THE IMPACT OF POPULISM ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION 2015 - 2023

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Abstract

Research Problem:
The populist "Change" mantra of 2015 was ambiguous. It is unclear whether the public perceived "Change" as a call for strengthening democratic institutions (rule of law, accountability) or as a mandate for a strongman to bypass those same institutions, if necessary, to deliver on substantive promises like fighting corruption and insecurity. The "impact" of populism on democratic governance is not just an objective, institutional phenomenon; it is mediated by public opinion. If the public perceives a leader's actions as necessary and legitimate (even if anti-democratic), it fundamentally alters the nature of accountability.

Methods/Theory:
This study employs a mixed-methods approach, synthesizing data from public opinion surveys, such as the Afrobarometer, with qualitative content analysis of presidential speeches, campaign messaging, and media reports.The analysis is structured around key populist themes: the anti-corruption crusade, nationalist security rhetoric, and economic interventionist policies.

Results:
Findings indicate a significant dichotomy in public perception. While President Buhari's populist rhetoric initially resonated with a populace weary of corruption and insecurity, leading to high approval ratings, these perceptions eroded over time. The anti-corruption war was increasingly viewed as selective, security strategies were perceived as ineffective and ethnically biased, and economic populism failed to alleviate widespread hardship.

Key Contribution to Knowledge:
The application of this populist strategy had a deleterious effect on Nigeria's democratic governance. The analysis of public perception reveals a consistent pattern: initial enthusiasm followed by profound disappointment. The anti-corruption war was perceived as partisan, security strategies were seen as biased, and economic populism failed to

deliver tangible benefits, leading instead to greater hardship.The impact on democratic institutions was severe.

Recommendation:

For the future of democracy in Nigeria, this experience holds a critical lesson. While populist appeals can be a powerful tool for political mobilization, they are no substitute for the difficult work of institutional reform, inclusive governance, and sound policymaking. Future research should continue to track public attitudes to assess the long-term impact of this era on Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

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1. Introduction

The 21st century has experienced a worldwide revival of populism, a political phenomenon that contrasts virtuous "people" with a corrupt and self-serving "elite." Although extensively analysed in Western democracies, its expression and effects in African contexts, especially in Nigeria, require further examination. Nigeria, the most populous nation in Africa, possesses an intricate democratic history characterised by military governance and a difficult transition to stable civilian rule. The 2015 victory of Muhammadu Buhari, a former military leader regarded as a transformed democrat and an uncorrupted representative of the populace, marked a pivotal milestone. His campaign was founded on a compelling populist narrative: to liberate Nigeria from a corrupt political elite, eradicate systemic corruption, and reinstate national security.

This paper examines the influence of the populist strategies utilised by the Buhari administration from 2015 to 2023 on the quality and stability of democratic governance in Nigeria. The primary argument posits that although Buhari's populism contributed significantly to his electoral victory and initially rallied public backing, its implementation ultimately resulted in the degradation of democratic principles, societal polarisation, and a diminishment of public confidence in governmental institutions. This was chiefly due to the lack of substantive institutional reforms or tangible enhancements in the lives of ordinary citizens to complement the populist appeal.

This study will examine the following research topics to investigate the thesis:

(i) . What were the principal attributes of the populist rhetoric and techniques utilised by the Buhari administration?

(ii) What was the Nigerian public's perception of these populist initiatives, specifically the anti-corruption campaign, security measures, and economic strategies?

(iii) How did the administration's populist strategy enhance or undermine essential democratic institutions and norms, including the rule of law, separation of powers, and political accountability?

2. Research Problem

The essence of the research focusses on the perceived conflict between the allure of populism and the implementation of democratic governance in Nigeria during the Buhari administration. Although there is considerable literature on the actual institutional effects of the Buhari administration (e.g., judicial rulings, legislative-executive dynamics, economic

strategies), a notable deficiency remains in objectively evaluating how the Nigerian populace has manoeuvred through this contradiction.

