

THE POLITICS OF COVID-19: ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined the politics of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria with a particular focus on government strategic responses and measures that curtailed the spread of the virus and the citizen's perception of the implementation of these strategies across the Nations. The federal government adopted measures to curtail the spread of the disease through the establishment of the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 and the Multi-sectored Pandemic Response Plan. The measures include economic and social welfare interventions, and healthcare strategies such as the closure of schools, and borders, the use of face masks, social distancing, lockdowns, and restrictions of travel, testing and contact tracing. The study adopted the historical method of data collection to elicit information and relevant data for the study. It was found that the efforts of the government to slow down and mitigate the rapid spread of COVID-19 were greatly hindered by public negative reactions. The study observed from the findings that corruption and stiff opposition from the opposition Party against the ruling party posed severe challenges to the effective implementation of the strategies and measures put in place by the government at the Centre. On the strength of these findings, the author recommended that in future, national challenges must be viewed and tackled evenly across all the levels of government and parties not along party lines for the benefit of all. In addition, the federal must leverage public sensitization and effective communication strategy for policy achievement and management of public opinion.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Government Strategies, Public Perception.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus of 2019 popularly known as COVID-19 has been the most global predicament of the 21st century with unanticipated health, economic and political problems. The virus has imposed a threat on human health leading to unprecedented consequences on the environment and human activity which has posed significant challenges to global governments including Nigeria. In other words, no country was left unaffected; however, there were significant variations in the number of COVID-19-affected persons and total deaths among global nations.

The disparities in COVID-19 casualties across nations can be explained based on the nature and the successful management of the strategies implemented and the public perceptions of the pandemic which largely depend on the quality of the political environment and the capability of available resources. That is to say, as COVID-19 strategies vary across nations so are the citizen's reactions or responses. While some nations experienced good measures and government control with public compliance and some government strategies met with social unrest and opposition others remained passive to the problems and incapable of formulating successful policy. COVID-19 is beyond a health crisis that is plagued with socio-economic and political challenges affecting nations' growth and development in recent years.

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus named coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) originated in Wuhan City in China in December 2019 and spread to other parts of the world within a few weeks (UNODC, 2020, Ikenga et al 2019). The widespread and contagious nature of the virus led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the novel coronavirus break a Public Health Emergency Concern (PHEIC) on the 30th of January 2020 and further declared it a pandemic on the 11th of April 2020 calling on all countries to take urgent and necessary actions. Notably, Nigeria was among the first eight nations of the team of WHO experts that visited China to determine the extent of breakout, and robustness of the responses and to identify best practices. Therefore Nigeria was privileged and well equipped with the early information and strategic mitigating measures against the disease.

In Nigeria, the novel pandemic had a profound impact in terms of public health, politics and in particular the threat to the size of the human population and their economic activities, thus impacting the economy. To contend with the unprecedented challenges posed by the virus, the Nigerian government adopted several strategies to contain the spread and mitigate its adverse effects on public health and the economic stability of the nation. The Federal government established implementation and policy structures to guide the actualization of the measures, such as the Presidential Task Force (PTF) at the national level (the Government's National COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Pandemic Response Plan) while the States adopted various measures to mitigate and contain the virus at state levels, Ladan, (2020). The states instituted their measures of responses to meet the requirements of the individual State. The implementation of the mitigating and containment strategies drastically slowed down the spread and curbed its contagious effects. The implementation and success of these measures have not been without challenges as well as having diverse public perceptions Dan-Nwafor et

al. (2021) described Nigeria's response as robust, aggressive and a qualified success. This notwithstanding there are still traces of the virus in Nigeria with current records of 288 deaths in October 2023 (NBS, 2023) and the lingering existence of the virus poses significant health challenges in Nigeria that requires more drastic and effective measures. Therefore the study examines the politics of COVID-19 and the analysis of Government mitigation strategies and their public perceptions, with a special focus on the political factors that shaped the implementation measures in Nigeria.

