to a single focus of visual and cognitive attention for social interactions and communication. Embedding of social media focuses on how all social media platforms allow their content to be visualised online, allowing broad-based participation (3).

The conduct of free and transparent elections is a necessary step towards democratisation; however, the claim that the use of social media during the 2015 elections in Nigeria transformed the country's politics and electoral process is not sufficient to consolidate democratic governance, in that the majority of Nigerians have limited access to social media to spawn broader political mobilisation capable of transforming existing structures of social, political and economic power relations via social struggles – in particular, deeply entrenched neo-patrimonial politics (Hopgood 2014). Thus, beyond merely asserting that the social media campaign is consolidating democracy in Nigeria, the Briefing argues that Nigeria's democratic deficit is rooted in her dysfunctional political and economic system. I argue that, despite the success of the opposition in the 2015 election, democratic roots remain shallow and there is a disconnect between elections and reforms. Nigeria's democratisation space is still fraught with many challenges that impede democratic consolidation – corruption, politicisation of ethnicity and the debilitating impact of 'neoliberal globalisation' restraining democratic legitimacy (Hoogvelt 2001). The country maintains only the outward appearance of democracy through regularly held elections but the political landscape is captured by weak, factionalised and corrupt elites. These elites have narrowed the political space and delegitimised the state and remain incapable of constructing the necessary political platform for democratic reforms (Ihonvbere 2000, 345). However, Buhari's campaign promises to reduce poverty among unemployed youths – through a social grant scheme under the APC's 'agenda for change' mantra – have helped to sway large numbers of undecided voters to support the APC. Buhari has already started implementing the 'N-Power' scheme, which provides conditional social grants for the country's 25 million poorest people (Sahara Reporters 2016).

The prevailing social tensions and democratic deficit that characterised the postcolonial Nigerian state have been underpinned by latent discourses of atavism and primordialism – in other words, most studies often link conflicts to inter-ethnic animosities and competition over scarce resources while ignoring historical root causes of conflict such as colonialism and now imperialism through the process of capitalist accumulation in

Africa (Ayers 2010, 157). Basically, the ethnic and religious differences in the north and south of the country are cited above all else as major explanations (Eveslage 2013; Mustapha 2004). It is an ethnic conflict, the roots of which lie in the supposedly immutable propensity for violence inherent in ethnicity and within the country, displaying a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity (Egwu 1998; Mustapha 2004; Nnoli 1978). Contrary to the dominant discourse, this Briefing argues that such accounts are highly partial and analytically inadequate.

Rejecting such essentialism, I argue that the democratic deficit in Nigeria is illuminated by deep-rooted historical-structural impediments in the country's political economy, in particular the so-called 'crisis of postcoloniality' perpetuated by self-centred and corrupt ruling elites who benefit from the deepened process of neoliberalism (Amuwo 2009, 45). Even though the concept of postcoloniality is highly complex and polemical in the literature, it relates to the Marxist discourse on postcolonialism that aims to reveal the historically entrenched and exploitative structures, institutions, and networks and processes that tend to reproduce and perpetuate imperialistic interest in Africa (Omeje 2015, 2). In this context, Nigeria's crisis of postcoloniality, broadly understood to be reinforced by colonial legacies and the postcolonial elites' politics of primitive accumulation and opportunism, has hindered democratic reforms and development (Amuwo 2009). The Briefing interjects in such debates through the use of a distinct analytical approach. Specifically, it interrogates three interrelated deeper roots of the country's crisis of governance which are ignored by orthodox explanations: (i) the politicisation of ethnicity by the elite; (ii) the adverse effects of neoliberal economic restructuring; and (iii) the fragile political system and the way political power arrangement is constructed.

The ethnicisation of politics is driven by elite power struggles and the intractable nature of Nigeria's economic crisis exacerbated by neoliberal policy accentuating ethno-religious differentiation and further fractionalisation of political elites (*Ibid.*; Ihonvbere 2000; Mamdani 2005, 3). Despite economic growth that doubled in size over the past decade and a shift away from oil dependency towards economic diversification, reducing poverty and creating jobs particularly in the restive north remain huge challenges for Nigeria (*The Economist* 2015). Thus, politicisation of ethnicity and widening inequalities have resulted in social fragmentation and manipulation of factionalism whereby political elites foster the interests of their ethnic group against national interests (Mustapha 2004). For instance, during the 2015 election, citizens split along familiar ethno-regional lines, with northerners and southwesterners mainly backing the APC while southeasterners and coastal minorities supported the PDP. This led to dramatic cases of increased 'hate speeches' and 'war-like' elections (Ezeibe 2015). During the elections, most social media users in Nigeria used the new platforms beyond mere social networking by taking ethnicised views characterised by 'hate speeches' into the digital sphere.

