

Managing Nigeria's Image Crisis: Akunyili's Rebranding Programme to the Rescue (?)

Victor Egwemi

Department of Political Science, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Nigeria

Abstract: This research examines the current image problem in Nigeria, the attempt to launder this image via rebranding, the kind of reactions that rebranding has elicited and a prognosis on what can be done. This is against the background of the image crisis that the country suffered from between 1993 and 1999. The image crisis in that period was largely attributed to Nigeria's lack of democratic progress. This image crisis was again compounded by the fraud that characterized the 2007 general elections. While arguing that the rebranding programme seems to be more of a cosmetic remedy, the paper recommends among other things that beyond sloganeering, the Nigerian government needs to address the issues that gave rise to the image crisis in the first place. This is the only way that Nigeria can get out of the image quagmire.

Key words: Image abyss, image crisis, Nigeria, rebranding programme

INTRODUCTION

Rebranding is not about telling the world what does exist (Ali, 2009). Rebranding is not just a slogan. A brand must be able to deliver on its promises. Has the country as a brand delivered on its promise of being a great nation? (Badejo-Okunsanya in Alao, 2009).

The above position and query summarizes the skepticism with which the re-branding programme of the Yar'Adua administration led by Dora Akunyili, Nigeria's Information Minister has been greeted. Of course, the re-branding programme has not been without its own supporters (Ishaq, 2009; Nwora, 2009). However, most commentaries on the re-branding programme have been anything but complementary. This paper is an appraisal of Nigeria's image crisis, the attempts made in the past to tackle it and the current Re-branding Nigeria Project.

Re-branding Nigeria is an initiative of the Federal Ministry of Information and Communication. In the words of the minister, Dora Akunyili the programme is about "a new chapter in our attempt as a people to take conscious steps at redefining our nation, re-examining our values and character and rededicating ourselves to the ideas of our founding fathers (Alao, 2009). The project 'addresses fundamental issues of how Nigeria is perceived as a country and how Nigerians are perceived as a people' (National Life, 2009).

The rebranding project is important to the extent that a nation's foreign image (as we will see shortly) is a major index in judging her standing vis-à-vis other nations. To that extent therefore, the project is not only commendable but worthwhile. But then some questions have to be asked at this point. How did Nigeria acquire for herself an image that is so sordid that it requires rebranding? What were

the efforts made in the past to address the image crisis? What has been the success of the rebranding project so far? What can be done to deal with the image crisis once and for all? This study attempts to answer these and other related questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Nation's foreign image: The positive perception of any country's image is an important gauge for judging her standing in the international political system. A good image translates to respect, influence and prestige. On the other hand a bad or negative perception of a country's image indicates that such a country lacks respect, influence and prestige in the international system. As a consequence, all countries endeavour to build, maintain and enhance their images in relation to other countries. The factors that determine a nation's image (for good or for bad) can be both internal and external. Internally, a succession of regimes of bad policies and practice can lead to this. Externally, it could be through participation in foreign military and humanitarian missions. An image problem usually occurs when there are both internal and external factors that sway the pendulum towards a bad/negative image. Whatever the source of an image problem, many a country would do all that is possible to overcome such an image.

Nigeria's external image has swung between periods of extreme positivity to periods of extreme negativity. Over the years in the country's political history, she juggled between a good image at certain periods (e.g., between 1960-1967, 1970-1983, 1999-2007) and a bad image at other periods (1993-1999, 2007-date) (Saliu, 2002; Egwemi, 1998, 2003, 2007; Egwemi and

Usman, 2007). During periods of negative external image, the various governments have responded via different programmes and policies aimed at turning around and improving the negative image. These have met with varying degrees of success.

Nigeria's image in historical perspective: Saliu (2002) has painted the picture of a positive image for Nigeria in the 1960's. The image was tarnished in a way by the country's civil war between 1967-1970. After the Civil war and especially under Gen. Murtala Muhammed regime, Saliu (2002) contends that "the country's image soared high in the world. Not only was the principle of Africa as centre piece of Nigeria's foreign policy eloquently given practical demonstration, Nigeria indeed assumed the proper role of an African leader. Her views were always sought on African Affairs even by the former colonizers (Saliu, 2002).