2. CONCEPTUAL WORK

The Coronavirus has been described as the 21st-century world health predicament with the most severe challenges that humanity ever bumped into since the Second World War, (Ghebreyesus, 2020). The coronavirus is a novel infectious disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus. It is an infectious and transmittable disease nurtured by severe acute respiratory syndrome, otherwise known as COVID-19. It is fever and cough-prone with a sore throat, running nose /sneezing associated with extremely high fever (Moore, (2020); Ohia et al (2020); Adnan, et al (2020); Keam, et al (2020). It was first discovered in Wuhan China ('CO' stands for corona, 'V' for virus and 'D' stand for disease. Initially, it was referred to as the "2019" novel-corona virus or 2019-loved and was linked to the family of viruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). It is also related to a type of cold that spreads quickly and is very contagious, (Eranga, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) saw it as a global pandemic because of its rapid spread and reconstructed the name in 2020 to COVID-19 (Ushie, Ushie, & Tangban, 2020. Adnan, et al (2020) reviewed that the disease currently has no cure but however different countries and organizations like the WHO made and still making efforts to develop curable vaccines and drugs. In other words as a novel virus, the pandemic created opportunities for nations and organizations to demonstrate their feat in discovering a cure for the seemingly incurable disease. This was seriously evidenced as some of the vaccines were unwelcomed and rejected. COVID-19 has been found to have the most profound impact on the world in terms of public health, economics and politics.

In Nigeria, Olapegba, et al (2020) observed a misconception from their findings on the disease that it is the Chinese Government's biotic weapon that affected most peoples' response toward accepting the preventive measure. On the other hand, Ozili, (2020) & Ohia et al (2020) saw

Nigeria and African countries as having rife and fragile countries in the health system, arguing that the health system is vulnerable and that made the national health system unable to cope with the growing numbers of infected persons (Ejumudo and Ikenga, 2015). COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing inequalities among nations in terms of poverty and healthcare systems and the poor and vulnerable countries have been disproportionately affected (Ikenga and Agah, 2020). In a nutshell, the government has a central role to play in responding to the pandemic that can effectively curb it.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The pandemic has had a profound importance on politics and societies across the globe and it has worsened the existing inequalities and tensions thus creating new opportunities for political actors to shape the public discourse and policy. Therefore the study employed several theoretical frameworks to discuss the politics of COVID-19 such as public health realism and critical medical anthropology, the risk society and Bio political frameworks.

Public Health Realism and Critical Medical Anthropology by Theodore H. Tulchinsky are the most often used theories in the history of public health research, Elena (2014). The author posited that public health practitioners must understand that there is inherent value in managing the Government Public Health Service (GPHS) to protect the population against the spread of diseases. This is true in times when public systems are expected to incorporate multiple mandates (both funded and unfunded) such as emergency preparedness. The theory argues that public measures are implemented in the face of opposition from powerful economic interests. The lockdowns and mask mandates can be costly for businesses and can lead to businesses lobbying against these measures. These were evidenced in Nigeria with peoples' resistance and protests against the government policy of containment.

Also, the Critical Medical Anthropology theory argues that health and diseases are not simply biological phenomena but are also shaped by social, economic and political factors. The pandemic exposed the social and economic inequalities among the developed and developing nations, The pandemic has disproportionately affected marginalized groups, vulnerable and those with low income in Nigeria because they are mostly those who live in crowded areas, homes, working in essential jobs where they are exposed to the virus and lack of access to quality health care.

The Risk Society theory developed by two Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens in 1986 encompasses a new social ontology in the era of uncertainties and crises, Baxter (2020). The risk society is one of the most ambitious, expansive and debated social theories of risk. It is not just defined by the distribution of good (wealth) but more

by the distribution of "bad" (pollution, contaminations and other by-products (like COVID-19)) and that it is a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced by itself. The theory entails three major burdens on society, the size of an emergency fund must be increased, society is deprived of certain goods and services and worries and fears are present. COVID-19 brought these burdens on all affected nations including Nigeria. This framework thus examines how the Nigerian government became increasingly obsessed with managing and controlling the risks and disasters of the pandemic.

