

Political confrontations and disagreements in the Nigerian Government's COVID-19 response

Konfrontasi dan ketidaksepakatan politik dalam penanggulangan COVID-19 oleh Pemerintah Nigeria

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Abstract

The COVID-19 outbreak has led to various interventions and policies from governments around the world, including Nigeria. However, Nigeria's response was laden with political interests, confrontation and disagreements from various blocs of interest. Therefore, this study aims to examine various phenomena of political confrontation and disagreement during COVID-19 intervention. This study uses qualitative methods. Data were obtained through qualitative secondary data and analyzed thematically. The results of this study indicate that the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC) are the two political parties that engage in the most political confrontation and disagreement. This study found that conflicting interests also occurred between the government and several interest groups regarding the import of foreign health workers and the distribution of COVID-19 assistance. Similarly, disagreements also ensued between the federal government and some sub-national governments over their refusal to acknowledge the existence and/or severity of COVID-19. This study concludes that political conflicts and disagreements during COVID-19 in Nigeria were caused by government policies and interventions that could not be separated from competing interests and needs of the political, business, and professional elite.

Keywords: COVID-19; political confrontations; partisan politics; government's response

Abstrak

Wabah COVID-19 telah menyebabkan berbagai intervensi dan kebijakan dari pemerintah di seluruh dunia, termasuk Nigeria. Namun, respon Nigeria sarat dengan kepentingan politik, konfrontasi dan perbedaan pendapat dari berbagai blok kepentingan. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji berbagai fenomena konfrontasi dan ketidaksepakatan politik selama intervensi COVID-19. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif. Data diperoleh melalui data sekunder kualitatif dan dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa People's Democratic Party (PDP) dan the All Progressive Congress (APC) adalah dua partai politik yang paling banyak melakukan konfrontasi dan perselisihan politik. Studi ini menemukan bahwa konflik kepentingan juga terjadi antara pemerintah dan beberapa kelompok kepentingan terkait impor tenaga kesehatan asing dan penyaluran bantuan COVID-19. Demikian pula, ketidaksepakatan juga terjadi antara pemerintah federal dan beberapa pemerintah daerah atas penolakan mereka untuk mengakui keberadaan dan/atau tingkat keparahan COVID-19. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa konflik dan ketidaksepakatan politik selama COVID-19 di Nigeria disebabkan oleh kebijakan dan intervensi pemerintah yang tidak dapat dipisahkan dari persaingan kepentingan dan kebutuhan elit politik, bisnis, dan profesional.

Kata kunci: COVID-19; konfrontasi politik; politik partisan; tanggapan pemerintah

Introduction

The effective management of public health emergencies, like the COVID-19 pandemic, is of utmost importance as it directly impacts the government's responsibility to safeguard and promote the well-being of its citizens. Unfortunately, these crucial responses and public policies often become entangled in a web of polarization, partisanship, and conflicting interests. Failing to address these challenges adequately can significantly undermine the outcomes of government initiatives and policies.

The emergence of COVID-19 disrupted all human activities at various levels (global, regional, and national) and in different sectors (transportation, tourism, manufacturing, service, education, mining, etc.). On the 9th January, 2020, the China Centre for Disease Control reported that a novel coronavirus (later named SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19) had been detected as the cause of 15 of the 59 cases of pneumonia. By January 20, 2020, the virus, which was exported from China, was discovered in three more countries, South Korea, Japan, and Thailand, all of which reported cases of COVID-19. Subsequently, the virus spread to other continents of the world including Europe, the Americas, Australia, and Africa and was declared a pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020 (European Center for Disease Prevention and Control 2020, Kandola 2020, Surico & Galeotti 2020).

The pandemic has had devastating effects on the world. Apart from deaths and health problems caused by the virus, the pandemic halted many economic activities and people's means of livelihood as a result of responses from various governments around the world. To curb the virus, governments instituted different measures such as lockdowns, compulsory wearing of facemasks in public, physical distancing, border closure, intrastate and interstate travel bans, etc. Also, to limit the economic and human impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments instituted various fiscal, monetary policies, and macro-financial policies such as cash transfers, emergency and supplementary food programs, revised and supplementary budgets to accommodate COVID-19 expenditure, tax breaks, credit schemes, and a moratorium on loans (International Monetary Fund [IMF] 2021).