Explaining the origins of the image problem: In the decade of 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria's image deteriorated. What could have brought this about for a nation, which in the 1970's was practically the toast of the international community? Saliu offers an explanation for the negative image, which Nigeria projected in the 1990's. According to him, to some extent, it could be argued that the negative image of Nigeria was part of the biases of the global system towards the African continent. He pursues the argument: A section of the international system – often derives pleasure in advertising negative occurrences in Africa while the positive aspects of the continent are conveniently ignored, or half heartedly projected. In this regard, one can cite the breakthrough achieved by Africa through the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) under Nigerian leadership, bringing an end to the Liberian civil war. Much as this fact is unprecedented in the history of sub-regional conflict resolution efforts, "the controllers of world affairs" at best has only acknowledged this fact grudgingly (Saliu, 2002). As an observer once put it, ECOMOG has achieved what the West could not do in former Yugoslavia with all its appreciable resource profile. The cause of Africa's image is not helped by the economic weakness of African countries. To be sure, the continent does not control the latest communication gadgets with which to blow its trumpet. The responsibility for projecting African affairs therefore sadly lies with the biased West. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA), the Cable Network News (CNN) and other western media, are apparently eager to air, or beam to the world, negative African news such as coups, famine, drought, conflicts, etc. The point being made is that Nigeria's image problem in 1990s was also a part of the larger African negative image. As such,

much as the country tried to launder her image, her efforts could only bring about incremental dividends while she shared the negative image climate with other African countries. Related to the above is the conspiracy thesis, which has been strongly canvassed by some Nigerian. Essentially, the thesis maintains that the negative image that was associated with Nigeria was borne out of the city linked with the impressive resource profile of the country. As the most populous, and mineral rich country in Africa, she was a target of the envy of her former colonizer, and the West, which were at the head of a campaign of calumny against the Nigerian state. The strength in this argument revealed itself in the 1970s, when relying on her relative economic buoyancy, Nigeria ignored President Ford's note urging African states to support a unity government in Luanda in November 1975. The Obasanjo regime continued with the tradition of assertiveness when it nationalized the assets of BP in Shell-BP to the displeasure of Britain, the country's colonial master. These experiences may have informed the west that there is more sense in projecting a negative image for Nigeria to weaken her influence in the international system. (Saliu, 2002). On the other hand, Nigeria too has not helped her case. Faced with a hostile environment, Nigerian decision makers should have been more patriotic and transparent in their handling of public affairs. The failure of the leadership, therefore, to rise up to the level commensurate with the manifest destiny of Nigeria to lead Africa and the black world, armed the external environment with necessary weapons to confer a pariah status on the country. In the contemporary international system, military rule is an aberration. Therefore, any country being ruled by the military cannot but be limited in the pursuit of her goals in the global system. The world has really come to be fully aware of the dangers of dictatorship. Not too long ago, Mobutu's dictatorship in the former defunct Zaire was uprooted, the regime's initial collaboration with the western world notwithstanding Sierra Leone was suspended from the Commonwealth because of the termination of democracy in the country by the Major John Koromah's military coup. The Mainasara military coup in Niger in January 1996 was promptly greeted by a regime of sanctions informed by the reverse, which the coup had put to the democratization process. We have gone this far to put the matter in perspective. Nigeria's recourse to military intervention in the 1990's served to project a bad image for her. A section of the international community in the view of Nigerian officials may have exaggerated the country's case. But in Nigeria many citizens had a strong aversion for military rule. In fairness to the military, they realized this. Hence, the implementation of the political transition programme was partly intended to win legitimacy for the country internationally, In keeping with