The Biopolitical framework, according to Adams (2017) was developed by Michel Foucault and describes how the State uses power to manage human populations including public health. Foucault argued that the state uses a variety of technologies such as surveillance, discipline and punishment to regulate and control bodies. This framework gave a better understanding of how governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The combination of the theoretical frameworks provided a conceptual lens for the understanding of the complex political forces that shaped global responses to the disease outbreak. Nations and Governments have taken various measures and approaches to the management of the pandemic and the mitigating strategies are shaped by a variety of political factors. Nigeria's government instituted various strategies including disciplinary measures, and surveillance to track the spread of the virus such as lockdowns, travel restrictions and others.

4. RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher adopted the historical research design to elicit relevant data and information for the study. Sources of data and information include the use of textbooks, journals, newspaper articles and internet materials, formed the secondary sources from which data for the study were derived.

5. COVID-19 IN NIGERIA (2020-2023)

COVID-19 recorded the first index case in Nigeria on the 27th of February 2020 and the wave increased with the spread across the thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja (WHO,(2020); Barisibi & Udeme (2020). Nigeria witnessed an uncontrollable spread of the virus across during the main pandemic period which lasted from 2020 to March 2021. Nigeria faced a dramatic change of lifestyle that posed an inestimable obstacle to public health, loss of lives and stale socio-economic activities in the country. According to WHO, (2021) Nigeria was recorded as the 5th most affected country in Africa and 77th position globally with 188,880 confirmed cases and 2298 recorded deaths and further expressed concern about the potential impacts of COVID-19. In other words, COVID-19 brought discomfort and incalculable challenges to every sphere of human existence which inadvertently led to the dearth of economic activities that led to the reverse of economic growth particularly in Nigeria where "poverty constituted the major challenge since the 1980s" (Ewubare,2020, Ikenga et al 2022, Ikenga and Chima, 2021)). In other words, COVID-19 presented a profound challenge to the government of Nigeria and date, the virus is still claiming lives in the country. In a recent development, NCDC, (2023) displayed the total number of 5,708,974 Samples tested, 280,765 confirmed, 259,953 discharged, 3,155 recorded deaths and 3,567 active cases in the 36 States including the Federal Capital territory. The highest recorded was in 2021 with 132,271 cases and 2,071 deaths and the lowest was in April 2023 where zero cases recorded. However, in October 2,543 cases were recorded having 288 deaths. (NCDC, 2023), which indicates a continuous presence of the virus disease in the country. While Lagos state has remained the most affected State, Kogi State maintained the lowest position of infection since the onset of the virus (Table 1). The impact of the pandemic is felt more in the densely populated and overcrowded States with a high tendency to facilitate the spread and transmission. The sorrows and hardships of the pandemic notwithstanding the responses from the governments and other stakeholders provided tangible palliatives that cushioned the effects on the surviving population and sustenance of the economy. The government intervention has not only curtailed the spread but has brought its death rates to a minimal standstill. Table 2, the bar chart and the graph demonstrated that the spread of the virus was highest in 2021, and witnessed a steady decline from 2022 to near zero level in 2023.

Table 1. CUMULATIVE SUMMARY OF COVID-19 CASES IN NIGERIA: (April 2020-October 2023)

STATE	NO. of Cases (lab. confirmed)	No. of cases(on admission)	No. Discharged	No. of deaths
Lagos	104286	1143	102372	771
.FCT	29535	9	27277	249
Rivers	18112	-3	17960	155
Kaduna	11675	3	11583	89
Plateau	10365	4	10286	75
Edo	7928	0	7606	322
Oyo	10352	0	10150	202
Delta	5858	576	5170	112
Ogun	5810	11	5717	85
Kano	5429	11	5291	127
Ondo	5173	315	4749	109
Akwa Ibom	4691	6	4960	44
Kwara	4691	452	4175	64
Gombe	3311	8	3239	66
Osun	3311	8	2990	92
Enugu	2952	13	2910	29
Nasarawa	2853	469	2345	39
Anambra	2825	46	2760	19
Imo	2691	3	2630	58
Ekiti	2466	0	2438	28
Katsina	2418	0	2381	37
Benue	2317	88	2204	25
Abia	2263	0	2229	34
Ebonyi	2064	28	2004	32
Bauchi	2028	2	2002	24