The Nigerian government's response to the pandemic is similar to the response of most countries affected by COVID-19. The responses include lockdown, closure of schools, markets, and stores, public gathering and travel ban, compulsory mask-wearing and physical distancing in the public, etc. Other government actions include a supplementary budget for COVID-19, three-month moratoriums on government loans to small businesses, food assistance program, a cash transfer program, tax rebate, public healthcare guidelines, intervention funds, etc. (Aluko 2020, Dixit et al. 2020, Ejiogu et al. 2020, Ilesanmi & Afolabi 2020a, Oginni et al. 2020, Oyeniran & Ochia 2020).

However, policy responses to problems such as the pandemic can be polarizing in the way that government actions are faced with pushbacks from various political groupings with different interests especially in a democracy. The pushbacks often come in the form of criticisms of government actions and how best the government could have approached a particular problem. In a study conducted by Lasco (2020) titled "Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic," the author examined how the pandemic was constructed and responded to by three political actors: Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and Donald Trump of the USA. The study notes that, through their responses, the three political actors simplified the outbreak by downplaying its impact and providing unverified solutions and treatments, dramatizing their responses, fostering a cleavage between the citizens ("we against them"), and making medical claims to support their responses and actions.

Particularly in the USA, the two major political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, traded blame over the devastating effect of COVID-19 on their country. In August 2020, the then Vice President Candidate of the Democratic Party, Kamala Hariss, blamed Donald Trump, the then President of the USA, for the severity of the coronavirus outbreak in the country and that Trump never took it seriously (Lovelace Jr & Higgins-Dunn 2020). Trump, on the other hand, was seen on several occasions downplaying the severity of the coronavirus, providing unverified solutions and treatments, and sensationalizing his responses (Lasco 2020). Trump, who is a Republican, also blamed the states controlled by the Democrats for the increasing COVID-19 death rate in the USA while ignoring the increasing rates of death in the states controlled by the Republicans. The Democrats also slammed Trump for blaming the Democratic leaders as he was responsible for the whole of the USA (Fritze & Jackson 2020). This is a case of individuals protecting their interests and that of their parties, thereby creating a division among the citizens and political leaders (the Left vs the Right) over policy issues during the pandemic.

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Camobreco & He (2022) aver that the perceived severity of the virus was dependent on partisanship in the USA. Republican governors never believed it was as severe as the Democrats governors claimed, and the Republicans were more likely to reject scientific recommendations and guidelines regarding COVID-19. The political ideology that fueled this polarization is “limited government” in which the Republicans believed the lockdown, social distancing, and mask mandate are exemplars of government encroachment and infringement of personal freedom (Goren 2005 as cited in Camobreco & He 2022). Additionally, there was polarization on the best form of response to COVID-19. As Kincaid & Leckrone (2020) noted, the Republicans were more concerned about protecting businesses from the negative impact of the pandemic while the Democrats were concerned about providing aid (welfare programs) to sub-national governments (see also Rodriguez et al. 2022). Ultimately, in the USA, partisanship became the driving force for people’s response (both citizens and government officials) to the pandemic instead of the effect of the pandemic on society (Clinton et al. 2021).

Polarized reactions to COVID-19 can also be found in Europe and Africa. For instance, Rovny et al. (2022) argue the ideology of political parties (ruling parties and oppositions) in Europe influenced their response to issues surrounding COVID-19 such as “economic normalisation and containment, legal versus voluntary enforcement and the role of science in policymaking” (Rovny et al. 2022:1). The left-wing parties supported containment of the virus and stern enforcement of containment policy while also dependent on science in policymaking. Right-wing parties, on the other hand, decried containment and strict enforcement, and they were dismissive of scientific recommendations and guidelines. In sum, the “ideological differences within countries are more important in shaping COVID-19 responses than differences between countries” (Rovny et al. 2022:7). Braimah (2020) describes the polarized nature of the COVID-19 response in Ghana. During the 2020 pandemic, both concrete and shallow criticisms, political jabs, and vehement attacks of the ruling party by political opponents became daily political activity. The decision of the ruling party (the New Patriotic Party [NPP]) to implement partial lockdown instead of total lockdown became a furious debate between the NPP and the main opposition, the National Democratic Party (NDP), who saw total lockdown as the international standard. In addition, the decision of the ruling party to lift restrictions (e.g. the partial lockdown) attracted polarized reactions from the opposition and the populace. While the less privileged who relied on daily wages welcomed this action, interest groups such as the Ghana Medical Association (GMA) and the opposition such as the NDP were antagonistic.

