

"CHANGE BEGINS WITH ME" CAMPAIGN AND THE DILEMMA OF VOTE TRADING IN NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL PROCESS

Kunde, Daniel Pere

Doctoral Student, Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos
igbedikemi@gmail.com

Abstract

The primary focus of this study to dissect the *Change begins with me* campaign vis á vis the vote trading dilemma in the electoral process of Nigeria. It relied on existing literature systematically reviewed to arrive at the discussion points. The study established that the Nigerian electoral process is plagued by several dilemmas and negative issues; such as vote trading, electoral malpractice, violence (before, during and after elections), vote suppression, and various other acts that disenfranchise the voters are rife in the country. A major act of electoral malpractice is vote trading; an act that involves selling one's vote for financial or material gains – often offered by the political parties and candidates standing for an elective position. Concerted efforts at ensuring credibility for electoral process in Nigeria seem to be failing. One of such is the campaign for attitude change launched by the government to curb all form of vices by the Nigerian populace. As part of efforts to get all Nigerians exposed to the contents of the initiative, different media forms were used; radio, television, and even the social media. Prescriptive, persuasive messages were mainly used as means to cause attitudinal change in the Nigerian society. However, through the systematic review of literature, this study found that the "Change begins with me" campaigns did not achieve the desired objectives in respect of a change of attitude towards vote trading. The study concludes that no evidence exist of a total change of attitude to vices such as vote trading during elections in Nigeria as citizens were seen in recent elections getting involved in same acts. Among several others, the study recommends that the electoral umpire INEC should collaborate with other stakeholders to champion voter education and reorientation on the needs to shun such actions capable of undermining the outcomes of elections.

Keywords: Campaigns, change, election, trading, voting

Introduction

Nigeria is a country with many complexities; constitution, electoral system, ethnicity, religiosity, and even the population. In fact, these complexities often result in humongous challenges for the polity; violence, mutual suspicion, electoral malpractices, ethnic bickering, and so much more. One that generated most concerns is that which has to do with the electoral system. In every electoral cycle or period in Nigeria, events and occurrences are characterised by suspicion, malpractices and violence – pre and post elections. In other words, the Nigerian electoral period is usually dramatic if not chaotic; and this based on the series of events that may herald the main electoral process and the eventual announcement of the winners. It suffices to note that the issues have far-reaching implications on internal cohesion and unity of the very fragile country.

Elections for any nation are genuine moves meant to usher in leadership with the people being the ultimate focus as they need to weigh options based on the manifestoes of the political parties and their candidates. Put in another way, elections are often conducted to fill various political offices and are mainly dependent on the voters or electorates who usually rely on their exposure to political communication in form of party proposed programmes and policies through manifestoes during pre-election campaigns. Therefore, it can be stated that elections are critical to the formation of democratic government and by extension a democratic dispensation anywhere in the world the political system holds sway. Against this backdrop, elections have been described as being the main apparatus of democracy as political office holders are given mandates by the electorate (Shamir et al.,

2008). In Nigeria, general polls are held once in four years.

In part of Africa and Nigeria in particular, elections are characterised by all forms of shenanigans and machinations by political actors. Stakeholders who include the political parties and their representatives (candidates and party men and women) are said to be involved in one form of corruption or another. Electoral corruption is also used interchangeably with synonyms such as electoral fraud or electoral malpractices. It is rife in Nigeria with successive election since 1999 having its peculiar pattern in respect of the corruption or malpractice tag (Aluaigba, 2016; Chironda & allAfrica, 2023; Nelson, 2023). Periodic and regular elections have seen one form of malpractice or another; from Ekiti, to Imo and Kogi, among others, the stories remain same as per irregularities including vote trading. The trend has now tilted to not just financially inducing officials of the Nigeria's electoral umpire the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), but also extending it to getting the electorate to be on the wrong side of the law through inducement. In popular parlance, the act is commonly referred to as vote trading.

As a trending concept, vote trading is one of the numerous malpractices by which Nigerian elections have now come to be known. In fact vote trading involves voters selling their votes for a fee and the buyer offering a token to them to influence their voting behaviour and subsequently their choice. It is an electoral offence in Nigeria (Aaron, 2019; Nwabughio, 2019). It has been described as an action that involves the voter selling his/her votes to the highest bidder (Schaffer, as cited in Adigun, 2019). In fact, Adigun described vote buying as an emerging side to election rigging in Nigeria. Vote buying is also a system common in other countries of the world; developing, developed, classical or contemporary and may not just be peculiar to the Nigerian electoral system alone (Christopher et al., 2022). It is made manifest in several forms including material, financial and even promissory inducement of the voter by the political parties and their candidates before elections.

The trend is embarrassing to countries of the world whose electoral systems have been found to be rife with vote buying and related practices. In the same light, recurring cases of electoral malpractices reported every other election year has

been a cause for concern for the Nigerian state. Worried by the bad reputation and image of the country in the comity of nations and as held by right thinking members of the society, the National Orientation Agency (NOA) launched a campaign "Change begins with me", one of many to correct the problem. The initiative was to cause a change in the attitude of Nigerians to understand that genuine change can only start with the individual before the larger society can be made better. The National Orientation Agency (2018) described the initiative as a value re-orientation campaign for citizens of Nigeria.