There is a lack of clarity regarding the extent to which the Nigerian populace views the administration's activities as populist, and importantly, how this perception affects their overall evaluation of democratic quality.The issue is threefold; first, the populist "Change" slogan of 2015 was vague. The public's perception of "Change" remains ambiguous; it is uncertain whether they viewed it as a demand to reinforce democratic institutions (such as the rule of law and accountability) or as a directive for a strongman to circumvent those institutions, if needed, to fulfil significant commitments like combating corruption and insecurity. Secondly, there is a deficiency of sufficient evidence regarding the public's perception of a "trade-off." Did citizens who endorsed Buhari's populist, anti-corruption position subsequently exhibit increased tolerance for anti-democratic practices, like the infringement of court rulings or the repression of dissent? Did those who esteemed formal democratic processes view his populism as a veneer for authoritarian inclinations? Third, the influence of populism on democratic government is not merely an objective, institutional occurrence; it is shaped by public sentiment. When the public views a leader's actions as essential and legitimate, even if they are anti-democratic, it fundamentally transforms the essence of responsibility. This study examines the primary issue: To what degree did the Nigerian public's opinion of the Buhari administration's populist language and approach influence their evaluation of the health and quality of democratic governance in Nigeria from 2015 to 2023?

3. Conceptual Clarification

3.1 Nigeria

Nigeria is a federal nation located in West Africa. It is the continent's most populous nation and greatest economy. It is a fairly diversified nation including over 250 ethnic groupings. Contemporary Nigerian governance is frequently examined in light of its substantial issues, which encompass the management of significant oil wealth, the fight against pervasive corruption, and the mitigation of widespread security threats, including the Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and separatist movements.

3.2 Democratic Governance

Democratic governance constitutes a governmental framework that transcends the mere conduct of elections. It denotes the ability of a state to operate in accordance with democratic norms. Essential elements comprise:

The Rule of Law: Every citizen and the state are subject to legal accountability. ii. Robust Institutions: The existence of autonomous and efficient entities, including a court, legislature, and civil service. iii. Accountability and Transparency: Government acts, decisions, and expenditures are subject to public examination, and officials are held accountable for them. Public Participation: Citizens possess the right and capacity to engage in political processes. The state diligently safeguards the essential rights and liberties of every citizen.

3.3 Buhari Administration

The Buhari Administration denotes the federal government of Nigeria under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari from 2015 to 2023. This administration ascended to office on a notable campaign program founded on three principal pillars: Addressing security, particularly the Boko

Haram conflict. Combating corruption. Stimulating economic recovery. Analysis of this time generally centres on the policies, achievements, and shortcomings associated with these three fundamental commitments.

3.4 Anti-Corruption

Anti-Corruption encompasses the policies, methods, and measures implemented to combat, avert, and respond to corrupt practices. To comprehend anti-corruption, one must initially delineate corruption, which is predominantly recognised as the exploitation of entrusted authority for personal benefit. This may encompass bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and fraud. Anti-corruption initiatives encompass the enhancement of legal frameworks and investigative agencies (such as the EFCC in Nigeria), the establishment of transparent systems (such as the Treasury Single Account, or TSA), and the cultivation of a culture of integrity.

3.5 Security

In a national context, security pertains to the safeguarding of a nation-state, its institutions, and its citizens against various dangers. This concept encompasses more than merely protection against foreign military forces. It encompasses: i. External Threats: Military attack from foreign nations.Internal Threats: Terrorism, insurgencies (e.g., Boko Haram), pervasive criminal activity (e.g., banditry and kidnapping), civil upheaval, and separatist movements. Additional Threats: Economic instability, food scarcity, and environmental catastrophes that jeopardise state stability and the welfare of its populace.