Borno	1629	5	1580	44
Taraba	1517	32	1451	34
Bayesa	1373	2	1343	28
Adamawa	1312	134	1140	38
Niger	1183	165	998	20
CrossRiver	947	0	922	25
Sokoto	822	0	794	28
Jigawa	669	2	649	18
Yobe	638	4	625	9
Kebbi	480	10	454	16
Zamfara	375	0	366	9
Kogi	5	0	3	2

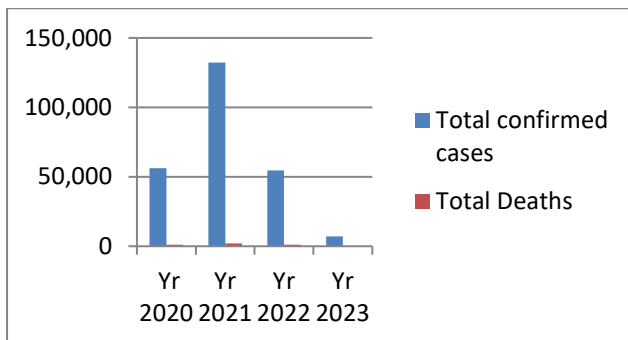
SOURCE :NCDC Coronavirus Commission: Covid19ncdc.gov.na. Retrieved online (11th Nov. 2023).

TABLE 2: CONFIRMED CASES AND DEATHS IN NIGERIA, (2020-2023).

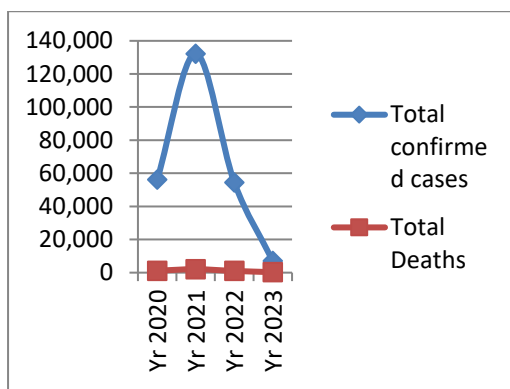
Year	Total confirmed cases	Total Deaths
2020	56,148	1,182
2021	132,271	2,071
2022	54,524	1,020
2023	7,055	288

Source: NCDC Coronavirus Commissions: Covid19ncdc.gov.na. Retrieved online (16th November, 2023).

BAR CHART OF THE CONFIRMED CASES AND DEATHS IN NIGERIA.(2020-2023)



GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION OF CONFIRMED CASES AND DEATHS IN NIGERIA (2020-2023).



Source: NCDC Coronavirus Commissions: Covid19ncdc.gov.na. Retrieved online (16th November, 2023)

6. GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES AND THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN NIGERIA

The outbreak of COVID-19 undoubtedly presented a global challenge of testing the resilience of the health care systems and the economies of nations. This elicited wide range of antivirus measures and global policies aimed at mitigation and suppression of the spread to maintain a balance between human health and economic stability of nations. Thus the Federal government of Nigeria employed the following measures to combat the pandemic and its spread.

The strategies

-Public Health measures which include:

- i. Nationwide lockdowns (closure of schools, public places, curfews and non-essential businesses) meant to hurt the spread.

- ii. Closure of all borders and travel restrictions (ban on all international travels meant to prevent the importation of the disease.
- iii. Social distancing, mask mandate and washing of hands meant to prevent transmission.
- iv. Testing and Contact Tracing. This was implemented to identify and isolate infected individuals to curtail the spread.

The Federal government's lockdown measures on major cities and State government restrictions were not without socioeconomic implications and the implementation was marred with political consideration. There was need for the government to balance public health with socioeconomic concerns however the implementation lacks comprehensive social safety nets and sufficient palliative measures. The mandate also led to loss of jobs and businesses closure impacting negatively on the peoples' socioeconomic status and the economy. This situation resulted in protests (Lagos & Ogun States) and criticisms in some places while in some cases people ignored the preventive measures in pursuit of livelihood at the detriment of public health protection strategies. (Premium Times Nigeria, April 30, 2020).