In spite of the campaigns, several other areas of national life including successive elections in Nigeria continue to see cases of electoral malpractices relating to vote buying. This has been attributed to a wide net of individuals interested in such activities, certain socio-economic factors, and the challenge of particular interest of individuals and group of individuals that came together to form political groups; such as the political parties. According to Aaron (2019) electoral crimes such as vote trading continue to be seen in Nigeria on account of poor enforcement of the electoral laws that criminalise the act, desperation on the part of the politicians, and poverty suffered by majority of the voters. Furthermore, Olorok (2022) quoting INEC and other critical stakeholders notes that the case of increasing poverty in the land coupled with the weak punitive measures against suspected vote buyers are drivers of the commercial venture known as vote trading.

A critical aspect of the festering electoral malpractice situations in Nigeria can be traced to voter behaviour. Jimoh (2021) asserts that there has been a portrayal of cynicism in the behaviour of the electorates who are quick to always show willingness and readiness to sell votes to the buyers. It therefore implies that the main challenge may be about the people who are the electorates exposed to the communication from the *Change begins with me* campaigns yet demonstrate that there may be no end in sight in respect of vote trading in Nigeria. Additionally, it can be said that the issues surrounding the vote-trading dilemma can be situated on the doorsteps of the electorates; who are the voters themselves, with who rest the power to choose leaders that will govern them. Therefore, this study dissects the "Change begins with me" campaign within the context of the vote trading dilemma in the country's electoral process with focus on the implications and the impact on

democratic governance in the Nigeria's model of democracy.

Conceptual Review

The study has some important concepts; and these are the Nigeria's electoral process, vote trading, as well as Change begins with me campaigns. These concepts are reviewed in this study. This review becomes important in order to provide vivid explanation to their meanings in the context they are used in this study.

A Review of the Nigeria's Electoral Process

The electoral system in Nigeria is one that refers to the ways elections are conducted in Nigeria. In fact, it can better be captured as the steps of conducting election in the country. According to Ilesanmi (2023) the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is the primary legal framework upon which the electoral system and its processes are situated and governed. Accordingly, the first step in the process as detailed in the electoral act is voter registration. The electoral body INEC is saddled with the task of registering voters in Nigeria and a person is eligible to register at the attainment of the minimum age requirement of 18 years. The registration process includes a capture of the person's bio information, fingerprints and photograph. This process is completed with the issuance of the permanent voter's card popularly known in Nigeria by its acronym – the PVC.

The system is political party based at the moment. Therefore, nomination of candidates is the next step in the electoral process leading to the election. Ilesanmi (2023) pointed out that political parties with supervision of INEC are mandated by the electoral act to nominate their candidates for presidential, national assembly, governorship and state houses of assembly positions. The step in the process is only complete after INEC vets the nominated candidates and certify them fit to take part in the election. The electoral umpire is empowered to reject candidates that do not meet the constitutional requirements that qualify one to run for and hold public office in Nigeria. Another major disqualifying factor is past criminal records of the individual nominated by the party.

Electoral campaigns follow the nomination of candidates by their respective political parties. Immediately after campaigns, elections are conducted on the scheduled date. It is usual for the electoral body to release a time-table to guide the process from start to finish for each

election period. At the close of voting, a vote count is conducted and this precedes the announcement of results and the eventual winners by INEC for all positions and areas where elections were declared conclusive. Disputes arising from the process are to be filed in form of petitions before the election petitions tribunals set up according to the act. While the disputes from presidential and gubernatorial elections can be pursued up to the supreme courts, those involving the national and states houses of assembly terminate with the decisions of the appeal court (Oke, 2015). The act of vote trading is not part of the documented processes involved in the elections in Nigeria but has been conspicuously included by the politicians, their political parties and the Nigerian voting populace.

The Concept of Vote Trading

The concept "vote trading" also often used in its conjunctive form "vote-trading" is one with a lot of focus in recent years owing to the periodic conduct of elections in Nigeria. In fact, it has in recent times enjoyed a robust interrogation within the field of political science and election studies. It is so because general elections are held once in four years in the country as per the electoral laws of the land. In addition, different states and constituencies usually conduct elections outside of the general election period on account of adjudications and judicial decisions. Therefore the word has become a buzz word of some sort in both online and offline communities within the context of the Nigerian electoral process. However, a focus on the meaning of the word is appropriate here. Vote-trading is seen as a situation that involves a political party, its candidate, or interest group that adopts the use of money or its worth to influence the choice of the electorate (Effanga, 2022) in an election.

In different parts of the world especially in developing countries of Africa and Asia, and within the electoral system, vote-trading vice is perpetrated by individuals and interest groups; the politician, their friends, the political party and groups that align with them. In Tamil Nadu located in the South of the State of India, a case of election cancelation on the basis of vote buying attempt was reported (Business Highlights, 2019; The Straits Times, 2019). This follows other reported cases of trading in the country as captured at different times (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Incidences of vote trading have been reported in elections conducted

in several African countries like Uganda (Kwarisima, 2016; Ralph, 2020), Kenya (Erlich, 2023), and many more other countries across the continents (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; Kramon, 2013). In democracies across the world, the menace has continued to dominate electoral affairs negatively influencing the outcomes of the elections.

