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Revaluating Igbo Political Communication: A Pathway to Achieving an Igbo Presidency

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Abstract

There have been a long cry of marginalization from the majority people in the Southeast political zone of Nigeria who are largely Igbos. This cry has been expressed through various ways ranging from a demand for a Biafra Republic and a demand for an Igbo presidency. With various attempts made to actualize this goal failing, many youths from the zone have resorted to self help which is threatening the already precarious security situation we have in the country. This paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of the Igbo political communication strategy, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) that have hindered progress towards an Igbo presidency. The paper identified; Ineffective communication strategies, tribal and identity based political messages, lack of political co-ordination and lack of strategic partnership among other issues as the major challenges of the Igbo political communication approach. The paper concluded that the absence of a clear, well-defined message has resulted in confusion and mistrust among potential allies and supporters and the time has come for the Igbo community to revaluate and restrategize its political communication approach by adopting a more effective communication strategy, so as to increase its chances of

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achieving an Igbo presidency and promoting a more inclusive, and peaceful Nigeria.

Keywords: Political Communication; Revaluation; Approach; Igbo Presidency

Introduction

The Igbos, one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, have a distinct history and cultural heritage which makes them one of the most formidable ethnic groups not only in Nigeria but in Africa. Prior to colonialization, the Igbos were politically fragmented by the centralized chiefdoms of Nri, Aro Confederacy, Agbor and Onitsha. The advent of colonialization brought the Igbos together to form a formidable political group in Nigeria. Igbo children like Alvan Ikoku, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, chief Micheal Okpara were among the foremost Nigeria elites that fought for Nigeria independence. Dr. Azikiwe was revered Nigerian statesman and political leader who served as the first President of Nigeria from 1963 to 1966. He was Considered a driving force behind the nation's independence, and was generally regarded as the "father of Nigerian Nationalism. Dr. Chike Obi another great Igbo son was the first Nigerian to bag Ph.D. in Mathematics, his research. dealt mainly with the question of the existence of periodic solutions of non-linear ordinary differential equations. He successfully used the perturbation technique, and several of his publications greatly helped to stimulate research interest in this subject throughout the world and have become classics in the literature (Ogbuefi 2016). In business Sir. Louis Odumegwu Ojukwu was a leading light not only in Nigeria but in Africa. He was regarded as the richest Black African in the late 1950s and 1960s. He was the Nigerian Stock Exchange's first president., president of African Continental Bank, chairman of Nigerian Cement Company, Nigerian National Shipping Line, Nigerian Produce Marketing Board. Sir Louis Odumegwu Ojukwu was the Chairman of Lion of Africa Insurance Company, BISCO, Nigerian Industrial Development Bank, Palmline Shipping Corporation and Nigerian Tobacco Company among many other positions. They was also Chinua Achebe who was making Nigeria and Africa proud in literature, his work: Things Fall Apart" was regarded as an archetypal modern African Novel in English, and one of the first such novels to receive global critical acclaim. The Igbos were unarguably

the dominant group in every sector of the Nigeria system, whether in politics, academics, military, business, banking or civil service the Igbos were in charge not till after the "1966 Nzeogwu coup" that was regarded as an "Igbo coup" by non Igbos largely because the major leaders and beneficiaries of the coup were Igbos. Even though Nzeogwu and his team did not set out to perpetuate an Igbo agenda the optics represented otherwise which led to a counter coup with Igbos as the major causalities. This crisis snowballed into a civil war that lasted for 30 months with Igbos again as the major casualties. The aftermaths of the civil war has brought an enduring cry of marginalization, with the Igbo elites accusing other regions of conniving to put the Igbos down. Nsoedo(2019) captured it thus: "Following the advent of the military incursion into the political sphere, and the subsequent Nigeria Biafra civil war, the Nigeria government, dominated with the Northern military and its Southwest partners, begun a deliberate policy of chipping away the rights of the Igbo people. The deliberate action includes excluding them from mainstream political activities and commensurate positions fit for their counterparts from other regions, particularly, those from the northern region" This accusation has been given impetus with the fact that the Igbos are the only major ethnic and political zone that has not produced the president of Nigeria. This perception is manifesting in many ways including a demand for a Biafran Republic and a demand for an Igbo presidency with many youths from the Southeast adopting a violent approach which is threatening the overall peace and development of the country (Chukwuma & Agbim, 2020).