3.6 Populism

Populism is a political ideology that resonates with common individuals who perceive their issues as overlooked by entrenched elite factions. It conceptualises politics as a moral conflict between: "The Pure People": A moral, cohesive, and industrious populace."The Corrupt Elite": A self-serving and ethically deficient elite encompassing politicians, media figures, corporate leaders, and academics. Populist leaders frequently portray themselves as the sole authentic representatives of "the real people," asserting a direct, unmediated link with them. This technique can be "thin-centered," indicating its potential alignment with diverse left-wing or right-wing beliefs.

3.7 Public Perception

Public perception refers to the aggregate opinion, belief, and attitude of the general populace regarding an individual, organisation, policy, or government. It is the "reputation" or "image" of that entity in the public consciousness. This perception is not solely grounded in objective facts but is influenced by a confluence of: Media reportage (news and social media)
ii. Individual encounters. Oral communication and social persuasion fourth Formal correspondence (propaganda or public relations) In governance, public perception is vital as it directly influences a government's legitimacy, credibility, and the people's faith in its institutions.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis. This approach allows for the measurement of public opinion trends while also capturing the nuances of political discourse and public sentiment.

4.1. Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data regarding public perception was predominantly obtained from nationally representative surveys, including:

Afrobarometer: Rounds 7 (2017) and 8 (2020) were utilised to monitor fluctuations in public confidence in the presidency, judiciary, and security forces; perceptions of corruption; and contentment with the government's performance on critical areas such as security and the economy. Nigeria-specific Polls: Data from reputable polling organisations such as SBM Intelligence and NOIPolls were examined to offer more regular assessments of presidential approval ratings and popular sentiment about certain government policies (e.g., border closures, anti-corruption arrests). The analysis utilised descriptive statistics to encapsulate significant patterns and inferential statistics, including t-tests and chi-square tests, to investigate the links between demographic variablesnamely ethnicity, region, and ageand opinions of the administration's populist actions.

4.2. Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data was collected to analyse the content and presentation of the administration's populist messaging. The sources comprise: Presidential Speeches and Official Communications: Significant speeches, including inaugural addresses, national day broadcasts, and media interactions, underwent thematic content analysis. This discovered persistent populist themes, frameworks, and rhetorical strategies.Campaign Materials: The 2015 and 2019 All Progressives Congress (APC) campaign manifestos, slogans, and commercials were examined to deconstruct the formulation of Buhari's populist persona. Media Analysis: A selected compilation of news items and opinion pieces from prominent Nigerian newspapers (e.g., The Guardian, Premium Times, Daily Trust) was analysed to assess the media framing of governmental actions and public responses. Qualitative analysis concentrated on discerning the fundamental populist narrative and its application in reaction to significant political, economic, and security occurrences.

4.3. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The research recognises specific constraints. Survey data, although comprehensive, may not entirely encapsulate the intricacies of human perspectives. Moreover, public perception is malleable and susceptible to the influence of political media. This study addresses these concerns by triangulating data from several sources. All utilised data will be publically accessible, hence mitigating any ethical problems related to human beings. The analysis will seek neutrality, recognising both the initial allure and later critiques of the administration's populist position.

5. Theoretical Framework

This research will be directed by a comprehensive theoretical model that links three separate domains of inquiry: (1) the ideational perspective on populism, (2) theories of democratic regression, and (3) socio-psychological frameworks of public perception, particularly framing and social identity theory. The primary assertion is that the populist language of the Buhari administration (2015-2023), which characterised politics as a moral conflict between "the virtuous populace" and "the corrupt elite," did not directly influence democratic governance. Rather, it influenced public perception regarding the criteria for effective government. This populist narrative prompted the public to view democratic institutions, such as the court and legislature, and democratic norms, including the rule of law, as impediments to the "will of the people."

The effect on democratic governance is assessed by the deterioration of public trust in these institutions, which subsequently provides

leaders with the popular mandate to undermine them.

The Ideational Approach to Populism (Cas Mudde)

Core Concept: This study transcends the notion of populism as merely a political style. It utilises Cas Mudde'scharacterisation of populism as a "thin-centered ideology." This ideology is "thin" due to its minimal intrinsic substance, relying instead on affiliation with other ideologies such as social conservatism or nationalism. Essential Elements:"The Unadulterated Individuals": A virtuous, cohesive, and genuine "common man" (e.g., the talakawa in Nigeria).