According to Olaniyan (2020) vote trading is not just a threat to the electoral process and democratic ethos that should radiate therefrom but also hinders the emergence of credible leadership from the process. This implies that each time vote buyers offer monetary or other form of inducement including materials to vote sellers to influence their choice of candidates during an election, they prevent the emergence of a candidate that represents and reflects the yearnings of the people. In addition, the very act of inducement to influence voter behaviour reduces the election process to one that is undemocratic. This is because such actions do not reflect the ethos of democratic process in our world. It suffices to also re-emphasise that vote trading is not only about offering and accepting monies to influence electoral choice of the voter but also include activities where candidates and their parties pave the streets, dig wells for water, distribute solar panels and fans, make huge donations to mosques, seminaries, shrines, and even send people to Mecca for pilgrimage as seen in Pakistan (Ali, 2018) just on the eve of the elections or when voting period approaches.

An Overview of the Change begins with me Campaign

A time came in Nigeria when there was a need to take a people-centered approach to behaviour and attitude change to everything Nigerian. In other words, the project was to ensure that the change desired by the Nigerian state is championed by Nigerians themselves. Exactly on September 8, 2016 the President Muhammadu Buhari-led administration launched an initiative nicknamed "Change begins with me" campaign with the main goal to instill patriotism and discipline in Nigerians (Okon, 2019; Premium Times, 2016; Vanguard, 2016). As a social advocacy campaign, the initiative was aimed at actualising attitudinal change in Nigerians. Such campaigns are not activated unless a problem situation is established; and an intervention required as solution to the identified issue. Usually, the use of public relations campaign may completely solve the issues or just

temporarily provide the needed reprieve. Put in a different way, PR can be the solution or cause a postponement of the doomsday.

One of the major public relations campaign initiatives of the Buhari's administration was that of the "Change begins with me" (Okon, 2019). With the campaign, the government anticipated a gradual and eventual complete departure from the norm and a case of embrace of the new attitude towards development by the citizenry. Therefore, there was the activation of strategies and deployment of necessary media tools to ensure that citizens are at home with the agenda of the campaigns. Based on the results of the interviews conducted in a study by Okon (2019) it was revealed that prominent among the media tools utilised were jingles on radio and television, handbills, posters, billboards, articles in newspapers and magazines, music, drama and film. It was further revealed in the study that various avenues and forums proved useful in sensitising the people – as the campaigns were taken to worship centers such as churches, mosques, educational institutions, and special group meetings. This was mainly done in form of seminars, public lectures, symposia and workshops.

The campaign specifically admonished Nigerians to take ownership of everything that belongs to Nigeria and protect same for the benefit of all, shun corruption and be patriotic citizens and good ambassadors of the country anytime, anywhere. Starting the change at the individual level, and then the society, before an extension to the country at large is the recommended way the initiative was driven by the NOA while it last. Though a lot of publicity was given to the communication of the initiative; through the traditional and modern media forms, the campaign cannot be said to have achieved its primary objectives. Okon (2019) lends credence to the foregoing with the assertion that aftermath of the campaign, there was hardly a change for the better to the behaviouristic attributed of many Nigerians. This implies that it was not able to achieve the anticipated outcomes as envisaged by the drafters of the initiative.

Review of Empirical Studies

Scholars have made attempts to look at the vote buying dilemma vis á vis the implications for the electoral propriety in Nigeria. Some others simply

also looked at the interventions by the government and other concerned stakeholders to curtail or completely stamp out the vice of the country's electoral system. A few of such studies are dissected in this section to properly situate this present study under existing ones; primarily for validation purposes. In a study conducted by Adegami and Makinde (2018), the main objective was to find out the implications of vote commercialisation and its effect on democratic governance in Nigeria. The study adopted the conceptual technique to elicit data. Findings from the study showed that vote buying has huge implication on democratic governance in Nigeria. For example, the study found that the political process became compromised through vote trading especially among the politicians and the citizens alike.

Furthermore, Adegami and Makinde (2018) in the study revealed certain factors that predisposed politicians and the electoral umpire to engage in vote trading. Some of these factors, the study found and revealed include high unemployment rate; failure to honour electioneering campaign promises by the politicians; dearth of political leaders with national outlook or acceptance; lack of integrity of candidates pursuing political offices; and competition to control the coveted central government. These and many more factors have contributed to the problem of vote trading in Nigeria. It is now almost impossible to curb the vice and totally eliminate from the electoral process.

In addition, the study further revealed different stages of votes buying which include – voters' registration period; parties' nomination period; campaign time and election days. Furthermore, the study revealed that voting commercialisation is a blemish on public policy; hindrance to a free and fair election; barrier to a transparent governance; and obstruction to quality democratic practices. One of the negative effects of vote trading is that it deprives voters from making free choice of their preferred candidates during election. This therefore, gives unpopular candidate the opportunity to assume leadership positions. The study concluded that vote trading is inimical to Nigeria's democracy.

Furthermore, Ofei, Apeakhuye, Vanessa, and Akinnibosun (2024) examined the role of the mass media in the campaign against vote buying during the 2023 presidential election. The major rationale for the study was to assess the effectiveness of media campaign on vote buying on the electorate. To achieve this, the study employed the survey research method and adopted the use of questionnaire as instrument of eliciting data for the study. Findings from the study indicated that 50% of the respondents that participated in the study were exposed to media campaigns on vote buying. In addition, 40% of those that took part in the study perceived media campaign on vote buying as effective, while 50% of the participants were of the view that they were exposed to campaign against vote buying more on social media more than any other media of communication. The study concluded by charging the media to continue to be resilient in exposing the problem of vote trading across all levels of elections in the country.

