The Politicization of COVID-19 and the Global Question: Multi-Dimensional Implications for Nigeria

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Abstract
The twenty-first (21st) century is experiencing one of the most despairing moments in its history. For the first time, almost every facet of life is experiencing a standstill as a result of COVID-19 pandemic that carries with it scourging footprints. In spite of the sophisticated scientific endowments of this century, the corona virus pandemic keeps proving how inadequate this supposed sophistication could be. The responses of nations across the globe have differed with the emerging expertise to track the pandemic. Nigeria is not left out in this present quagmire as the handling of the disease has left people with varying conceptions about the nature of the pandemic. Using the exploratory approach, this paper investigates the politicized nature of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, expressing the myths and realities surrounding it and the many implications therein. The paper shows that amidst the politicized nature of the pandemic, Nigeria has challenges in terms of healthcare delivery, education and economic development to reckon with. It concludes that Nigeria must look beyond the present scourge and rethink its preparedness for attaining sustainable development.

Key Words: Politicisation, Covid-19, Globalisation, Medical Tourism, Information and Communication Technology

Introduction

The global community has always been rocked by deadly pandemics. Prabhu and Gergen provide a list of such epidemics which includes the present COVID-19 and call them "history's seven deadliest plagues". The first is the Plague of Justinian which took place from 541 to 549 and killed about 30 to 50 million people. The next is the Black Death between 1334 and 1353 with a mortality rate that stood between 75 and 200 million. Then came the New World Small Pox between from 1520 to early 1600 killing between 25 and 55 million people. There is also the Third Plague between 1855 and 1956 with a death toll of about 10 million. In1918, came the Flu that swallowed between 50 and 100 million people. This lasted up to 1920. From 1981 to the present, the HIV/AIDS has killed between 27 and 48 million people. Finally, the COVID-19 from 2020 to the present has killed between 5 and 17 million people. Such pandemics have always shaken the foundations of the globe bringing severe consequences for humanity.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, there have been conflicting opinions regarding the nature, origin and cause of the pandemic. Within political circles, people are divided as to the authenticity of the acclaimed virus, means of transmission of the various and best practices to contain the impact of the virus. Pursuant to the level of impact of the virus in developed countries where the pandemic is assumed to have sprang,

the worst case scenarios were imagined for developing countries. As the mortality rate in developing countries proved contrary to assumptions in terms of being low, it became more and more difficult to understand the dynamics of the pandemic. It is on account of this that issues bothering on the COVID-19 pandemic were reckoned as being politicized leading to a polarisation of opinions as to whether the virus was real or not and whether it was present in some countries or not.

Debate as to whether the virus was real or not, present or absent in some parts or countries of the globe is one that will continue for a long time. However, the changes that the pandemic brought to the society cannot be over-emphasised. Indeed, the realities that surrounded societal attitude towards the care of victims of the COVID-19 pandemic raise a lot of questions about collaboration among countries and races across the globe. While some counties could adjust to the paradigm shift brought by COVID-19, some were total losers as they lacked the institutional capacity to combat the effects of the pandemic. Nigeria is one of such countries that was severely impacted by the pandemic. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on Nigeria.

The Nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic came emerged from the type of virus called coronavirus. According to Hu et al, "coronaviruses are a diverse group of viruses infecting many different animals, and they can cause mild to severe respiratory infections in humans" (141). Coronavirus is very contagious and spreads almost at a supersonic rate. This is confirmed by Abdulkadir et al when the submit: "The virus is highly contagious in the human population and spreads quickly and continues to evolve rapidly as several new strains, including the Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta (B.1.617.2), and the latest Omicron (B.1.1.529) are continuously found around the globe" (3). It is quite difficult to draw a conclusion about the nature of COVID-19 because of the different and sometimes "contradictory" symptoms observed in victims of the virus. For instance, severe fever and respiratory difficulties among other symptoms were used to diagnose those infected by the virus in early beginnings of the pandemic, but later cases showed that people could also be victims without showcasing such symptoms. This is confirmed by the submission of Vetter et al as follows: "Severe acute respiratory illness with fever and respiratory symptoms, such as cough and shortness of breath, comprise the working case definition used to select people for viral testing. This strategy captures typical symptomatic presentation, but imperfectly identifies unusual manifestations, such as patients without respiratory symptoms or only very mild symptoms" (1).