But is there any deliberate conspiracy among other major regions to marginalize the Igbos or the failure of realizing an Igbo presidency may just be a poor political communication approach? Because Political communication is a crucial aspect of any successful political campaign, as it involves the proper dissemination of information, ideas, and messages to the public in order to garner support and influence decision-making. In the context of the Igbo quest for a presidency, it is important to assess the effectiveness of their current communication strategy in reaching this goal. This work therefore seeks to analyze the strategy, identifying its strengths, weaknesses, and justifying the need for reevaluation and restrategizing.

Litereture Review

Effective communication is a key element in building relationships that significantly contribute to the peaceful co,-existence of humans and it is also a major factor that contributes to crisis among humans. Aduradola and Ojukwu (2013) captured it clearly when they opined that; Communication as a complex phenomenon remains vital to a sustenance of relationships and human existence. They explained that It is in fact, the oil that lubricates human interactions but warned that communication can also be a double-edged sword which can be used either positively or negatively depending on how it communicated.

Like other forms of strategic communication, political communication is very key in achieving any political goal or objective. According to Kiran(2020) Political communication is the process of exchanging information and ideas. For Mcnair(2003) political communication is purposeful communication about politics. He further explained that;political communication does not only involve verbal or written statements but also visual presentations such as clothes, hairstyle, logo and actions and inactions.

Political Communication studies how political campaigns and policies are presented to their intended audience. It focuses on how politicians, supporters, and other stakeholders use communication techniques to persuade others about their points of view.

It is the use of communication to influence power distribution within society. Therefore to be effective, political communication must be strategic, targeted, and well-timed. It must also consider the specific context in which it will be received.

An effective political communication strategy can help to build trust and legitimacy. Bakir(2013) commenting on the relationship between strategic political communication and agenda setting explained that; strategic political communication involves communication that is manipulative in intent and uses social scientific technique and heuristic to understand human nature, and an intended message can be communicated effectively.

Reiterating this opinion Ekpuk (2024) remarked that; "the impact of political messaging on public opinion cannot be overstated. Well-crafted messages can inspire, motivate, and galvanize the public, leading to increased political engagement and support for policy initiatives. Conversely, poorly executed communication can lead to public distrust and apathy"

While political communication is complex, it can also be divided into five stages: agenda setting, issue framing, message dissemination and reception, media interpretation, and policy formation.

One key tool in political communication framing. Framing works by activating certain cognitive shortcuts in the minds of the audience. These shortcuts are based on our past experiences and beliefs, and they help us to make sense of the world around us.

When information is presented in a way that is consistent with our existing beliefs, it is more likely to be accepted and remembered. Framing can also be used to change our beliefs by presenting information in a way that challenges our assumptions.

It is therefore very important that messages are framed in a way that resonates with the target audience. Research by Entman (1993) suggests that framing can influence public opinion and shape perceptions of political issues. By choosing certain language, images, and narratives, politicians can effectively shape public perception and opinion. Moreover, framing can also be used to shape the agenda and focus of political discourse. By highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, politicians can steer the conversation in a direction that benefits their agenda. Framing involves the use of key elements which include;

Rhetoric: According to Kramer (2024):" Rhetoric is language that's carefully constructed to persuade, motivate, or inform the reader or listener about the speaker or writer's position. You might have heard the term used in discussions about politicians and political goals. That's because politicians, alongside people in other roles that involve public speaking, employ rhetoric regularly, he also reiterated that the essence of rhetoric in politics is mainly to display an individual or his beliefs in the most favourable light. This assertion was given credence by George Orwell when he posited that 'political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable' (Harris, 1979). The main objective of rhetoric is to enhance speaking that will persuade people. Its language is full of unnecessarily long, formal or literary words, which are often insincere and full of half-truth's . According to Charteris Black metaphor is an essential feature of political rhetoric and is an important means of conceptualizing political issues and constructing world views.