Similarly Gusau (2014) investigated the dynamics of vote trading in Nigerian politics and its implications for strengthening Nigeria's democracy. The study traced the historical development of vote buying in Nigeria politics to the election of 1960. According the study, the use of money in politics was a convention in electoral financing, shifted to mild vote trading in the election of 1960 and gradually became fully entrenched in virtually all the elections conducted in the country. Part of the findings of the study is that this practice has impeded the strengthening and internalisation of the values of democracy in Nigeria's electoral processes. The study concluded by advocating for reforms and political education through the enforcements of elections laws to curb with the menace of vote trading in the country.

In a related development, Anyanwu and Ikpegbu (2022) in their study discussed the important role of media advocacy in curbing the issue of vote trading in Nigeria. The scholars noted that vote trading is an electoral offence and thus violate Sections 131 to 136 and 177 to 181 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended. The study through the use of conceptual method underscored the need for the mass media to carry out extensive enlightenment campaign on the danger of vote trading among Nigeria electorate. Furthermore, it subscribed that

the media can be involved in carrying out advocacy campaigns through several media platforms like the cartoon, editorials and features in newspapers to educate the electorate on their rights. The scholars believe that when people are sufficiently educated on the danger of selling their votes they would not engage in such behaviour in subsequent elections.

Theoretical Framework

This study is located within the ambit of the framing theory. The concept of framing is related to the agenda-setting tradition but expands the research by focusing on the essence of the issues at hand rather than on a particular topic. The basis of framing theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning (Goffman, 1974). In other words, the mass media highlights certain events and occurrences in society and then place them within specific context to either promote or play-down some interpretations or narratives. The primary focus of the theory is on how the media package sourced information and package same to the public who are expected to see things from the angle presented to them by the media.

Accordingly, Entman (1993) is of the view that frames are meant to perform certain fundamental functions such as problem definition, making moral judgments and providing support for remedies. This argument is supported by De Vreese (2005) who opined that framing is an "integrated process model that includes the production, content and media perspectives". In the same vein, Nwofe (2016) noted that much of the power of framing comes from its ability to define problems, articulating cost and benefits, specifying causes, make moral assessments, and recommend solutions.

In applying the framing theory to this study means that the media can deliberately focus their attention in the production of programmes that would educate the electorate on the need to shun vote trading by politicians and exercise their civic responsibility without being induced by the political gladiators. The media can further highlight the implications and consequences on vote selling on the future of the electorates. When the media consistently frame these issues and especially unfolding the negative issues that characterised the consequences of voting selling

the people would think twice before they can allow the contestants to mortgage their future. It is even more so because of the duration persons elections in Nigerian election stay in office; and that is about four (4) years. The primary focus of this study is on the Change begins with me campaign and how it was framed and communicated to the public through different media platforms.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and therefore takes on the conceptual review approach. It adopted the use of relevant literature and empirical studies in its discourse section. This required the gathering of qualitative data from online journals and sources, including books to discuss the analysis of key issues as well as make conclusions in a positional manner.

The Nigeria's Electoral Process and the Many Dilemmas

The electoral system in Nigeria is one considered as complex as it provides a hold upon which many activities are premised; voting schedules, election, a well-articulated expected behaviour of electoral officials and observers (Aluko, 2019). An interesting aspect of the electoral process in Nigeria is that; on paper, the accepted procedures to be adopted and time for all activities is well documented. Usually, this is premised upon the framework of the country's constitution and the electoral act – which has a new version based on the amendment to it by the 9th National Assembly of Nigeria and assent of the president sought and obtained within same period.

Regardless of the documents and schedules, the electoral process in Nigeria is replete of many inconsistencies and issues when juxtaposed with events that usually take place on Election Day. In fact, observations are that the state of the Nigeria's electoral process is that of total confusion, relapse, and quagmire (Aluko, 2019). This has put a dent on the image of the electoral umpire as they are always the first to be blamed for failure to fully implement provisions of the electoral act and other enabling legislations. The problems are seen every other election year/period. According to Okeke (2023) the recent general elections conducted in 2023 culminated in reports by local and international observers with notes to show that there were many problems.

It is no longer unusual to always think about the associated drama, conflict, and many complexities each time the electoral system of Nigeria is mentioned in public domain. For instance as a fallout from the last election, Nwangwu (2023) notes that several issues that may need to be addressed before the next one are violence before and during the scheduled polls, suppression of people's right to vote, low turnout, ethnic tensions, and the need to accept that technology may not be the solution to fix the flaws in the electoral process of the country. There are other dilemmas of bribery of election officials on election days to influence their announcements or even forcing them to declare results in favour of certain candidates. At other times, cases of compromise of resident electoral commissioners have been reported in elections conducted in different parts of Nigeria (Oyero, 2023; Premium Times, 2024; Shibayan, 2023). This is in addition to the several reports of intimidation, harassments, and extreme violence to scare the electorates or cause voter apathy.