In a similar vein the implementation of the travel restrictions and border closure strategies faced several challenges and public resistance. This measure was the early response of the federal government in April 2020 although the virus made its first entrance to Nigeria in February with increasing spread intensity. This was an indication that the government was not only ill-prepared for the pandemic. It demonstrated inadequate public awareness that was not unconnected with the political dynamic surrounding border security and closure, influenced by vested interest. According to Vanguard Nigeria, (March 19, 2020), While the government "emphasized the importance of cooperation and urged citizens to adhere to the guidelines to curb the spread of the virus," there was lack of trust on the government which led to resistance and non-compliance by some individuals.

The testing and tracing measures were significantly faulted for inadequate testing facilities and due to under reporting of government officials particularly at the initial stage leading to lack of data transparency. The limited facilities hampered testing capacity and delayed sample outcomes that hindered the identification and isolation of infected persons particularly outside the major cities which aroused the popular criticisms that saw it as COVID-19 politics of infrastructural/ facilities allocations. For instance the major outbreak in Kano, May 2020 was

attributed to lack of testing and contact tracing amidst political interference and public skepticism. On the other hand the poor handling of testing, contact tracing and isolation measures created fear and uncertainty. This contributed to increased depression, anxiety and stress that aggravated other health issues, leading to resistance among the population.

Government procurement procedure and distribution of the vaccines played key roles in the pandemic response. The novel nature of the pandemic placed the supply or acquisition of the vaccines on global supply chain based on geographical consideration and Nigeria was faced with the problem of inadequate supply. There was global limited availability of vaccines so there was disruptions of supply chain that coincided with the financial constrain in the country. The politics of vaccines diplomacy, distribution, prioritization and public trust that influenced government's strategies of procurement and the administration were subject to much debates and discussion. According to This Day news (27th August, 2021), "The significant challenges that impacted on the overall effectiveness of the vaccination programme such as "slow and delay procurement, lack of transparency, disorganized rollout, vaccine hesitancy and misinformation and inequitable distribution attracted some level of public reactions". . Besides, vaccines hesitancy or reluctance in accepting vaccination despite the availability has been a major challenge to implementation of the pandemic measures in some quarters. The vaccines hesitancy even led to the destruction of over a million expired doses of COVID-19 vaccines in October 2021 due to low demand despite the spread of the virus (Iwuji & Okoye, (2021).

The government also launched public health awareness campaign on the health implication of the virus to encouraged preventive measures. The public health education strategy was highly effective with the public embrace of the preventive and control measures such as "Wash your Hands, Mask mandate and Stay Safe' campaigns although the mask- wearing was taken with levity by some people.

Economic Intervention: The government implemented economic measures meant to stimulate the economy in form of economic tax relief, infrastructure investment and financial grants and loans provided to assist businesses or individuals affected by the pandemic. The implementation of the economic intervention programmes were not without challenges to the government and popular reactions. The economic measures of the government include Targeted Credit Facility and financial support to businesses, Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) as economic relief to the affected businesses and those who suffered severity during the pandemic as well as stimulating the ailing economy. For instance 500 billion

naira COVID-19 intervention fund aimed at assisting the vulnerable groups, micro, small and medium enterprises was implemented while 207 million dollars was implemented as low-interest loan, with reduction rate by 1.5% to stimulate economic activity at reduce cost of borrowing was also provided. (African Development Bank,(2021). This provision notwithstanding the politics of accessing and distribution of the fund was received with mixed reactions by the public citing lack of transparency, accountability as well as allegations of corruption and favoritism in handling the affairs, (Human Right Watch, 2021).

Social Welfare Programmes: The Federal government also embarked on social welfare programmes by providing direct food stuff supply and cash to the vulnerable population in the country. The social welfare measures include expanded government steps such as Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT), School feeding and vulnerable groups support programmes. The programmes provided essential assistance to vulnerable groups and school children were applauded by populace though suffered limitation in many regions. The provision of food and essential items to the vulnerable groups and the elderly/ disabled though was highly appreciated was flawed by corruption and ineptitude of government officials which led to palliative looting. For instance in May 2020 there was looting of government warehouses storing food and other relief items meant to be distributed to the public. The looting was fueled by the allegations that government officials were hoarding the items for themselves and in certain quarters distribution was politically influenced. In other words there was and still public concerns about government's neglect of the necessary beneficiaries hinged on government inconsistent enforcement regulations and lack of clear communication leading to skepticism and distrust of some citizens.