Persuasion: is a process by which someone, usually by reasoned arguments or logic, appeal to sound judgment in order to attain his set goals. A persuasive language soothes the voters particularly, when topics or issues that revolve around problems that affect voters are repeatedly mentioned in the course of the campaign. It also follows that the language of political campaign embodied in propaganda and rhetoric, is persuasive because most politicians adopt these linguistic devices to cajole the electorates to vote for them and their political parties by presenting themselves as the only capable individuals for the position (Omozuwa and Ezejideaku , 2007). It is probably in view of this, that Szanto describes the language of politics as a "lexicon of conflict and drama, of ridicule, and reproach, pleading and persuasion, colour and bite permeated. It is a language designed to exult some men, destroy some and change the mind of others" (Omozuwa and Ezejideaku, 2007). The point is that the phenomenon of persuasion is an integral part of politics and a necessary component of the pursuit and exercise of power. Politicians use a variety of techniques to ensure they captivate voter's attention and establish credibility and trust amongst the electorates.

Propaganda is the expression of opinions or actions carried out deliberately by individuals or groups with a view to influence the opinions or actions of other individuals or groups for predetermined ends through psychological manipulations (Jacque, 1965). It is usually repeated and dispersed over a wide range of media in order to stimulate and sensitize the electorates and by extension, assist in harming an opponent.

Political communication also involves adopting communication strategies used in conflict resolutions, because politics involves building relationships, forging new alliances and building strategic partnerships, so they may be need to settle age long conflicts that can hamper such necessary collaboration. Kilmann and Thomas (1975) cited by Babatope & Olanipekun (2017) in their model identified and developed five communication strategies for resolving conflicts which are: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. Avoidance requires avoiding certain discussion topics, changing the topic of discussion, reducing conversations to jovial matters, and physically withdrawing from the venue of interaction. Accommodation include, giving up or giving in, disengagement, denial of needs, or a desire to get along.

Competing include faulting, hostile questioning, hostile joking, presumptive attribution, avoiding responsibility and prescription (Sillars, 1986)

Theoretical Framework

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

This theory was developed by Ervin Goffman in 1959 when he presented his ideas about dramaturgy in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* Goffman's explained that; in dramaturgical theory, people assume roles that they use in their daily interactions with others. He asserted that a role can be understood in two ways, one as a public portrayal of a character and another as a representation of a part played in reality, such as brother, aunt, or friend. He explained that these roles allow individuals to present themselves to others to create specific impressions, just as actors present characters to a theater audience. In keeping with the theater metaphor, Goffman calls these public presentations front stage. The preparation for the role occurs back stage, which is a more private component of the process. The back stage may include considering potential dialogue, personal appearance, and other areas contributing to the desired, dominant impression. He concluded that Impression management contributed greatly in shaping the opinions or views of others, explaining that Impression management is achieved when individuals consciously or unconsciously select the information presented in interactions with others. According to Goffman, interactions between two or more people will involve impression management, which is always based on attempts to persuade others to accept a particular definition of the social situation.(Study.com)

Strengths of the Igbo Political Communication Strategy

Cultural Identity: The Igbo have a strong cultural identity and sense of community. From the intricately woven fabrics of Isiagu' to the vibrant colors and patterns of 'Akwete' cloth, each garment carries a distinct cultural significance, to their unique language, music, and family systems where emphasis is placed on extended family, with strong bonds between siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles provides a strong foundation for political mobilization and communication. This if properly annexed can contribute significantly into mobilizing support towards an Igbo presidency.