It is instructive to note that the country specifically has a long history of violence seen before, during and after conduct of elections. Acts such as ballot snatching, ballot paper stuffing, and various other acts of disruptions usually culminate in violent attacks and disenfranchisement of the electorate. Specifically, electoral violence has not gone away from the electoral system and different figures as per loss of lives were reportedly linked to the different crisis situations and violence that characterised the 2023 elections in Nigeria (Eromosele, 2023; Leadership, 2023; Olugbode, 2023; Premium Times, 2023). While the CDD-quoted Premium Times and ThisDay reports revealed 109, the report by Leadership Newspaper puts the toll at 39 deaths, just as that of Vanguard revealed that there were 137 deaths and 57 cases of abductions within same period. All these cases point to the danger faced by democracy in Nigeria as the country seemed threatened from elements within than outside forces.

However, the most troubling and cringing challenge or dilemma of the Nigeria's electoral process is the associated acts of malpractice for which it is now famous. Vote trading is considered as an act or a form of corruption (Eldar, 2008). Aside it being a form of high profile corruption, it also depicts inefficiency in the institutions of government (Nwagwu et al., 2022). It is criminal in

Nigeria for a voter to offer his/her conscience for sale for the purpose of financial or materials gains. The corruption-related activity of vote trading has in no small way undermined Nigeria's young democracy in diverse ways (Hoffmann & Patel, 2022). Since the decision to market vote is transactional and largely individualised and independent of the voter, it therefore implies that it is also personal decision of the persons involved to shun the act considering the destructive outcomes. Most significant is that it leads to the emergence of a leader not on merit but based on the corrupt actions of the politicians, their cronies, and their respective political parties.

These dilemmas that have plagued the electoral system and process of Nigeria are not isolated cases as they are seen manifested in every election year. Since her return to democracy in 1999, Nigerian politicians are always scheming to outsmart and outshine one another in different political-decision-interfering actions; whether vote trading, instigated violence or even bribery of officials of the umpire, also known as INEC. The danger is that the electoral process has been robbed of its supposed credibility and reports by independent observers always point to the question of our elections not being as credible as they should be or as expected.

Vote Trading within the Context of the Nigerian Electoral System

In most democratic states, vote trading is considered a very serious electoral offence. In Nigeria, the 2010 electoral Act as amended states that anybody who pays money to any individual with the intention to buy his or her vote or induce an individual to accept gifts with the sole intention to influence such an individual to vote commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of 100,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2019). The implication of the foregoing is that all acts of commercial activities relating to votes in an election are criminalised in Nigeria via the electoral act of 2010 as amended.

In addition, the Act states in section 124 that an individual who is caught taking and receiving bribe will pay the sum of 500,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both when caught given money to electorate's during the election process. Furthermore, Sections 65, 76, 131-136 and 177-181 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria underscores the essence of

being "elected" into public office and emphasises that anyone who occupies such positions must be "duly elected" as a just mandate. This process can only be obtained through a credible, free and fair election devoid of all forms of manipulation (including inducement by offering monies for votes). Often, it is where the candidates and their parties are incompetent or lack the goodwill to win in a free and fair contest that they seek for means to "buy" the votes from the electorates who are willing to "sell" their rights.

According to Gusau (2014) Nigerian extant electoral statutes recognise spending by political office seekers. Section 88 & 91 of the Electoral Act as amended provided for election finance by presidential candidates, governors, national and state legislative assemblies and chairmen of local government councils. Also, in its hand book, INEC (2005) had acknowledge election finance as a convention, accepting that "as the sophistication and complexity of communications and other technologies needed to effectively compete for votes increases... need for vast resources by political parties to finance their electoral campaigns is required. In essence, it is not illegal for political parties to spend money in an election but a cap is put on the amount expected. In addition, no one is permitted by law to seek to buy votes from the electorates. All acts related thereto are considered criminal as per the electoral acts of the country; 2010 and the amendment made by the 9th Assembly in 2022 to strengthen the electoral process.

However, the implication of the recognition and input that monies can be spend on election has given rise to some other negatives for which the electoral process of Nigeria is now known. Accordingly, it has given a scenario where money plays a huge role on who is nominated to bear a party's flag during electioneering campaigns. And this has led to the highest bidder contestation in securing seats at all levels of elective positions; national assembly, state houses of assembly, presidential, governorship and even local government level governance. Echoing this position Wakili, Zango and Mohammed, (2008) opined that:

...if you do not have money, you cannot be able to massively campaign through the media, you can hardly be able to buy guns or

give bride, no matter how acceptable your program is to the public, Money plays an important role because of the corrupt nature of the election process in Nigerian politics which, in nearly all cases, is devoid of ethical conduct.

The above assertion is true and can be validated considering the just concluded elections in 2023 across all the states of the federation. Massive vote buying was carried out in order to secure the legitimacy of the electorates. This was especially pronounce during the presidential primaries where it was alleged that the three presidential contenders – President Bola Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar, and Nyesom Wike spent huge amount of money to buy votes from party members in order to secure their parties mandate. Yet none of these politicians have been arrested for engaging in vote trading during the period of the elections. The people are somewhat conditioned to accept offers to sell votes due to prevailing circumstances; socio-economic, and other considerations

It is imperative to state here that poverty has contributed to a large extent in fueling and promoting vote trading during elections. When majority of people are poor, they will do anything to get their own part of the national cake during electioneering campaigns, and politicians understand this; that is why they continue to keep people in a perpetual circle of poverty so that they can buy their conscience every election year. A cursory examination of elections conducted from 1999 when Nigeria returned to democratic rule to the just concluded one in 2023 attested for the fact that vote trading was a major factor in deciding the people that contested and eventually won the elections.