This same pattern can also be found in Nigeria with different political entities and interest groups trading blames and pushing back on government actions as well as downplaying the severity of the pandemic. Accusations and counter-accusations between the main political parties became the norm at the beginning of the pandemic (Adenekan 2020). Various labor unions expressed their discontent with the government’s approach and response to the pandemic (Young 2020). Some political actors denied the existence and the severity of the virus, and upheld economic concerns over health concerns (Toromade 2020). Understanding these issues is crucial as they provide valuable insights into the complexities surrounding the government’s response to COVID-19. Moreover, they highlight the presence of partisanship and conflicting interests that emerged during government interventions, which had the potential to hinder the effectiveness of government interventions in achieving their desired objectives.

Given the aforementioned, the study examines the polarized reaction and partisanship that ensued from the government’s COVID-19 response in Nigeria between March and November 2020. The remaining sections of the study include the research methods; Nigerian government’s COVID-19 response; the political disagreements and partisanship that ensued from government response; and a concluding remark.

Research Method

The study examines the polarized reaction and partisanship (in the form of disagreement and conflicting interest) that ensued from the government’s COVID-19 response in Nigeria between March and November 2020. To do this, the study adopts a qualitative research strategy. The study relies on secondary sources

of data such as journal articles and newspaper reports. In particular, it relies heavily on newspaper reports on the government's COVID-19 response and controversies that ensued between March and November 2020. A total number of 30 newspaper reports (supported by journal articles) were analyzed using thematic analysis. Various patterns emerged from the data and were categorized into the following themes: "political parties and COVID-19 response," "controversies of imported Chinese medical team," "disagreements from sub-national governments," and "COVID-19 palliative scandals." These themes are further discussed in the subsequent section.

Results and Discussion

In Nigeria, there were pushing and hauling, disagreements, competing needs, rival opinions, and opposing interests from different and competing quarters in response to various interventions of the Nigerian government. These pushing and hauling revolved around different groups trying to protect their interests, discrediting the government, defending the government, downplaying the severity of COVID-19 as well as denying the existence of COVID-19, among others.

Nigerian Government and its COVID-19 intervention

Nigeria confirmed her index case on the 27th of February, 2020 in Lagos. The case was an Italian man, who worked in Nigeria and flew into Nigeria from Milan, Italy on the 25th of February, 2020. The case was confirmed by the Virology Laboratory of Lagos University Teaching Hospitals (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC] 2020). After that, the virus spread within and across different states and geopolitical zones in Nigeria. From 27th of February to 17th of December, 2020, Nigeria conducted 869,362 tests, recorded 76,207 cases, discharged 67,110 COVID patients, recorded 1,201 deaths, and still had 7,896 active cases. Nigeria also recorded its highest daily cases of 1,145 on December 17, 2020. Lagos state, Nigeria's biggest city, recorded the highest number of cases with 25,895 cases and Kogi state with the lowest number of recorded cases of five as of December 17 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control [NCDC] 2020).

Ilesanmi & Afolabi (2020b) noted that the COVID-19 intervention in Nigeria is conducted within a vertical framework in which the Federal Government through the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) provides guidelines and policy directions for sub-national governments. The response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been top-down mainly because the federal government is the most capable to roll out grand policies which are mostly domesticated by the sub-national governments. Apart from this, most sub-national governments had been relying on monthly allocations from the central government to sustain themselves even before the pandemic. Thus, when COVID-19 broke out, the federal government became even more instrumental in providing resources to many sub-national governments to curtail the pandemic. For instance, in April 2020, the federal government disbursed about 43 billion Naira to 24 state governments. By November, another 66.5 billion Naira was disbursed to 35 eligible state governments (Ujah 2020). Also, every state was reported to have received COVID-19 palliatives from the federal government (Nwabughio 2020). Hence, the responses discussed (some of which were domesticated by state governments) in this study are mostly that of the federal government because it is the major driver of COVID-19 intervention in Nigeria.

The Nigerian government, in its bid to fight the pandemic and its socioeconomic impact, adopted several interventions. One of these actions was the government budgetary response. The government had to adjust the 2020 budget in May to adjust and adapt to the changing circumstances resulting from the global pandemic. This included a fiscal stimulus of N500 billion as the COVID-19 Intervention Fund. The fund is meant to be used to upgrade healthcare facilities, support various state governments, and finance public works and social intervention programs (Ejiogu et al. 2020).

In addition, the federal government also froze nonessential recruitment into the public sector except in health and security. This was done to have more funds for COVID-19 intervention as the personnel cost was about 27% of the total projected expenditure in the budget. There was also a reduction in the

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allocations of state governments in the budget, but the federal government planned to draw \$150 million from the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority Stabilization Fund in order to support the adequate funding of essential services at the sub-national level (Ejiogu et al. 2020).