Oratory and Proverbial Language: The Igbo are known for their eloquence and use of proverbs in communication. This allows them to convey complex ideas effectively and engage with their audience. According to Onuzilike (2018) the Igbos are extremely skilled in speech and they tend to excel very well in any field where such skill is valued. Great political leaders like Dr. Azikiwe, Rtd.Col. Ojukwu, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo etc were renown orators and bestroded the political space of the country and continent like a holocaust. A peep into Chinua Achebe book; "Things Fall Apart" will give you a proper understanding of how rich the Igbos are in oratory and proverbial language . This is a strong tool the Igbo political leaders must continue to annex and deploy in their political communication.

Grassroots Networking: The Igbo have a strong grassroots network that connects urban centers with the most remote rural villages. This intricate web of interconnectedness plays a crucial role in political mobilization, enabling the dissemination of messages and the coordination of efforts with remarkable efficiency. This network, often referred to as the "Umunna'", is based on kinship, shared lineage, and a sense of communal responsibility. It encompasses a range of informal structures like age groups, religious organizations, kinship associations, and even market associations (Nwosu, 2017). These groups serve as platforms for information exchange, collective decision-making, and mobilization. According to Okoli(2022)" from the history of the Igbo people; the Umunna is adjudged to be very powerful, strong and wields great influence amongst the people. He explained that In a typical Igbo setting, the Umunna remains second to none in decision making; so in Igbo land, the institution is sacred, strong and respected and warned that anyone who neglects them does so at his or her own peril.

Defects of the Igbo Political Communication Strategy

Tribal and Identity Based Political Messages:

The Igbo political strategy has often been criticized for its reliance on tribalism. By emphasizing Igbo interests above national interests and appealing to a sense of shared Igbo identity and seeking to mobilize support based on ethnic solidarity may be effective in mobilizing internal support, but oftens alienates other ethnic groups, fueling a perception of 'us vs. them.' This has led to mistrust and resentment among non-Igbo groups, particularly during periods of political mobilization. Decrying this impression of the Igbos

Kolowale(2019) asserted: I am aware of the arguments being articulated against the Igbo by other ethnic groups, particularly the charge of clannishness. They are often accused of seeking to dominate anywhere they operate. It is said that when an Igbo trader rents a shop, he will soon make sure all the surrounding shops are taken by fellow Igbo traders. I am aware of the accusation that Senator Anyim Pius Anyim filled his office with Igbo when he was secretary to the government of the federation, and that the financial sector was overwhelmingly Igbo when Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was minister of finance.

Unnecessary Focus on Marginalization and Sentiments:

A significant defect in the Igbo political communication approach is its focus on highlighting the perceived injustices and marginalization faced by the Igbo people, often tapping into emotional narratives of exclusion and historical grievances. While potent in mobilizing support within the Igbo community, this strategy often alienates other ethnic groups who view it as divisive and unconstructive (Egwu, 2012).

Therefore, (Afigbo, 2015) advised that the Igbo community needs to move away from a purely grievance-based strategy, incorporate and present a vision for a united and prosperous Nigeria, emphasizing shared values and national aspirations in their communication.

Lack of Strategic Coordination: There is a lack of strategic coordination among Igbo political leaders. This results in fragmented communication efforts and a failure to maximize their collective influence.

The Eastern region used to play a very significant role politically in determining which parties collaborated to form a government. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun, which later changed to National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) under the leadership of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe partnered with the Northern People's Congress founded by Tafawa Balewa to form the government (University of Central Arkansas, 2019)

This was better captured by Nwanze (2021): "The reason that ndi Igbo are such great traders is not that we are genetically superior, but because our situation demands that we move about. Our geography makes us what Hubert Blalock called a Middleman minority. We must live among others, our geography demands it.

But this is where our republican nature works against us. Because culturally, we do not have "leaders", we tend to be very abrasive. We do not listen to our own admonition that "Eneke si na kemgbe dinta ji muta mgbagbu na ofu mgba, ọ muta ife ma adaghi n'ala." Meaning; When a hunter learns how to shoot without missing, the bird learns how to fly without perching.