Nigeria's prolonged economic crisis that undermines its legitimacy is historically tied to the complex IMF and World Bank-imposed neoliberal policy of the Structural Adjustment Programme in the 1980s. The Programme, introduced by the Nigerian (neo)liberal apologist elites, first by the Babangida and Abacha military regimes and later by the Obasanjo government, has drastically reduced the government's policy space and fed kleptocratic elites (Ikpe 2014; Mustapha 1993; Olukoshi 2003). The embedding of neoliberalism through economic reform packages changes not only the political economy but also weakens the capacity of state institutions, thereby restraining democratic legitimacy and

contributing to incessant political instability. In fact, overlooked as well is the fact that neoliberalism has even taken deeper roots since the country's return to democracy in 1999 (Amuwo 2009; Smith 2008). The increased privatisation, trade liberalisation and the sale of state institutions by the elites in collaboration with international capital have tremendously reduced the government's sphere of influence in the economy, thereby deepening exclusion. Since 1999, past presidents have used state parastatals to cultivate national political allies and provincial patrons. These institutions have been a cornerstone for competition (Smith 2008). Market reforms during Obasanjo's government from 1999 to 2007 and beyond fuelled dramatic corporate and private profits for transnational capital and the state political elites through the misuse and abuse of the oil industry (Amuwo 2009, 38). The deepening neoliberal market policies therefore led to the reduction of politics to an elite competition among rentier bourgeois groups jostling for influence and power as a vehicle for the accumulation of oil resources (Ibid., 50). As Amuwo (Ibid.) further argues, democratic transition under neoliberal market reforms has been reduced not only to electoral processes for inter- and intra-elite competition for vote buying and vote rigging, but also to attempts to buy justice. But until recently, the accession of Buhari's government alongside his zero tolerance on corruption might have opened up the space and possibilities for governance reform.

This intense competition for primitive accumulation by elites has led to a lack of internal democracy in all the political parties that contested the 2015 elections. Nigerian politicians are not famous for party loyalty; a phenomenon Ikechukwu (2015) labelled 'political nomadism' – politics without principles underpinned by political defections by elites in search of greener pastures, or resources to be looted at both state and national levels, has characterised Nigeria's democracy. As the political equation now favours the APC, more defections are possible. Despite victory for the opposition, fighting endemic corruption remains a huge challenge for democracy. Buhari's reform agenda probably faces its greatest threat from corrupt old-school politicians within his own party. For instance, both APC candidates in the Kogi and Bayelsa governorship elections have been indicted by Nigeria's anti-corruption agency. Thus, 'house cleaning' carries heavy political risks for Buhari. After all, his victorious electoral coalition included powerful defectors from former president Goodluck Jonathan's PDP. If he unduly antagonises these establishment figures, they could derail his party's newfound dominance by joining their comrades in the opposition PDP (Page 2015).

Lastly, the root of the country's political malaise is embedded in the negative consequences for the poor majority arising from the adoption of the market-led neoliberal democratic reform (1999–2015). Neoliberal policies have widened the space for spoils and corruption as well as deepened income inequalities among the poor majority (Larmer 2010; Schuster 2002; Smith 2008). The liberalisation of the economy and the privatisation of national assets, which exacerbate the spoils system, have also deepened poverty and social polarisation despite Nigeria's economic growth over the last decade (Smith 2008). Arguably, only social movement unionism involving trade union movement struggles through a broader participatory process that transcends labour's struggles for workers' demands for change, has formed a vibrant vanguard for social struggles. Social movement unions such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities and the Nigerian Labour Congress whose members cut across ethnic divisions play a critical role in contributing to social struggles by challenging neoliberal policy and state hegemony

(Odion-Akhaine 2009, 431). Rooted in Marxist–Leninist ideological leanings towards anti-imperialism, these social movements have on several occasions organised nationwide industrial action and protests against neoliberal policies such as sales of national assets and deregulation of the oil sector, cuts in public spending and low wages (Tar 2009). In this context, these social movements representing their constituencies effectively articulate discontent and struggle for political change (Larmer 2010, 252).

2015 elections and the new media

In Nigeria, the role of the social media grows in every election. With 63 million Internet users, Nigeria is ranked number one in Africa. Access to the Internet steadily grew from 35.7 million in 2011 to 63.2 million in 2015 (*Vanguard* 2016). Despite the rising influence of social media, this study argues that social media did not boost turnout in the 2015 elections. Social media users are predominantly located in urban areas and constitute less than 25% of the total number of voters. Their online political engagement is largely restricted to people already active in politics. There are also issues of access relating to factors such as age, gender and education (Ezeibe 2015).

In the course of Nigeria's 2015 elections, the social media spectrum could be categorised into the following: state-owned platforms; party platforms; civil society platforms and citizen-voter platforms. The state-owned platforms promoted the interests of the state and elites, while party platforms represented the narrow interests of political parties, the dominant ones being the ruling PDP and the opposition APC. The parties set up a number of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp messaging etc. to campaign for the elections (Isaac and Adesola 2015).