The various strategies were meant to contain and mitigate the spread of the disease to forestall its adverse effects on public health and the economy. However the enabling politics that surrounded government's implementation provoked public acceptance and reactions that significantly defined their effectiveness and successes.

7. FACTORS THAT SHAPED COVID-19'S GOVERNMENT RESPONSES AND THEIR PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The complexity of Nigeria political environment depicts the socioeconomic problems of Nigeria and the policy incertitude of government's institutions as well as public response to government policy. The challenges and successes of COVID-19 strategies were no doubt

shaped by political considerations of the government and public reactions. Nigeria like most developing nations of the world faces long history of political discrepancy between different levels of government and parties due to the bequeathed political polarization that produced political unrests and weak economy. Nigeria has been plagued with poor and ill-equipped healthcare infrastructure, weak economy and long history of corruption as a result of political polarization. This puts strains on the government's ability to provide the basic services for its citizens manifesting in societal inequalities.

Political polarization: The event of the novel pandemic aggravated the political tension that further increased the political polarization in Nigeria. It paralyzed the Federal government's ability to effectively implement the COVID-19 measures and the control of public reactions particularly at the onset of the virus. The pandemic exacerbated the existing inequalities in the country and exposed the weaknesses of its healthcare systems, governance, structure and the social safety nets. In other words, the pandemic unfolded the longstanding and deep rooted political disunity between the different levels of governments and political parties exposing the Federal government to public distrust. This greatly delayed and hampered the effective implementation and expected successes.

First, the Federal government strategies suffered inconsistencies and delays partly because of political polarity debates over the appropriate policy measures and the approach for mitigation and containment. . For instance the implementation of the nationwide lockdowns and the mask mandate measures in the major cities faced resistance and opposition from some State governors. Political considerations were adduced for the initial reluctance and delay in the implementation of the lockdown as the ruling party was under severe criticisms from some of the opposition governors with the fear of potential economic disruptions of their states. For example, Governor Ayande of Cross Rivers in April 2020 resisted the calls for a state-wide lockdown claiming that it would harm the economy. However, his decision met some criticisms from public health experts and some of the oppositions Similarly Lagos and Kano States relaxed the lockdowns measures of the Federal government to which the Federal government expressed concern that led to disagreement between Lagos and Federal, (The Punch, June 1st, 2020) while Kano decision to "reopen schools despite the spread of the virus"(Daily Trust, 21st Sept 2020) were seen as being motivated by politics that made it difficult and improper for the coordination of uniform response to the pandemic. The reluctance to adhere to national guideline undermined and greatly contributed to the spread of the virus. The implementation

strategies suffered lack of cooperation between the States and Federal government and void of “national unity “(Awolowo D. & Ojo, O. 2012).

Lack of trust: The political polarization fuelled the mistrust between the different levels of government and parties, particularly the two major parties on the execution of the pandemic fund. For instance in May 2020 Rivers State government (PDP State) accused the Federal government (APC dominated) of deliberate refusal of COVID-19 relief funds to Rivers State. This sparked war of words between the State and the Federal Government leading to public distrust. (Vanguard News, May 21st 2020). The political party allegiance in the country greatly impacted the public reactions to the pandemic measures. It influenced public perception of COVID-19 and compliance with preventive measures. There was significant divide between the supporters of the two political parties regarding the seriousness of the virus and efficacy of government strategies particularly at the early stage of the pandemic that made the wearing of masks and social-distancing uneven across the nation. (Amadi, Maduka & Obi, (2021).