"The Corrupt Elite": A self-interested, ethically deficient establishment that operates contrary to the interests of the populace (e.g., "corrupt politicians," "compromised judges," "Lagos elite"). "The General Will" (Volonté Générale): The conviction that the populist leader possesses a direct, unmediated link to the "people" and is the sole individual capable of actualising their authentic desires, frequently rationalising actions that circumvent established institutions. Application (2015-2023): This paradigm enables the research to operationalise the populist rhetoric of the Buhari administration. The 2015 campaign and ensuing administration rhetoric is examined for its persistent portrayal of its fundamental policies, particularly the anti-corruption initiative, as a moral struggle of "the people" (headed by a "incorruptible" Buhari) against a "corrupt political and judicial elite" that had "devastated" Nigeria.

Democratic Backsliding / Erosion (Steven Levitsky& Daniel Ziblatt)

Core Concept: Conventional conceptions of democratic governance, such as Dahl's polyarchy, are inadequate. Levitsky and Ziblatt's work, "How Democracies Die," offers a more pertinent perspective. They contend that contemporary democracies never perish through dramatic military coups, as witnessed in Nigeria's history, but are instead "ousted" by elected officials.
ii. Essential Elements of Erosion: This thesis asserts that democratic government is undermined by: a) Manipulating the Overseers: Systematically undermining or seizing neutral institutions such as the courts and election commissions (INEC). b) Marginalising Key Stakeholders: Designating political adversaries and dissenting media as adversaries of the state.
c) Amending Regulations: Altering statutes or constitutional interpretations to benefit the executive and disadvantage adversaries. Application (2015-2023): This concept characterises "democratic governance" not solely by the occurrence of elections, but by the perceived robustness of its institutions and norms. The influence of populism is evaluated by gauging popular perception of the administration's actions relative to these principles. The public's assessment of the executive's confrontations with the judiciary, such as the Onnoghen case, or the legislature serves as a key indicator for evaluating the perceived state of democratic government.

Framing Theory & Social Identity Theory

1. Framing Theory (Goffman, Entman):

Core Concept: This theory asserts that the manner in which an issue is presented ("framed") to the public profoundly affects individuals' decision-making. It is not solely the content of the message, but also the manner in which it is conveyed. Application: The Buhari administration articulated its fundamental policies in populist language.a) The Anti-Corruption War Frame: This was not presented as a legal, due-process-oriented matter. It was presented as an ethical struggle for the nation's existence. The Outcome:

Within this "moral conflict" framework, institutions such as the judiciary that upheld "elite" principles like "due process," "evidence," and "rule of law" were readily reinterpreted by the administration as participating in corruption and hindering the "will of the people." This study evaluated popular perceptions of the conflict.

2. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner):

The fundamental idea is that individuals obtain a portion of their identity from groups ("in-groups") and exhibit preferential treatment towards their in-group while harbouring bias against "out-groups."Application: Populism exemplifies the strategic application of Social Identity Theory. The Buhari administration fostered a robust "in-group" including the "honest, ordinary Nigerians" and the "long-suffering masses," delineated against a distinct "out-group" of the "corrupt elite," "political thieves," and "unpatriotic judges."
The Consequence: This research posits that voters who strongly identified with the "in-group" (i.e., proponents of the populist message) saw any assault on the "out-group" (even if targeting a democratic institution such as the judiciary or legislature) favourably. The leader was regarded as "fighting for us." Consequently, measures indicative of democratic backsliding (Pillar 2) were interpreted by the public as popular justice (Pillar 3).