the global democratic culture, Nigeria made the search for a durable democracy a constant policy goal. But the mishandling of the political transition programme by Babangida's military regime climaxed with the crisis-laden annulment of the June 12 Presidential election which Moshood Abiola was set to win for the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Even the role of damage control envisioned for the Interim National Government could not mitigate the afflictions brought on the state by the annulment of the election. If anything, Shonekan's Interim National Government (ING) suffered a legitimacy problem, thus providing the impetus for the emergence of the Abacha military regime in November 1993. Not surprisingly, the regime inherited all the grudges nursed against the Babangida administration, its conception notwithstanding. Abacha's regime raised some concern when it uprooted all the democratic structures put in place by its substantive predecessor administration. Although the regime announced a new transition programme in 1995, it had a negative image given its authoritarian mould. And thus began the international attempt to isolate Nigeria (Saliu, 2002). When General Abdulsalami Abubakar took over after the death of Abacha, he urgently put in place a transition programme. This was in tandem with the mood of the world at that time. Abubakar handed over to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo on the 29th of May 1999. Obasanjo inherited this image crisis and he had to embark on a lot of foreign trips to turn around the country's image (Egwemi, 2003). And the truth is that Obasanjo succeeded on that score. His ability to successfully launder and restore the hitherto bastardized image of the country will forever be remembered (Nigerian Tribune, 2007).

In this paper, we focus on the 2007 general elections as a key indicator of Nigeria's contemporary international standing. Nigeria's failure to abide by internationally accepted electoral standards has cast a long shadow on her international standing. The failure of the 2007 elections seems to have been accentuated by the rerun gubernatorial elections across the country. This came to a head with the 2009 re-run gubernatorial elections in Ekiti state. We will turn to a full discussion of these issues shortly.

While focusing on Nigeria's democratic failure, it is not to say that it is the only determinant of image crisis. Other determinants are, corruption and the crisis in the Niger-Delta. However, we focus on democratic failure in this paper because of its recurrence in Nigeria's image problem and because of the relevance of democratic compliance in the contemporary world as we hope to see in the discussion that follows shortly.

The 2007 election and Nigeria's decline into the image abyss: As we have indicated Nigeria has been looked upon over the years since its independence to show the

democratic example to the rest of Africa (Egwemi, 1998, 2003, 2007). Many times she has failed to do this. Starting from the annulment of the June 12, 1999 election, Nigeria's democratic failure or success (among other issues and factors) has been a major gauge for assessing her external image. As indicated in the previous section, Obasanjo during his eight-year presidency largely reversed the negative image of Nigeria. Unfortunately, the way and manner in which the 2007 elections were conducted under his watch has again taken Nigeria back to her pre 1999 image profile. The country's second democratic failure, that is, the fraud associated with the 2007 election, again brought to the fore her external image problem (Egwemi and Usman, 2007). The elections were generally flawed and most of the observers of the process reported that they fell "far short of the basic international and regional standards ... and cannot be considered to have been credible" (Anonymous, 2007). This assessment was corroborated by Nigeria's present Umar Musa Yar'Adua when he admitted after his swearing in ceremony that the process from which he emerged president "had some shortcomings" and therefore promised "to review the entire electoral process" (Daily Trust, 2007). Since the 2007 election Nigeria's external image has taken a plunge.

The image crisis has not been helped in anyway by the seeming inability to fix the electoral process. (Haruna, 2009; Karofi, 2009; Oladesu, 2009). This is therefore clear especially after the electoral reform commission submitted its report and attempts seem to be on to water down some of the important recommendations of the committee (Mato, 2009; National Life, 2009).

Added to this, are the problems that have been associated with the series of re-run gubernatorial elections in Kogi, Cross River, Adamawa, Bayelsa and most recently Ekiti States. In the case of the Ekiti re-run it has been said that it "has acted as an acid test for the Yar'Adua government on the controversial electoral reform... It is a mirror of what to expect from Yar'Adua electoral reform" (Ali, 2009). The opprobrium that greeted the Ekiti re-run will indeed take a long time to die down. As it relates to the rebranding project, the Ekiti re-run and the perpetrators of the electoral fraud specifically, Ali has argued rather convincingly as follows:

The day Akunyili succeeds in re-branding this set of people, people who are hell bent on overriding the collective wishes of the people, the re-branding job will be made as simple as ABC (Ali, 2009).

