

# Politics of Gagging of Opposition in Nigeria: Issues on the Restriction of Political Campaign in Public Spaces against General Elections

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## ABSTRACT

This study X-rayed the politics of gagging of opposition in Nigeria, considering the issues on the restriction of a political campaign in public spaces against the general election. Objectives of the study are to identify the impact of the gagging of opposition on the electoral process and the effect of ruling party disturbance on the use of public spaces that affected the democratization process of Nigeria. Documentary method of data collection, content analysis and ex-post facto research design was employed in this context. Finally it was discovered that political gagging of opposition has a negative effect on the electoral process and the disturbance caused by the ruling party on the use of public spaces has an adverse effect on the democratization process of Nigeria. It therefore recommended that a legal framework should be used to guarantee equal access to the public spaces for all political parties during campaigns and Human Right Agency in Nigeria should be employed to wall off every form of political gagging of opposition parties.

**Key Words:** Politics, Gagging, Democratization, Public-Space, Restriction, Campaign.

## INTRODUCTION

The term "gagging of opposition" describes how governments or individuals in positions of authority stifle or restrict the free expression of political opposition. Opposition can be suppressed by a variety of means, including as physical assault, intimidation, censorship, and repression. Political experts, Amnesty International, and numerous human rights organizations have expressed alarm about Nigeria's problems with stifling the opposition. The government has taken action to stifle dissenting opinions and limit the right to free expression on multiple occasions in recent years. For instance, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report claims that the Nigerian government has repressed free speech and silenced critics by using criminal defamation statutes and other regulations. The report states, Nigerian authorities have used a range of tactics to silence critical voices, including arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment and threats against journalists, human rights defenders and other government critics. (HRW, 2019).

The public space, along with synonyms like public sphere and public domain, is a fascinating topic that sparks intense discussions and has, as expected, been the subject of many writers. Some believe that the public sphere has the power to transform previously closed civilizations. For instance, Rinaldo has concentrated on the ways that new interpretations of Islam are generally expanding Indonesian territory. And specifically to feminization. Gender equality concerns and the more rigid Islamic dogma that previously supported women's subordination are being discussed and contested as part of this feminization process. Other interpretations of Islam are now presented to women through workshops and other public events.

Public space concerns include shifting ideologies (the former context between capitalism and communism); more specifically, the market ideology's domination and its twin processes of state reversal, private sector growth, and privatization and public-private partnership initiatives. According to Banerjee (2001), private-

public places like malls, galleries, and shopping arcades are replacing more traditional types of public space. The supremacy of capitalism or the market is the shifting ideology that informs and reflects these new public space forms. In the age of neo-liberal economic policies, some have expressed worries about peaceful coexistence in a multiethnic setting and the intense competition it has sparked between these many ethnicities (Egwu 2008).

Regardless of their typology, public spaces all share the idea of a shared area with members of the general public, as well as laws and regulations that control participation and activities and have an impact on the general public's daily lives. Additionally, there are moral standards that all members of the public must abide by. The general public, who are all human beings, and more exclusive members, who are further subdivided into publics based on gender, class, religion, and ethnicity, can be interpreted as two levels of publics. As we go back down, public areas are open to a variety of publics, many of whom challenge the laws and moral standards in place as well as more substantive engagement.

These contestations can become harbingers for changes as well as conflict. It is in this sense that we contest that the public space is not just a *res publica* of an undistinguished public; rather it is a terrain contested by many publics.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

Election results are frequently neither acceptable nor a real reflection of the electorate's true preferences. Political heresy therefore illustrates the seriousness of electoral politics' issues and the threats they represent to Nigeria's democracy's consolidation (Ashindorbe, 2018; Joseph, 2020; Osha, 2020). Nigeria's fledgling democracy is in danger, as evidenced by the fact that both the 2019 elections and the most recent 2015 election series contributed to some electoral conflict. Therefore, the history of Nigerian elections serves as the primary justification for electoral reforms in that country. Research on this topic is still sparse, though.

This study sheds light on what constitutes electoral fraud and offers a possible panacea by using electoral reform instruments. For the time being we argue that if there is a holistic electoral reform, most of the politicians currently in office may not get a valid chance to win the election, therefore, they are in opposition and fierce resistance to reform.

In Nigeria, access to public areas is regularly disputed by different publics, including classes, gender categories, religious organizations, and ethnic groups. According to Elaigwu (2005) and Akinyemi (2005), it is frequently thought of as a component of what Nigerians generally regard to as the national question or issues of common citizenship and sense of belonging among all constituent groups. Conflicts over public space have resulted in violent outbursts between different groups. The conflicts between natives and colonists, followed by violent outbursts, serve as examples of the types of participation that take place between different publics.