Connecting the Change begins with me Campaign and Vote Trading Dilemma in Nigeria

Since the philosophy behind the "Change begins with me" campaign was to ensure a change in behaviour of Nigerians towards the realisation that genuine change in society can be achieved when it begins with the individuals members. It became an inevitable move to solve the behavioural challenge once the obvious is that the nation saw a total

breakdown in respect to adherence to its core values over the years. In the nation; and in both the public and private sectors, insincere and unpatriotic individuals seem to have been bred over time resulting in difficult times when seen from the economic, social, and political spheres. Persons with questionable character can be found in both the public sectors of the Nigerian economy (Udeh & Ugwu, 2018).

Corruption has done some damage to the very foundation of Nigeria as the country seems to be struggling economically because of the economic sabotage of a microscopic few. Credence has been led to the foregoing with the assertion that as the Nigeria's economy down-spiral, it must be noted that it is self-inflicting pain by Nigerians (Adeleye, 2024). Aside the economic sabotage, corruption has also resulted in denting of Nigeria's image all over the world to the point that citizens of the country are subjected to all forms of inhumane treatment at border points and different other places. The corruption perception index score for Nigeria in 2023 stood at 25 out of 100 points and ranked 145 out of the 180 countries ranked (Shaibu, 2024). The causal factors of corruption in Nigeria could be nepotism, societal pressure, tribalism, low risk-high benefits of getting involved in corruption among several others (Ijewereme, 2015).

A time for attitudinal and behaviour change came with the introduction of the "Change begins with me" campaign. The campaign was framed and messages communicated with the public through the use of various media platforms; the print, broadcast, and social media genres. Primarily, the communication of messages in the campaign were mainly prescriptive; and focused on the need for Nigerians to take on the culture of social justice, discipline, dignity of labour, integrity, self-reliance, religious tolerance, and patriotism (Okey-Kalu). The campaign critically highlighted most of the ills of the Nigerian federation and prescribed that the solution must take base in self-resolution by individual Nigerians from whose domain the change must begin; hence the tag in which it is known "Change begins with me".

It must be noted that among the several areas of focus is the need to shun corruption. Messages were framed to target the public to enhance social and economic process, augment conduct and personal behaviour of citizens of the country. Faleye (2016) lends credence that the

primary aim of the campaign was for the enhancement of economic and social progress in Nigeria and to ensure that citizens are well-behaved and then conduct themselves in the very best ways possible. Messages for the campaign were carefully crafted by the NOA that championed the cause. According to Obia (2016) rather than adopting "coercive" means, the campaign chose the adoption and deployment of "suasive" means to achieve attitudinal change across all facets of the Nigerian society. This validates the postulation of framing on the need to frame messages to achieve the desired result. However, the pertinent question here is: has the campaign solved the problem of corruption including those that are electoral-related such as vote-trading?

Vote trading is considered as one of the many wrongs bedeviling the electoral system of Nigeria and the need to end it has been amplified by concerned stakeholders across different platforms and forums (National Star, 2022). Though the NOI-sponsored campaigns can be directly linked to the quest to curb all forms of corruption in the polity including vote-trading, there is no concrete empirical evidence to clearly show that it was effective in that regard. This is drawn because as of the last general elections conducted in the country tagged "the 2023 elections" there were reports of widespread vote trading across the federation. This shows a trend that has been ongoing since the country returned to democratic governance in 1999 following the transition from a military regime. It is instructive to note that critical stakeholders including INEC are of the view that vote-trading will continue in the country due to economic imbalance and inequality as well as poverty (Olorok, 2022). It is indeed a dilemma for the country and other countries in Africa and Asia where the transactional practice is widespread.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that indeed the "Change begins with me" initiative or campaign was launched by the Muhammadu Buhari-led administration to cause attitudinal and behavioural change in Nigerians; and that was individual-based. Furthermore, it also concludes that though the campaign can be linked to the need to curb corruption and other vices in the country, there is no evidence to show that the identified challenges were solved – as per the direct observation of recent elections conducted in the country. This

implies that the ugly practice will continue regardless of efforts to stem the tide. However, the people hold the will power to change it once they resolve absolutely to curb the menace and get a saner society where their voices can be heard and choice reflect on the ballot.

It is also part of the conclusion of this study that vote trading is rife in Nigeria and it is an undocumented part of the electoral process in the country in modern times. As seen in period (general elections) and others conducted at different times, transactional vote trading refuses to go away. Relatedly, all other forms of corruption and malpractices seen in the elections of Nigeria are inherent implying that the re-orientation campaigns for a change in attitude and behaviour of Nigerian citizens resulted in little or no effect. In other words, the "Change begins with me" campaign launched by the Federal Government of Nigeria was not-so-effective or even completely non-effective. On the basis of the discourse above and conclusion, the study recommends that:

1. INEC in conjunction with civil society organisations (CSOs) must take voter education and re-orientation serious. It fact, it must be institutionalised and made to be part of the core

mandate of the electoral umpire in association with other critical stakeholders. This can be achieved by organising seminars, symposia, conferences and through the use of traditional and new media tools and platforms to communicate in specially-tailored manner.

2. Government must now take the issue of punishment of electoral offenders serious as against the levity with which such cases are presently being handled. This is possible when law enforcement agencies are allowed to function independently of any government in power and without undue interference from the political party at the helms of affair in the country.