Misinformation/Disinformation: Political polarization also created an environment that paraded information that undermined public trust in government institutions. The public, particularly in the rural settings were either misinformed or uninformed about government’s efforts and the effectiveness of the strategies. This made it difficult for the ruling government to effectively implement public health measures and control. While the APC government was more cautious in its approach in the implementation, the PDP on the other hand was more critical of the government measures projecting that they are more harmful to the economy. This attitude greatly downplayed the severity of the pandemic and enshrined skepticism against the federal government measures. As Okafor and Agbakor (2022) noted, the social platform became a breeding ground for misinformation and conspiracy theories about covid-19 often fuelled by partisan allegiances leading to mistrust of public health authorities and reluctance to adhere to preventive measures. The theories inadvertently thwarted the efforts of the government to project public awareness that promotes preventive behaviors ensuring equitable access to healthcare service particularly in vulnerable communities with limited access to healthcare facilities.

Ethnic/religious belief: The country’s political landscape enshrined in ethnic and strong religion also exacerbated the challenges and popular reactions witnessed by the implementation measures. At the onset of the pandemic some religious groups deliberately defied the government restriction measures such as mass gathering, mask wearing and this contributed to

the wide spread of the virus especially with large congregational religious groups. Olapegba, Ayandele, Kolawale et al.(2020)

Party Ideology:The inherent sociopolitical divisions in Nigeria also widen the gap between political party's ideologies that shaped the public attitudes towards the vaccinating preventive measures of the government. Politicizing the vaccines led to public hesitancy of the vaccines that caused the challenges in rolling out of COVID-19 vaccination programmes largely due to misinformation and public distrust for government institutions. In other words politicizing the vaccines eroded the public trust on the scientific advice of the vaccines. There was manifestation of differential vaccine hesitancy and perceptions among individuals aligned with different political parties and ideologies. For example in the PDP States there was initial concern about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines that raised doubts and delays the acceptance of the vaccines in some regions among the PDP supporters. (Eze & Onyebuchi, 2022).

Existing Inequality: The poorly equipped and deplorable healthcare facilities were overstressed by the demand of COVID19 that makes it difficult to provide parallel healthcare services to citizens. COVID-19 exacerbated the existing inequality in the country where the poor and vulnerable disproportionately suffered healthcare while the wealthy and political leaders access better health care. According to (Ayogu & Egbara 2021), "in Nigeria the Leaders demonstrate very poor political will to develop the country's health infrastructure" and "the government officials including the rich and powerful resort to foreign medical tourism." Beside preferential treatment was considered for certain groups or areas aligned with the ruling party. The inequalities in medical services during the pandemic increased public distrust and reactions that negated complete compliance to the strategy. This has also led to decrease in citizens' poor attitudes and delay in seeking treatment for many other diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis for fear of contacting COVID19 because of poor and ineffective health services.

Limited Resources: The limited government resources were heavily strained as all resources were diverted to curtail the disease. This led to decline of the quality of government services or inputs in other spheres of the economy. The impact of COVID-19 compounded poverty and unemployment yet government support for household was scanty, resulting in dangerous coping strategies such as reducing education and scaling back food consumption having negative long-run consequences on their human capital. The poverty and unemployment rate witnessed tremendous hike in the peak of the pandemic and still on the increase in the face of

Nigeria struggling economy. The Nigeria Labour Force Survey (NLFS), (April 2023, report), noted that before 2018, unemployment rate (using the “International” methodology) were always single different in line with current estimate but saw unimaginable spike during the pandemic. According to Ojonta,(2023). “Increase in unemployment have caused the huge decline of output production in MSMEs on inadequacies of work operation by enterprises” exacerbating on the existing poverty rate. The NBS, (2022), reported the poverty of Nigerian people in 2018/19 to be 41% monetary poverty line and 63% in 2022, therefore Nigerians witnessed multidimensional poverty according to the National Multidimensional Index (MPI) survey and had 72% and 42% poor people in the rural and urban areas respectively. Similarly the unemployment rate average 4.16% from 1991 to 2023 reaching an all time 6% in the fourth quarter of 2020 (peak of the pandemic) with a lowest in 3013, (NBS, 2023). Although there was some decline from 5.30% in the last quarter of 2022 to 4.10 in 2023, Nigeria witnessed economic crash between 2020 and 2022 COVID 19 that led to widespread dissatisfaction and mixed perception of the government polices particularly the failure to provide adequate support for generality of the affected persons.