There are different forms that the coronavirus can be transmitted from one person to the other. Commenting on the spread of the virus in its scientific brief, the World Health Organisation noted that "the COVID-19 virus is primarily transmitted between people through respiratory droplets and contact routes" (1). Explaining further how this happens, the World Health Organisation submits:

> Droplet transmission occurs when a person is in in close contact (within 1 m) with someone who has respiratory symptoms (e.g., coughing or sneezing) and is therefore at risk of having his/her mucosae (mouth and nose) or conjunctiva (eyes) exposed to potentially infective respiratory droplets. Transmission may also occur through fomites in the immediate environment around the infected person.8 Therefore, transmission of the COVID-19 virus can occur by direct contact with infected people and indirect contact with surfaces in the immediate environment or with objects used on the infected person (e.g., stethoscope or thermometer).

Nigeria and the Politicisation of COVID-19

Nigeria's index case of COVID-19 pandemic is associated with an Italian business who entered Lagos on the 24th of February, 2020. Two days after his entry, that is, 27th February, 2020, he was diagnosed of the virus. This singular case deepened the public's consciousness that COVID-19 was no longer far away as thought but already within the polity. The news of this index case was saluted with a lot of skepticism especially among critics of the present government. For some, it was the government's way of siphoning public funds under the pretext of fighting pandemic because as it were, acute emergency action had to be taken to prevent the virus from further spread. Others considered the announcement as a myth projected by the Nigerian government in order to gain the attention of the United Nations and other global bodies who assisted countries suffering the scourge of the pandemic on palliative grounds.

Since COVID-19 was a global health emergency, it was only appropriate for relief supports to be considered with priority given to countries already caught up in the web of the virus. As more cases were

reported, people also stigmatized the Nigerian government's efforts at keeping to terms with the agenda of the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a leading voice in the comity of African nations. Although concerted efforts of the government were corroborated by the goodwill of well-meaning individuals and groups within the country in cash and kind, serious doubts still trailed the truth surrounding the presence of the virus in Nigeria. The social media also did not help matters as conflicting information emerged regarding the index case after his acclaimed discharge. A letter purportedly written admonishing Nigerians by the Italian upon his return to his country was also attributed to an infected Nigerian in Italy whom it was claimed was advising Nigeria that the virus was real. As if that was not enough, some governors were hesitant to admit the possible presence of the virus in their States. The fact that it took time for some States such as Kogi and Cross River to be included in the daily report of new cases across the States by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control lends credence to this fact.

Other countries of the world where the virus had caused a lot of fatalities were not hesitant to create awareness by publicizing the severity of the infection on victims in intensive care units through videos to make the threat real. However, there was no such thing in Nigeria except for a few persons who only gave verbal testimonies to the acute nature of the disease, and unfortunately, some of them later confessed that they were hired to make false claims for monetary gains. Beyond the above internal scenarios, the case of Tanzania where it was claimed that the samples used for test were diagnosed of COVI-19 heightened the doubts. The samples included those of animals and plants as well as non-living things.

In spite of the doubts hovering the real presence of COVID-19 in Nigeria, after all the pandemic was global and its devastating effects on other countries were glaring, galvanizing efforts to contain it within the country was not a matter for debate. Measures were devised following the advice of health experts across the globe through global, regional and national bodies established to cushion the pandemic in terms of spread and treatment. The measures ranged from observing personal hygiene to social distancing, avoidance of large gatherings, lockdown and provision of relief materials/palliatives. Even within these measures, there were still doubts as to whether Nigeria had real COVI-19 pandemic. The misleading example by the Federal Government during the burial of the Chief of Staff to the President, Abba Kyari, supposedly considered to have died as a result of COVID-19 infection seemed to have confirmed people's suspicion that there was something fishy about the real presence of the virus in Nigeria. Against the injunction that death victims of COVID-19 should be buried immediately and at the place of death, the corpse was taken to Abuja (because by then only Lagos had the facility to attend to cases) for burial with a gathering of people more than the stipulated number allowed and some without facemasks and hand gloves. As if making a caricature of the claims of the NCDC, those in isolation centres turned those centres into playground as such videos went viral. This is counteractive to the fear-evoking videos that were viral from other countries that had cases in their intensive care units.

The poor co-ordination of some of the measures to curb the spread of the virus also did not help matters. Lockdown that was supposed to be national only began with the States acclaimed to have the highest number of cases, namely, Lagos, Ogun and the FCT, Abuja. It was only later that other States joined in the lockdown. The efficacy of the lockdown was even another perturbing issue as borders could be crossed under petty reasons such as the mere declaration of being an essential service provider often without proper verification and bribing of security agents. Many markets in States within the country were open and often people failed to observe social distancing, let alone carry face masks. It was to avoid large gatherings and to observe social distancing that schools, religious bodies, banks, industries and other centres were shutdown. Quite worrisome was the timing for relaxing the lockdown. In other countries, relaxation only came when cases had reduced in number, but in Nigeria, this happened when the number of cases was high. Amidst the fear about the virus, political parties held rallies and elections were carried out under crowded circumstances without social distancing and wearing of masks.