Synthesized Theoretical Model for this Study

This research proposes the subsequent causal sequence:
The Buhari Administration (2015-2023) employed a populist framework (Pillar 1), categorising Nigeria between "the people" and "the corrupt elite."
ii. This rhetoric characterised complicated governance concerns, such as anti-corruption and security, as straightforward moral conflicts, while concurrently fostering a robust societal identity of "us vs. them." Consequently, when the administration's actions precipitated democratic disintegration (Pillar 2) by undermining the judiciary, disregarding court orders, or marginalising the legislature, a substantial segment of the public failed to recognise this as an assault on democracy. Conversely, public perception (the emphasis of this judgement) was shaped to regard these acts as an essential and widely supported struggle against the "corrupt elite." The principal effect of populism on democratic governance in Nigeria (2015-2023) was the effective substitution of public demand for "due process" with a need for "populist outcomes," thereby conferring popular legitimacy for democratic regression.

6. Analysis of Public Perception: Key Populist Themes

This section analyzes public perception of the Buhari administration through the lens of its three main populist pillars.

6.1. The Anti-Corruption Crusade: A Moral War or a Political Witch-hunt?

President Buhari's primary populist pledge was to "eradicate corruption before it devastates Nigeria."
i. Initial Perception: In 2015, this message garnered significant popularity. Data from Afrobarometer (2017) indicated that a majority of Nigerians perceived the government as performing "fairly well" or "very well" in combating corruption. Prominent investigations and the retrieval of misappropriated assets were initially lauded as proof of authentic dedication.
ii. Deterioration of Trust: Gradually, perceptions became negative. The crusade was increasingly perceived as selective and biassed, especially focussing on opposition leaders while disregarding corruption claims against ruling party officials. The inability to

get high-profile convictions and the "Mainagate" affair (the restoration of a fugitive public servant) significantly undermined credibility. By 2020, Afrobarometer data revealed a notable decline in popular satisfaction about the anti-corruption efforts. Public debate, as seen by media analysis, transitioned from commendation to scepticism, with numerous individuals perceiving the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) as an instrument of governmental authority rather than an unbiased entity.

6.2. Nationalist Security Rhetoric vs. Lived Realities

The administration framed security challenges, especially the Boko Haram insurgency, as issues of national pride and military strength, contrasting with the perceived frailty of the prior government. The initial offensive against Boko Haram, resulting in territorial recovery in the Northeast, garnered significant public favour. The populist story of a robust, resolute commander-in-chief really resonated. Divergent Realities: This view deteriorated as insecurity proliferated. The escalation of banditry in the Northwest, confrontations between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt, and secessionist movements in the Southeast have precipitated a national security crisis. The government's reaction was frequently perceived as sluggish and partial. Public perception, particularly in the southern and north-central regions, indicated that the administration shown forbearance towards armed Fulani herders while employing excessive force against Biafran rebels. The notion of ethnic favouritism, which directly contradicts the unifying "for the people" populist mantra, significantly undermined Buhari's status as a national leader and polarised the nation along ethno-regional divisions.

6.3. Economic Populism: Social Intervention vs. Worsening Hardship

The administration's economic policies were articulated as pro-poor measures aimed at safeguarding local industry and assisting the disadvantaged.

i. Fundamental Policies and Perception:

a. The 2019 border closure was defended as a populist initiative aimed at enhancing local agriculture and reducing smuggling, however it sparked significant controversy. Although certain local producers, like as rice growers, profited, it resulted in escalating food inflation, adversely affecting the impoverished populations it purported to safeguard. Contemporary public opinion polls indicated a pronounced division, primarily along regional and economic lines.

b. Social Investment Programmes (SIPs), such as N-Power (youth employment) and TraderMoni (petty trader loans), constituted direct populist appeals to the "common man." Although they offered temporary relief to millions, they faced extensive criticism for inadequate implementation, corruption, and being unsustainable clientelistic handouts rather than structural solutions to poverty. The public perceived them as more successful for vote-buying than for authentic economic empowerment initiatives.

ii. The predominant perception was one of economic failure. Notwithstanding the populist narrative, Nigeria emerged as the "poverty capital of the world" during Buhari's tenure, characterised by two recessions and escalating unemployment and inflation rates. The actual experience of economic adversity for most Nigerians sharply opposed the pro-poor discourse.