Corruption /mismanagement of stimulus packages: The public perceived the distribution of economic stimulus packages and relief fund as subjected to political influence therefore criticized government poor handling of the measures. This conception was particularly emphasized with respect to the international donors that played significant role in the implementation of the COVID-19 mitigating strategies in Nigeria. All the financial and technical assistance to Nigeria were placed under conditions of specific implementation. This led to mixed reactions and protests from the public, while some saw it as foreign donors’ dictum; others accused the Federal government of mismanagement and corruption. For instance in April 2020 the government arrested and held in detention Omoyele Sowere, a journalist and activists, for organizing protests against government poor handling of the pandemic relief fund and the action of government was widely condemned as bridging fundamental human rights, Adeyemi, Awoyemi & Omoloke (2020).

Level of public literacy: The level of literacy among the populace also undermined government efforts on one hand and public perceptions on the other particularly in preventive measures such as mask-mandate, social distancing and hands washing. For instance those with higher level of education are more likely to understand the rational and implication of the preventive strategies therefore public perception is greatly based on mixed reactions of the

populace. For example May, 2020 survey by the African Centre for Strategic Studies on People of Interest (POI) found that 64% of Nigerians believed that government was doing a good job in handling the pandemic and in July 2020 Nigeria Institute of Public Opinion poll found out that only 52% were satisfied with the response while Afro barometer survey found that only 29% of Nigeria trusted the government to provide accurate information about the pandemic. (Eziebe, Abimbola, Obinna, Idigbe, & Adebolwale. (2020).

The enforcement of government policy measures were not only criticized but seen as being used as pandemic's excuse to crackdown on dissent and freedom of citizens. For instance government COVID-19 policy that permitted police to detain anyone suspected to have the disease without warrant was widely seen as political attempt to silence the critics of the government that manifested in wide protests like the EndSARS in August 2020. The EndSARS protests coincided with the resurgence of the pandemic crises with the concern about the potential for mass gathering to spread the virus, however the movement during the pandemic can be judged with various lenses. These include protests against poor impact on public health (inadequate preventive measures), allegations of corruption and mismanagement of fund meant for relief programmes, economic hardship exacerbating the pre-existing socio-economic problems and calling for government accountability, transparency and improved governance. The intersection between EndSARS and the pandemic therefore created an atmosphere for the public demand for vibrant change in governance.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The politics of COVID-19 in Nigeria has been complex and having multifaceted challenges. The Federal government has presented mixed strategies to combat the pandemic aimed at balancing public health with the stability of the economy including healthcare measures, economic interventions and social welfare programmes. However the implementation met with challenges and diverse public reactions that shaped the mitigation and containment outcomes of the pandemic in Nigeria. Nigeria has taken a giant step to address the evil of COVID-19 by implementing economic stimulus measures and expansion of social protection programmes bedeviled with public mixed perceptions. The government responses contented with weak health infrastructure, limited resources, political polarization and public distrusts arising from misinformation and disinformation. While some Nigerians observed that the measures were inadequate, ineffective and poorly targeted and handled denying the vulnerable group and some individual's benefits others saw government efforts that curtailed the deadly disease.

The study therefore shared light on the complex interplay between the politics, government strategies, and the public perceptions in the context of the COVID -19 pandemic. The public perceptions notwithstanding, the study identified that neither the government nor the citizens alone can effectively manage the spread or death rate associated with the virus but only by their cooperation and unison. That is to say that while the government provides the strategies and recommendations the citizens must possess positive attitudinal behavior that can enhance the successes of government measures. The study also affirmed that Nigeria is encumbered with challenges of restoring full healthcare, social system, and building of stronger economy due to the conflicts of political polarization and discrepancy the parties' ideologies. There is need to strengthen public awareness, enhance the health infrastructure, and provide economic supply as essential strategies to ensure to effective and inclusive response to pandemics that can totally curb or wipe out the lingering pandemic in the country. Also that in future, all levels of government and parties must ensure that palliatives are evenly distributed across board to the beneficiaries and not along party lines.

By understanding the dynamics of Nigeria complexity, policy makers would be more equipped to develop policies that would enhance stronger health systems, more robust social safety nets and cohesion in order to effectively address future public health crises.

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