It will be too grave to consider the aforementioned happenings in Nigeria as enough reasons to dismiss the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic was real and present in Nigeria. From a global perspective, many people violated some of the measures to guide against the spread of the disease. A glance at the celebration of football fans in England after Liverpool Football Club was declared the Premier League Champion and Paris Saint German progressed to the Champions League Final among others will confirm this point. Of course, there were severe cases that often led to death and there were other cases under treatment. It seems wiser to posit as some have done that the number of real cases in Nigeria was not as high as claimed.

Whether or not we accept it, the pandemic shook the entire Nigerian polity to its bone marrows and left a lot of scares on the development of the country. This is a serious challenge that Nigeria must be prepared to face in the post-COVID-19 era especially if the issue of sustainable development is of any concern.

COVID-19 and Sustainable Development Crises in Nigeria

The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has made a lot of revelations regarding the challenges Nigeria faces in terms of sustainable development. Nigeria, like other African countries, must remain appreciative of the fact that the pandemic did not kill many as predicted by foreign bodies. There were predictions that African streets were going to be littered with dead bodies as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, Africa had lower casualties compared with other continents. The happenings during the period of the pandemic leave Nigeria with a lot of concerns to preoccupy herself.

At the global level, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is a limit to which the phenomenon of globalization can help Nigeria and its citizens. The pandemic led to a halt in migration, dashing the hopes of many who had fancied making the best of their lives out of the country. Unfortunately, the severity of the pandemic seems to have overwhelmed the welfare services most countries could provide for immigrants. This showed itself in the discrimination of victims of COVID-19 of Nigerian origins resident abroad in the medical facilities that were overwhelmed by patients. There was an outcry on social media from health workers who complained that Blacks were literally left to die as medical services were discriminated against them. This is where the issue of racism surfaces amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation is also explainable by the phenomenon of evacuation that has been experienced during this period. It only shows that Nigeria should not rely on foreign nations to make the lives of her citizens better. While promoting the global agenda, there is need for wisdom to make Nigeria consider how it can internally accentuate her effects for sustainable development.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the poor health care system of Nigeria which reflected in her unpreparedness for the health emergency that the virus brought. This is confirmed by the studies Abdulkadir et al (10). As of the time that the cases were very few, Nigeria was yet to have isolation centres and testing kits for the pandemic. This should not come as a surprise because Nigeria had already scored very low in the index of preparedness for health emergencies back in 2017 (Editorial Board, *The Guardian*). Medical research laboratories are inadequate and there is also evident insufficiency of manpower in the sector. One thing that has affected the sector severely is the problem of medical tourism. Nigerian leaders have always factored foreign medical treatment than that at home. Consequently, they have left the system or sector malnourished for only the poor. Unfortunately for them, the possibility of foreign treatment was blocked by border closures and lockdown such that no one could seek medical attention abroad. Maybe if the situation had not been that way, the leaders would have been less-concerned about the health emergency as they could always run abroad for their medical care.

Religious Impact

Worshippers across the major religions were not spared of the politics, myths and realities of COVID-19. Unlike the Ebola Virus of 2014 in which the effect was immediate, the symptoms of COVID-19 were sometimes confusing. Consequently, it strengthened the speculation that it was mere politics by the ruling class to derive another means of looting public funds. This would not be the first time an outbreak of this magnitude would leave people confused. According to Nwakanwa Kingdom, the Ebola saga of 2014 was portrayed by the media in such a way that people were left terrified and confused. There were lots of fake stories and propaganda that it was an invention by the elite to create wealth, and an attempt by the West to reduce African population and exploit their resources (14). Worshippers received the news of covid-19 with mixed reactions as some were suspicious and deemed the whole idea as an attempt to deprive them of their right to worship. In fact, many mosques and churches refused to adhere to the COVID-19 guidelines. The National Centre for Disease Control intent on enforcing the law made some arrests in places of worship, including church leaders.