3. This also calls for the creation of special election tribunals to handle cases of electoral malpractices once elections are completed. In addition, there is urgent need to create or amend sections of existing laws to ensure that the special tribunals conclude their cases before winners of elections are sworn-in to serve their mandate. This will deter people from engaging in desperate activities to undermine the electoral process in Nigeria.

References

- Aaron, D. D. (2019). Legal regime to curb vote-buying in Nigeria. *Legal Issue Brief*, 1(1), 1-6. <https://ir.nilds.gov.ng/bitstream/handle/123456789/>
- Adegbami, A., & Makinde, L.O. (2018). Democratic governance and voting commercialisation: implication for Nigeria's budding democracy. *International Journal of Governance and Development*, 5, 28-32.
- Adeleye, M. (2024). Nigeria's economy and the saboteurs within. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/nigeria-economy-and-the-saboteurs-within/>
- Adigun, O. W. (2019). Vote buying: examining the manifestations, motivations, and effects of an emerging dimension of election rigging in Nigeria (2015-2019). *Canadian Social Science*, 15(11), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.3968/11392>
- Ali, Z. (2018, July 16). Votes on sale in several constituencies. *Dawn*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1420313>
- Aluaigba, M. T. (2016). Democracy deferred: the effects of electoral malpractice on Nigeria's path to democratic consolidation. *Journal of African Elections*, 15(2), 136-158. <https://doi.org/10.20940/JAE/2016/v15i2a7>
- Aluko, O. I. (2019). Trust and reputation in Nigeria's electoral process: the context and conundrum. *The African Review*, 46, 333-348. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48659605>
- Anyanwu, B. J. C., & Ikpegbu, E. O. U. (2022). Media advocacy and vote selling in general elections in Nigeria. *African Journal of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 12(2), 288-305.
- Business Hilights. (2019). 'Vote buying' surfaces in India as ECI cancels election in southern region. <https://businesshilights.com.ng/2019/04/18/vote-buying-surfaces-in-india-as-eci-cancels-election-in-southern-region/>
- Chhibber, P. K., & Verma, R. (2018). *Ideology and identify: the changing party systems of India*. New York: Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190623876.001.0001>
- Chirona, M., & allAfrica. (2023, May 18). Unmasking corruption: examining Nigeria's 2023 election fallout. *Premium Times*. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/headlines/599150-unmasking-corruption-examining-nigerias-2023-election-fallout.html>
- Christopher, F., Ogbotubo, L. G. S., & Gesiye, I. E. (2022). Vote-buying and democratic governance in Nigeria. *Advances in Politics and Economics*, 5(2), 81-89. <https://doi.org/10.22158/ape.v5n2p81>
- De Vreese, C. H. (2016). New avenues for framing research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(3) 365-375
- Effanga, O. (2022, Sept. 10). Sociopolitical paradox of vote-trading in Nigeria. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/sociopolitical-paradox-of-vote-trading-in-nigeria/>
- Eldar, O. (2008). Vote-trading in international institutions. *European Journal of International Law*, 19(1), 3-41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chn001>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Erlich, A. (2021). Vote buying is a big problem in Kenya. How to curb it before the 2022 elections. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/vote-buying-is-a-big-problem-in-kenya-how-to-curb-it-before-the-2022-elections-17163>
- Eromosele, F. (2023, May 5). 137 killed, 57 abducted during 2023 elections – report. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/05/137-killed-57-abducted-during-2023-elections-report/>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. New York, NY et al.: Harper & Row
- Gusau, B. H. (2014). The dynamics of the "use of money" in politics and electioneering campaigns: Implications for strengthening Nigeria's toddling democracy. *Journal of Democratic Studies*, 5, 57-77
- Hoffman, L. K., & Patel, R. N. (2022). Vote-selling behaviour and democratic dissatisfaction in Nigeria. *Chatham House Briefing*. <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135348>
- Ijewereme, O. B. (2015). Anatomy of corruption in the Nigerian public sector: theoretical perspectives and some empirical explanations. *SAGE Open*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015581188>
- Jensen, P. S., & Justesen, M. K. (2014). Poverty and vote buying: survey-based evidence from Africa. *Electoral Studies*, 33, 220-232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.07.020>