The nature of women's participation in the political process also provides further illustration of inclusion and exclusion in the public space and how struggles for participation are effectively part of the broader issues of citizenship and gender equality.

We begin by briefly discussing the idea of public space and its significance. The battles for participation and public space control by different publics are covered in the next section. According to the conclusion, Nigerian public space offers a window into the types of discussions and topics that either foreshadow peace or spark conflict. There are significant ramifications for the rest of Africa, where armed conflicts are common and typically stem from disputes over public space.

As a result of the above scenario, it is necessary to note that politics of gagging of opposition comes with diverse issues on the restriction of the political campaigns held by the opposition parties not presently on sit in Nigeria. Therefore, the issue on the restriction of political campaign in public spaces against the general election has raised a fundamental question on the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria.

## EXTANT LITERATURE

Gagging of the opposition is conceptually defined as the repression or limitation of the political opposition's capacity to express their views, critique the governing party, and take part in election-related political activities. This can manifest in a number of ways, including as but not restricted to: Limitations on freedom of assembly and speech: The opposition may encounter limitations on their capacity to organize political rallies and speak freely, which would hinder their ability to reach the general public with their message.

Gagging of the opposition in Nigeria has remained a complex issue, with various factors contributing to the current situation. The ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) has been accused of suppressing opposition parties, with many members defecting to the APC. This has weakened opposition parties like Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Labor Party. To this, Kenneth Okonkwo (2025) stresses that a coalition among opposition parties is crucial to defeating APC IN 2027. He cited 2015 election, where a united front led to the defeat of Goodluck Jonathan, as an example of what could happen if opposition elites come together. He went further to note that in Nigeria's current political landscape, winning elections requires not only popular support but also the backing of political elites for victory. He suggested that opposition parties need to secure the support of influential figures to have a chance at winning.

Bode George (2025) called for opposition parties in Nigeria to unite, specifically suggesting that Akitu Abubakar, Kwankwaso and Peter Obi form a solid opposition to the APC.

Many political analysts and human rights organizations have expressed alarm about Nigeria's practice of silencing the opposition. The government has taken action to stifle dissenting opinions and limit the right to free expression on multiple occasions in recent years. For instance, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report claims that the Nigerian government has repressed free speech and silenced critics by using criminal defamation laws and other regulations. According to the report, "arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, threats and attacks against journalists, human rights defenders, and other government critics are just a few of the tactics that Nigerian authorities have used to silence critical voices" (HRW, 2019).

The gagging of opposition also has a negative impact on the economy. A study by the World Bank found that countries with a higher degree of press freedom tend to have higher levels of economic growth (World Bank, 2016). This suggests that the suppression of opposition can harm the economy by restricting the flow of information, political campaign in public spaces against general elections and stifling innovation.

### Theoretical Perspective:

This subject will be studied within the theoretical framework of theories of political behavior, which are a branch of political science that aim to measure and explain the factors that determine an individual's political beliefs, ideology, and degree of political engagement. In general, any action taken by people or organizations to try to control or avoid the impact of others is political. The subset of human behavior that deals with politics and power is known as political behavior. Karl and Theodor (2013) are two theorists who have influenced this field. Many research that sought to examine the relationship between social group behavior and political results have recently piqued the interest of certain political scientists.

Age demographics, gender, and ethnic groups are a few of the social categories that have been covered in their investigations. Understanding what motivates people to take part in the democratic process—whether by voting, campaign volunteer work, petition signing, or protesting—is another goal of political behavior theory. Rational action is not always sufficient to explain participation. For instance, the voting paradox argues that voting cannot be in a citizen's best interests because the costs of voting are nearly always more than the rewards, especially when one vote is unlikely to alter the outcome of an election. Instead, political scientists suggest that people vote for social or psychological reasons.

Studies show, for example, that individuals are more likely to vote if they see their friends have voted or if someone in their household has received a nudge to vote.

## METHODOLOGY

This study anchored on documentary method of data collection, ex-posto facto research design and content analysis.

### Data Presentation And Analysis

Political campaigns have long relied heavily on public venues, particularly in cities where a lot of people congregate. Political candidates can interact with the public, disseminate their message, and connect with a larger audience through these venues. Public areas like parks, plazas, and streets are essential for political gatherings, protests, and marches, according to one study. These areas serve as a symbol of democratic freedom and rights and permit the expression of political opinions (Grahn, 2014). Eagle Square, for example, has long been a well-liked site for political rallies and protests (Mike, 2014).

Furthermore, public areas can give political candidates a chance to interact more intimately and personally with prospective voters (Ajayi 2016). For instance, former President Mohammed Buhari hosted town hall meetings in public parks throughout the nation during the 2019 presidential campaign, when he spoke with voters face-to-face and answered their questions. Bassey (2013) Furthermore, using public areas for political campaigns might boost voter turnout and encourage democratic involvement (Grahn, 2014). Candidates can foster a sense of community and inspire others to participate in the political process by hosting events and rallies in public areas. (Grahn).