Absence of Diplomacy

There is a huge need for diplomacy in the political communication strategy of the Igbos.The approach of using foul language against other ethnic groups, attacking their religion amd culture cannot build the relationship that will translate to political support. Nwanze (2021) explained this thus; "A few months ago, I asked about Okonkwo, and unfortunately, most Igbo people think he was a hero. Newsflash, he was not. Okonkwo was that person who didn't have the ability to think. Even Prof Achebe once said that he'd prefer if we were like Obierika. SO, THE LESSON: FIRST, WHAT IS DIPLOMACY?

Diplomacy is tact. It is a skill in managing negotiations, handling people, etc, so that there is little or no ill will. There's an Igbo proverb for that: agbakoo aka nyuo mamiri, o gbaa .meaning. It is not only the Igbo people that can pee together, as a matter of fact, but we also need the help of others so that the urine will foam very well. Let us go back to our darkest moment as a people—1967 to 1970." It is important that political messages are crafted in a manner that it will attract goodwill and support to the cause intended. Sadly a lot of people adjudged the Igbos to be very arrogant with a strong feeling of superiority over other tribes. According to Kolowale (2017); "I recently got entangled in a protracted but decent argument with a reader over my article, "Biafra is Not a Dirty Word" (May 28, 2017). In it, I broached the possibility of a president from the south-east in 2019 to balance the national equation and continue the nation-building project. The reader objected furiously. She said she would never support an Igbo to become president. She said the Igbo think they are superior to everyone else "and that the rest of us are just making up the numbers", reminding me that the Great Zik was quoted in 1949 as saying the Igbo were created "to lead the children of Africa from bondage".

Lack of Strategic Partnership

There is a huge lack of strategic partnership between the Igbos and other major ethnic groups including the minority groups in the country, this again are proceeds from long years of strive, mistrust and conspiracy theories. Decrying this situation Nwanze (2021) said: "The Igbos cannot continue to see every other ethnic group including their minority neighbors as their enemy, they must seek reconciliation and partnership.

To be truly successful as a people, we must listen to that and adapt to our realities. We must understand that "Ikpe aghahi ima ọchịcha ebe ọkụkọ nụọ" meaning; The blame can not be on a cockroach when a cock is there. .So we must learn to be less abrasive, and more conciliatory, especially to our near abroad. The same rain that is beating us is beating Ndi mili na Ndi ugbo.- (The water people and the sailor) So we must embrace them, not antagonize them by calling them "Fulani slaves" all the time, then turning around and expecting them to work with us" Politics is about collaboration, alliances and partnership, the party, group or individual will amass these more in a contest always emerges the winner. Henderson,etal(2014) explained that; Strategic partnerships involves efficiently resolving challenges to ensure the longevity and success of the alliance, unfortunately Igbo political leaders have failed resolve the challenges that can enhance strategic alliances can help actualize an Igbo presidency.

Conclusion

The Igbo political communication strategy has both strengths and weaknesses. While it has served the Igbo well in the past, it is in need of reevaluation and restrategizing to meet the demands of the modern political landscape. By emphasizing national unity, fostering strategic partnerships, modernizing communication tactics, and investing in leadership development, the Igbo can strengthen their political influence and play a more significant role in shaping the future of Nigeria. The Igbo political leadership must be able to find a balance between promoting tribal interests and contributing to the broader national good. They must recognize that a narrow focus on tribalism can be detrimental to both their own political goals and the overall unity of Nigeria, They must navigate this fine line carefully, by incorporating inclusivity, collaboration, and unity in their overall political communication approach.

Recommendations

1. The Igbo must move beyond tribalism and embrace a broader vision of national unity. By appealing to the interests of all Nigerians, they can build a more inclusive political coalition.
2. Igbo political leaders should frame messages that emphasize strategic partnerships with other ethnic groups and political parties. This will broaden their support base and enhance their political mobilization.
3. Show respect to the diverse cultural norms and values of the wider Nigerian population in their communication to avoid alienating potential supporters.
4. The development of young and dynamic Igbo political leaders is crucial for the future effectiveness of their communication strategy. By investing in leadership development programs, they can build a new generation of skilled communicators.

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