For a society that wants to change international views about herself, the kind of thing that happened in Ekiti re-run elections can only be a big blow in spite of the orchestrated re-branding programme. (Ali, 2009;

Badmus, 2009; Sorunke, 2009; Financial Times, 2009; Ajayi, 2009).

Obama's shunning of Nigeria as indicator of Nigeria's international rating Elsewhere, this scholar had made the following observation:

That the last elections in Nigeria have brought her back to her pre-1999 image is not in doubt Nigeria's new president... has promised to reform the electoral process. How urgently and sincerely he does this, would go a long way to shore up Nigeria's image in the international political system... in a globalized world where democracy has become the mantra, any tendency towards anti-democratic practices can only create an image crisis for the country involved" (Egwemi, 2007).

When this opinion was expressed, the elections that produced Barrak Obama, America's new president were over a year away. Obama took power early 2009. In Obama's first visit to Africa, Nigeria was not on his itinerary. This has variously been described as a slight on Nigeria (Adeleye, 2009; Nnanna, 2009; Kperogi, 2009; Odunga, 2009; Ogunbayo, 2009).

On the other hand, President Obama and some of his officials have tried to deny snubbing Nigeria (Kperogi, 2009). However, it has been argued that Obama's administrations warm relations with any country would be premised on good governance, social inclusion, transparency in government, fight against corruption and tolerance of the opposition" (Kperogi, 2009). If any one is in doubt about this, the statement by Obama's press secretary on the reasons for choosing Ghana will suffice. According to him:

The president and Mrs. Obama look forward to strengthening the US relationship with one of our most sub-Saharan Africa, and to highlighting the critical role that sound governance and civil society play in promoting lasting development (Kperogi, 2009, emphasis mine).

One will recall that Nigeria had conducted an election in 2007 that was fraught with massive vote rigging and violence. This was in sharp contrast with the Ghanaian elections, which were relatively peaceful and led to the handover of power by the incumbent party.

As it is today Nigeria which should be a model for the rest of Africa has lost this pride of place because countries like Ghana which seem to have taken the initiative, are occupying the front row and have left the back bench for Nigeria.

Obama's snub of Nigeria is not the first time in the life of the Yar'Adua administration that the country is

being snubbed by the leading countries of the world. At the G20 summit in London, April 2, 2009, Nigeria was excluded, the country was not found worthy to be invited to the gathering of the 20 leading industrialized countries of the world. (Nigerian Compass, 2009; Aremu, 2009). At the end of the summit, Yar'Adua could only lament Nigeria's absence (Aremu, 2009). But beyond all the lamentations of the President what is important for him to do according to Akuta (2009) is to "put Nigeria on the right tract so that the outside world would take us seriously". Until this is done, Nigeria's international stature would continue to dim (Daily Trust, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Nigeria has been plagued by image crisis at various times in its history. During these periods several attempts were made to launder the country's image. It would seem that Nigeria has fallen into an established pattern of falling in and out of the image quandary. And this pattern seems to recur most poignantly when Nigeria experiences democratic failure.

The rebranding strategy, which we examined in the paper, is a direct fall out of the electoral fraud that characterized the 2007 general elections among other issues. Obama's snub of Nigeria is more than enough reason for her to know that no amount of re-branding can change the story of the 2007 election and the re-run elections across other states of the country and especially the one in Ekiti State. If the rebranding strategy (or any other strategy for that matter) is to succeed, then there is a need for attitudinal change on the part of Nigerians especially of her leaders. The leaders need to change their attitude to the issues of power and electoral contest. The led also need to develop a culture of resistance to illegitimate leaders. These have to be done to take Nigeria out of the image quagmire once and for all.

On a final note, it is clear that the re-branding slogan only seems to be a cosmetic remedy since it is only an attempt to clear up the surface instead of addressing the core of the matter. In such a situation, it is clear that it is not a strategy that would do Nigeria's image any good.

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