Nigeria has witnessed an exponential growth internet usage. From a modest 200,000 users in 2000, now to an estimated 51percent of the population uses the internet (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>). There are a total of 186,410,197 active mobile lines in Nigeria as of February 2015 according to the Nigerians |communications Commissions, twofold increase from the 93million reported in 2011 (Miniwatts,2012.) Much of this increase is driven by a growth in mobile web access. A Gallup poll from found that almost 73 percent of Nigerians owned a mobile phone. That figure is now expected to be over 80 percent. The Mobile Africa 2015 study, which surveyed 3,500 mobile users in five countries across Africa, reported that 47 percent of Nigeria used their phone to access the internet.

The elevated position of social media in Nigeria society and public life can also be seen from the changing nature of news websites which have informed Nigeria about the presidential election. Twitter and Facebook was the major used media platform during the election.

The 2015 Nigerian political candidates' Facebook pages had dysfunctions, according to Apuke and Apollos (2016). These included intentional misrepresentations of opponents' information, derogatory language, misrepresentations of their own performance, and the use of disinformation as a tactic to sway voters. This is in line with earlier research that found that political opponents are being defamed, threatened, and discredited by comments and posts on new media, leading to a high degree of misinformation that incites violence. In a related study, Ibrahim et al. (2019) discovered that there was a great deal of hate speech and harmful speech in the run-up to the 2019 Nigerian election, in addition to sentiments that people have on social media but are not fully articulated. This implies that social media were employed to increase the divide between the North and the Southern part of the country. Thereby creating an atmosphere full of enmity for one another. This situation posed a great threat to the fragile democracy which the country was striving to consolidate. In the same way, Olabamiji (2017) who investigated the use and misuse of the new media for political communication in Nigeria's 4th Republic revealed that although the new media like Facebook have enhanced political awareness and interaction, however, they are also being used in Nigeria to malign, intimidate and discredit political opponents thus triggering conflicts.

In In summarizing social media's role in political processes, Suntai and Targema (2018) argue that while social media gives activists and concerned citizens a helpful tool to participate in elections and effectively serve as watchdogs, this privilege was not previously available. However, hate speech and harmful speech are more common, lies, mischief, falsehoods, and negative propaganda are more intense, and discussants, political candidates, and voters are attacked, verbally assaulted, bullied, and demonized in comment sections.

This clarified the ramifications, applications, and function of social media in Nigerian electioneering campaigns and broader political processes.

Therefore, based on the data analysis, the impact of gagging of opposition has a negative effect on the electoral process.

### **Democratization process of Nigeria**

Nigeria began its democratization process in the early 1990s, when it transitioned from military rule to a more democratic form of administration. Following the passing of military dictator Sani Abacha in 1999, the proclamation of a shift to civilian government was a significant turning point in this process (Adebajo, 2002). The nation, which had endured protracted periods of military administration throughout its history, saw this as a significant advancement.

Nigeria has made great strides in bolstering its democratic institutions and extending political freedoms and rights in the years thereafter. For example, the country has held multiple elections since 1999, with the most recent taking place in 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2019). These elections have been largely free and fair, and have been praised for their peaceful and orderly conduct (Ibrahim, 2019).

Nevertheless, Nigeria's democracy movement has encountered numerous obstacles in spite of these encouraging advancements. Among the most important has been the ongoing problem of corruption, which has harmed the nation's democratic institutions and afflicted them for decades (Adebajo, 2002). Human Rights Watch (2019) has also raised concerns regarding the judiciary's impartiality and independence, as well as the underrepresentation of women and other marginalized groups in the political process.

## **CONCLUSION WITH FINDINGS**

The electoral process is negatively impacted when opposition members are gagging. Elections can be significantly impacted by political gagging and public space restrictions. When opposition parties and other political actors are denied access to public areas by dominant parties. It limits these actors' capacity to interact with voters and successfully convey their messages by creating an unfair playing field. Because it restricts voters' capacity to make educated judgments and may lead to a skewed portrayal of public opinion, this could jeopardize the fundamentals of free and fair elections.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following suggestions aim to reduce political gagging and disruptions in public locations during election campaigns:

1. legislative framework: Make sure that all political parties have equal access to public areas during election campaigns thanks to the existing legislative framework. Laws that control the distribution of public areas and establish rules for their use may fall under this category.
2. Independent monitoring: During political campaigns, designate an impartial organization to keep an eye on how public areas are used and allocated. This organization ought to have the power to uphold the rules and guarantee that everyone has equal access to these areas.

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