7. Discussion: Populism's Impact on Democratic Governance

The analysis of public perception reveals that the Buhari administration's populism had

a corrosive impact on Nigerian democratic governance in three key areas.

7.1. Weakening of Democratic Institutions and the Rule of Law

The populist portrayal of the president as the singular representation of the people's will was employed to rationalise actions that compromised other democratic institutions.
i. Executive Aggrandisement: The anti-corruption campaign frequently ignored court decisions and due process, justified as essential expediency in combating a corrupt judiciary. The suspension of Nigeria's Chief Justice, Walter Onnoghen, just prior to the 2019 election was broadly denounced as an unlawful overreach that infringed upon the principle of separation of powers (Akinwunmi, 2020).
ii. Erosion of Legislative and Judicial Independence: By depicting the legislature and judiciary as components of the corrupt "elite," the administration cultivated public scepticism towards these vital checks and balances, thus undermining their capacity to hold the president accountable.

7.2. Deepening Social Polarization

Effective democratic government necessitates a fundamental degree of national cohesion and plurality. Buhari's populism, albeit not explicitly ethno-religious in its discourse, exerted a polarising influence in practice.
i. Perceived Ethno-Regional Bias: The belief that the administration's security and appointment policies favoured the Muslim North marginalised significant portions of the people, especially in the South and Middle Belt. This intensified pre-existing divisions, stimulated secessionist movements, and compromised the perception of the president as a leader for "all Nigerians." In this scenario, populism did not succeed in forming a cohesive "people" and instead exacerbated societal divisions.

7.3. The Legitimacy Crisis and Public Cynicism

The most detrimental legacy may be the significant erosion of public trust. The Rhetoric-Reality Gap: The significant disparity between populist assurances of security, prosperity, and integrity and the actual experience of escalating insecurity, economic distress, and perceived nepotism has engendered widespread dissatisfaction. This is apparent in the significant decrease in presidential popularity ratings and public trust in government, as indicated by polls conducted during his second term.
ii. Consequences for Democracy: This cynicism undermines democratic consolidation. It undermines political engagement, delegitimises democratic mechanisms, and fosters an environment conducive to the emergence of future authoritarian or anti-establishment political groups. The collapse of Buhari's moralistic populism may render Nigerians apprehensive not only towards populists but also towards the democratic system as a whole.

8. Conclusion

The presidency of Muhammadu Buhari exemplifies the dangers of populism in an emerging democracy. His ascent to power was propelled by a compelling populist narrative that adeptly harnessed pervasive public indignation towards a corrupt political elite. This narrative assured a moral rejuvenation and governance for the populace. This article has shown that the implementation of this populist method adversely impacted Nigeria's democratic governance. The examination of popular sentiment indicates a recurring trend: initial excitement succeeded by significant disillusionment. The anti-corruption campaign was regarded as political, security measures were viewed as prejudiced, and economic populism did not yield substantial advantages, resulting in increased

adversity.

The effect on democratic institutions was profound. The executive's self-representation as the exclusive guardian of the populace's will legitimised the bypassing of the rule of law and the erosion of the legislative and courts. Moreover, the administration's actions, regardless of its rhetoric, exacerbated the nation's perilous ethno-regional divisions, eroding the essential national unity necessary for efficient governance. The definitive legacy of the Buhari administration's populism is a more divided country, diminished democratic institutions, and a profoundly sceptical public.

This event imparts a vital lesson for the future of democracy in Nigeria. Although populist appeals can effectively mobilise political support, they cannot replace the arduous tasks of institutional reform, inclusive governance, and prudent policies. In the absence of meaningful advancements in security, economic prosperity, and justice, populism ultimately undermines its own credibility, resulting in a weakened democracy. Subsequent study should persist in monitoring public sentiments to evaluate the enduring effects of this period on Nigeria's democratic progression.

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