Meanwhile, a coalition of pro-democracy civil society actors led by key players such as the Transition Monitoring Group established the 'Election Situation Room' to monitor the elections and provide real-time accounts to the voting public. The Situation Room had its Twitter handle, Facebook page and live video streaming in YouTube and other designated local digital platforms. Finally, citizen-voters were not left out in the social media show. Numerous Twitter handles, blogs and instant-messaging platforms were created by Nigeria's vibrant youthful population who had long shown genuine discontent with the dominance of the political spectrum by 'elder politicians', insecurity, breakdown of law and order, and the decay of infrastructure. These youthful media platforms lampooned Nigerian politicians, especially the elites of the ruling PDP who had ruled the country for over 16 years (Oseni 2015). In all these, the social media environment in Nigeria's 2015 elections was criticised for inciting violence and for being used as an avenue for hate speech (Ezeibe 2015).

There are a number of questions that are pertinent to determining the impact of social media on election behaviour. First is the question of whether there is a correlation between increased use of social media and increased political participation in Nigeria. During a series of focus-group discussions, my survey of voters revealed that 99% of respondents agreed that social media has advanced information sharing but did not transform the process of electioneering campaigning during the 2015 general elections. Instead, many respondents stated that social media to transform Nigeria's politics is still in its infancy. Based on INEC's statistics, voter turnout in the 2015 elections was the lowest since 1999, with 53% in 2011 and 44% in 2015 (Agaigbe 2015, 3). When asked during the

focus-group discussion why there was such a low turnout of voters during the 2015 elections, most interviewees attributed it to issues such as fear of electoral violence at polling stations and lack of internal democracy leading to candidates being imposed on voters by competing political parties. Thus, the increased use of social media has not influenced voter turnout. However, the judgement of interviewees on civic engagement or political activism such as protest activities by civil society groups like *#occupyNigeria* was completely positive.

A related question is whether social media campaigns enhanced political participation during the 2015 elections. Most interviewees – 84% – argued that the reason behind the relative improvement in the credibility of the voting process was the use of a new technology by INEC – in particular, the use of biometric voter registration had tremendously reduced election fraud and rigging (*Leadership Newspaper* 2015). In the questionnaire survey, some interviewees stated that they used social media tools for social relations, however only 41% said they had engaged in at least one act of 'participatory politics online'. Thus, there is little evidence that most of the apolitical people interviewed were being recruited into politics online.

In sum, it is apparent that the impact of social media on voters' behaviour during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria was relatively weak. Most respondents showed awareness of social media as a tool of political communication; however, such media did not influence most voters. Several reasons could illuminate this trend: first, in Nigeria social media activism and patronage were restricted to urban-based political elites and workers; the mass of rural-based voters were either unaware or unconcerned. Second, social media participation requires some form of Western education as most platforms were English-medium and, indeed, even if there are numerous versions of Facebook in local languages, formal education is required to access them. Third, the material and class dimensions of social media participation had a constraining impact on voters, especially poor citizens: Nigeria's harsh socio-economic conditions meant that only the wealthy and self-sufficient could afford Internet-enabled mobile handsets and computer devices. This appears to be an assault on the notion and practice of universal suffrage and freedom of expression contained in liberal democracy.

Conclusion

This Briefing has attempted to demonstrate that, while social media possesses enormous potential to facilitate information sharing for mass mobilisation, during the 2015 general elections it evidently did not provide the platforms that were essential to the success of democratic struggles for political change or transformation of the political economy of voting in Nigeria, as eulogised by its proponents. This grand narrative on the 'democratising' and 'transformative' effect of 'new media' constructed by its supporters is an abstract conceptualisation of what constitutes 'democratic change' which ignores the reality that the democratic spaces are inseparable from socio-political and economic structures of society. Unlike trade union movements, social media users in Nigeria do not challenge the status quo, particularly the asymmetric power structures of domination and exploitation; nor do they campaign for the empowerment of the poor or advocate for mass action against the problem of deepened class division and inequality fostered by neoliberalism in the current Nigerian democratic space. The Briefing argues that deepened neoliberalism

has generated anti-neoliberalism, anti-state and anti-hegemonic activity only from trade union movements in Nigeria which effectively mobilise communities for solidarity and mass action. In Nigeria, trade union movements in particular provide the concrete platforms for social struggles for change and radical transformation of society challenging state hegemony. They kick against the destructive deflationary policies of neoliberalism and privatisation of the state parastatals, which are the hallmarks of global capitalism. The labour movement's collective struggles were even instrumental in the victory of Buhari's APC in the 2015 elections, whose anti-corruption campaign was widely embraced as pro-democracy and pro-worker among the various trade union movements.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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