- Jimoh, A. Z. (2021). Vote buying and its implication on democratic governance in Nigeria: a study of Ondo State 2020 governorship elections. A Dissertation, NILDS/UNIBEN. <https://ir.nilds.gov.ng/handle/123456789/1008>
- Kramon, E. J. (2013). Vote buying and accountability in democratic Africa. A dissertation, University of California. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1490x02z>
- Kwarisima, C. (2016). Vote buying and its effect on democracy and development in Uganda: a case of Rwamucucu sub-county, Kabale district, south western Uganda. Master Thesis, University of Agder. <https://uia.brage.uni.no/uia-xmlui/handle/11250/2414544>
- Leadership. (2023). Nigeria counts over 39 deaths in 2023 elections. <https://leadership.ng/nigeria-counts-over-39-deaths-in-2023-elections/>
- National Star. (2022, Sept. 3). 2023: stakeholder to tackle vote buying. <https://newnationalstar.com/2023-stakeholders-to-tackle-vote-buying/>
- Nelson, C. J. (2023). The Nigerian election was a frustrating reminder that corruption still reigns. *Inews*. <https://inews.co.uk/opinion/2023-nigerian-general-election-frustrating-reminder-corruption-reigns-2176410>
- Nwabughio, L. (2019). Vote buying: INEC proposes fine of N500,000, 3 years imprisonment for electoral offenders. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/04/vote-buying-inec-proposes-fine-of-n500000-3-years-imprisonment-for-electoral-offenders/>
- Nwagwu, E. J., Uwaechia, O. G., Udegbum, K. C., & Nnamani, R. (2022). Vote buying during 2015 and 2019 general elections: manifestation and implications on democratic development in Nigeria. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1995237>
- Nwangwu, C. (2023). Nigeria's elections faced five serious challenges – how to fix them before the next polls. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/nigerias-elections-faced-five-serious-challenges-how-to-fix-them-before-the-next-polls-20369>
- Nwofe, E. S. (2016). Dimension of negativity in the coverage of the Nigeria' 2015 presidential election. *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies*. 2(2) 6-29
- Obia, V. (2016). The 'Change begins with me' campaign. *ThisDay*. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/09/11/the-change-begins-with-mecampaign/>
- Ofei, E. K., Apeakhuye, A. L., Vanessa, I., & Akinnibosun, S. N. (2024). An assessment of the mass media as a medium for campaign against vote buying during elections in Nigeria 2023 presidential election. 5(1) 1734-1744.
- Oke, G. (2015, Oct. 16). Election petition: the emerging twists, triumphs. *Vanguard*. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/10/election-petition-the-emerging-twists-triumphs/>
- Okeke, C. (2023). Post-2023: how to improve Nigeria's electoral processes and institutions using the Uwais committee report. *Business Day*. <https://businessday.ng/opinion/article/post-2023-how-to-improve-nigerias-electoral-processess-and-institutions-using-the-uwais-committee-report/>
- Okey-Kalu, O. (2020). A critical analysis of the "change begins with me" campaign. *Tekedia*. <https://www.tekedia.com/a-critical-analysis-of-the-change-begins-with-me-campaign/>
- Okon, P. E. (2019). The role of research in contemporary public relations campaigns: a case of Nigeria's change-begins-with-me rebranding initiative. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 16(2), 128-143. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/lwati/article/view/186047/175337>
- Olaniyan, A. (2020). Election sophistication and the changing contours of vote buying in Nigeria's 2019 general elections. *The Round Table*, 109(4), 386-395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2020.1788762>
- Olorok, F. (2022, Sept. 2). Why vote-trading will continue in Nigeria – INEC, others. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/why-vote-trading-will-continue-in-nigeria-inec-others/>
- Olugbode, M. (2023). Nigeria recorded 109 deaths related to 2023 elections, CDD reveals. *ThisDay*. <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/03/19/nigeria-recorded-109-deaths-related-to-2023-elections-cdd-reveals>
- Oyero, K. (2023). 'Adamawa returning officer disappeared', Binanis's campaign coordinator defends Ari. *Channels Television*. <https://www.channelstv.com/2023/04/25/adamawa-returning-officer-disappeared-binanis-campaign-coordinator-defends-ari/>

- Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre. (2019). Electoral Act 2010 (Update. <https://placng.org/wo-content/uploads/2020/02/Electoral-Act-2010.pdf>
- Premium Times. (2016, Sept. 6). Nigeria to launch 'Change begins with me campaign'. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/209892-nigeria-launch-change-begins-campaigns.html>
- Premium Times. (2023, March 18). Nigeria recorded 109 deaths in three months linked to 2023 elections – CDD. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top/588325-nigeria-recorded-109-deaths-in-three-months-linked-to-2023-elections-cdd.html>
- Premium Times. (2024, Feb. 4). INEC suspends electoral officer in Plateau over missing ballot papers. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/665395-inec-suspends-electoral-officer-in-plateau-over-missing-ballot-papers.html>
- Ralph, K. (2020). Case study: an anti-vote-buying campaign in Uganda's 2016 election. The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. <https://harris.uchicago.edu/news-events/news/case-study-anti-vote-buying-campaign-ugandas-2016-election>
- Shaibu, N. (2024, Jan. 30). Nigeria rises five places in 2023 corruption perception index. *Punch*. <https://punchng.com/nigeria-rises-five-places-in-2023-corruption-perception-index/>
- Shamir, M., Shamir, J., & Sheaffer, T. (2008). The political communication of mandate elections. *Political Communication*, 25(1),47-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600701807869>
- Shibayan, D. (2023, Apr. 6). CSO asks INEC to remove Imo REC over 'irregularities' in assembly polls. *The Cable*. <https://www.thecable.ng/cso-asks-inec-to-remove-imo-rec-over-irregularities-in-assembly-polls/>
- The Straits Times. (2019, Apr. 17). India cancels polls in southern area over 'vote buying'. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/india-cancels-poll-in-southern-area-over-vote-buying>
- Udeh, S. N., & Ugwu, J. I. (2018). Fraud in Nigerian banking sector. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business & Social Sciences*, 8(5), 589-607. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i5/4159>
- Vanguard. (2016, Sept. 15). Buhari's "change begins with me". <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/09/buharis-change-begins/>
- Wakili, H., Zango, I., & Mohammed, H. (2008). Research report on financing political parties in Nigeria, 1999-2007. Kano Center for Democratic Research & Training, Mambayya House