Worst of all, believers began to discriminate among themselves based on adherence to the COVID-19 guidelines. In the Catholic Church, for instance, a group of pious people felt that the application of some COVID-19 guidelines was an expression of lack of faith, especially on the part of religious leaders. In remote areas, there were worshippers who believed COVID-19 was only in the big towns of Lagos and Abuja, where occupants were either expatriates or have first returned from foreign countries. In fact, some believed it was "big-man's disease". Thus, while it was easy for the city centres to observe the COVID-19

guidelines, in the suburbs it was difficult to convince worshippers about the endemic virus and more difficult to get them to observe the guidelines.

Impact on Education

There was no aspect of the societal life that was spared during the heat of the covid-19 pandemic. The number one guideline was to avoid any form of gathering. Consequently, people had to device means of carrying on with their social life. It is no news that all institutions of learning were closed down during the pandemic. Thus, e-learning became expedient as students were able to receive lessons from the comforts of their homes for the few institutions that could afford it. Learning materials were passed across to students of tertiary institutions. The good news is that institutions are now building on this experience to be more technology-friendly in learning experience of their students.

Impact on the Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a lot of impact on the economy. During the pandemic, most economic activities were at a standstill. Except for technologically-driven economies, the lockdowns and many other measures employed to contain the virus did allow economies that depended on human labour to adequately function. Most markets were shut down and the few that could open only did so under strict conditions. The transportation sector was not spared the impact as airports and airlines were non-functional following the fact that many could not travel. Most business ventures were grounded as their capacities could not contain the impact of the virus. In many climes, people lost their jobs as most employers could not pay their employees. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported that about20 percent of the full-time workforce in Nigeria lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Ejechi). Sasu's 2022 review encapsulates this impact in more details as follows: "As of 2022, an estimated number of 2.2 million full-time equivalent jobs were lost in Nigeria due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis. This was aggregated considering 40 hours per week of working time. In 2021, around 3.6 million full-time equivalent jobs were lost due to the pandemic, decreasing from over 5.7 million in the previous year."For most struggling economies, especially those of the developing world, borrowing and bailouts became the only source of survival.

COVID-19 and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

There is no gainsaying that the COVID-19 pandemic given a new direction to Nigeria's march towards sustainable development. Following the dynamics and impact of the pandemic on all aspects of life, Nigeria has the opportunity to re-examine her efforts at sustainable development. The import of building a technologically-driven society is a fact beyond debate. Many countries were able to contain to the impact of the pandemic because of the technologically developed advantage over others. Within this context, the role of artificial intelligence cannot be over-emphasised. Artificial intelligence has proven to be a reliable driver of economic development by its application in almost all fields of human endeavours: medicine, education, agriculture, marketing and the like.

The need for an improved healthcare delivery system cannot be over-emphasised. Healthcare facilities during the COVID-19 period were overwhelmed by the yawning number victims of the pandemic. The donation of buildings by individuals and groups to accommodate victims proves that the healthcare facilities in Nigeria were inadequate. This calls for the expansion of the health facilities. Structural expansion alone will not help the situation as the structures will need to be furnished with ultra-modern medical facilities and equipment as well as adequate and competent manpower.

The educational sector must learn from the blows it suffered by becoming technologically driven. While the educational sector in most developing countries were at a standstill, the developing countries leveraged on their technological advantage to keep the sector alive. Nigeria must prioritise a technologically-driven educational sector. This will salvage her educational sector from the consequences it suffered during COVID-19.

Other sectors must leverage on the opportunities afforded by technology to combat the effect of pandemics in the future. The application of technology in agriculture, business, marketing and even governance can keep the efforts at sustainable development on a balance even in the face of pandemics such as COVID-19. This is only possible when the supporting institutions are made available to ensure there are no setbacks to sustainable development.

Concluding Remarks

There is no doubt about the devastating effect of COVID-19, especially when one look as at the death of millions of people across the globe and the general impact on the entire fabrics of our societies. However, the COVID-19 pandemic must be seen as a blessing in disguise because of the changes it has brought to the society and the way we live our lives. COVID-19 has challenges societies to pay attention to key areas of sustainable development. The transformations in the medical, educational, religious, economic spheres of our societies cannot be over-emphasised. Many schools were forced to be more internet friendly as both teaches and students learned to organize virtual lectures. The same can be said of businesses, worship and social activities. As they say, necessity is the mother of invention. Beyond that, the pandemic has improved our sense of hygiene. Schools, churches, offices and other institutions are now very concerned about maintaining a high level of hygiene. Mynepolli Sridhar et al recount the impact of COVID-19 in India by noting that "it is has made it a more powerful State. It made its government and health workers better, especially in responding health issues (286).Whether same can be said of Nigeria, only time can tell.

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