Coupled with the federal government fiscal policy measures toward the pandemic are the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) monetary policy measures. The CBN reduced the interest rate from 9% to 5% for one year (starting from March 1, 2020). It also made provision for a N50 billion credit facility to help households and small and medium-scale businesses cushion the effect of the pandemic. It also made provision for N100 billion credit interventions to support local pharmaceutical companies and other businesses in the health value chain with the ultimate aim of increasing their capacity to cater for the possible increase in the demand for healthcare goods and services (Ejiogu et al. 2020).

Table 1.
Timeline of government COVID-19 interventions (February to May 2020)

Date	Events\Interventions
February 29	The first case was confirmed.
March 9	Presidential Taskforce for COVID-19 commissioned.
March 18	Travel bans on 13 countries. Ban on mass gatherings of over 50 persons in Ogun and Lagos.
March 19	Federal government orders closure of schools.
March 23	Ban on international flights. CBN announces stimulus package for SMEs, households, health sector, etc.
March 24	The Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 passed.
March 27	The federal government calls for private sector donations to raise \$330 million.
March 30	Lockdown orders were issued for Abuja (Federal Capital Territory), Lagos, and Ogun.
April 1	Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development (FMHADMSD) announce free food ration for the needy (i.e., food assistance). The federal government announces it will transfer \$52 (N20,000) to the poor registered in the National Social Register (NSR).
April 2	More states went into lockdown.
April 6	Reaching out to multilateral institutions to raise \$6.9 billion.
April 20	Ban on domestic flights.
May 2	Nationwide overnight curfew (8 pm-6 am).
May 4	Mandatory facemasks in public.
May 6	Domestic and international flights ban extended to June 7.
May 7	The federal government decides to raise \$4.34 billion from the domestic stock market to finance the budget.

Source: Dixit et al. (2020)

To cushion the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, the government implemented three major social intervention programs. Firstly, it granted a three-month moratorium on government loans to small businesses. Secondly, it expanded the existing cash transfer program for the poorest and the most vulnerable households. Before the pandemic, the program covered about 2.6 million households that receive N5,000 monthly. As a result of the pandemic, the government was compelled to add an additional one’s million households to the program with every household now receiving a N20,000 stipend (this is not monthly but an advance payment) (Dixit et al. 2020, Opejobi 2020). Thirdly, the government implemented a food assistance program (also known as COVID-19 palliatives) for vulnerable households across the country to help reduce hunger that may result from the lockdown enforced by the government (Dixit et al. 2020, Ejiogu et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the Economic Stimulus Bill 2020 was passed in March 2020 aimed to provide a 50% tax rebate to businesses registered under the Companies and Allied Matters Act so that they would be able to maintain their current workforce (Dixit et al. 2020). Also, government agencies such as the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) helped publicize the World Health Organization's (2020) recommended public health measures, which include frequent handwashing, avoiding touching one's eyes, nose, and mouth, practicing respiratory hygiene, and social distancing (Oginni et al. 2020).

The federal government also rolled out public health measures which included guidelines for self-isolation and mass gathering, deployment of rapid response teams to support various states, and a newly revised "The Quarantine Act (ACP Q2 LFN 2004)" which now contained the COVID-19 Regulations 2020 (Oyeniran & Chia 2020). These measures also included lockdown and restriction of movement within and across states; testing and contact tracing; international travel restriction; and closure of schools, universities, stores, and markets among others (Aluko 2020, Ilesanmi & Afolabi 2020a, Oginni et al. 2020, Oyeniran & Ochia 2020). Table 1 shows the timeline of government COVID-19 interventions between February to May 2020.

Political parties and COVID-19 response

The main opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), has seized all opportunities to criticize the ruling party or the All Progressive Congress (APC)-led government for its response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria. As early as March 2020, the PDP accused the APC-led government of "playing politics" with the pandemic. The party claimed that the APC was busy with internal disputes while the country was in danger and the APC-led government hesitated to ban international flights despite the PDP, on several occasions, having advised the government to put in place stringent measures, especially at the international ports and borders. The PDP was also accused of being in the background and not leading from the front like other world leaders in the fight against COVID-19 (Ripples Nigeria 2020a).

Within the same month of March, the PDP caucus in the House of Representatives also did not hold back in showing their displeasure to the president. They accused the president of a "lackluster attitude" to the pandemic. They claimed that Nigeria was far behind other countries in developing a comprehensive plan on how to tackle the pandemic. They also criticized the president for being too distant from the citizens and for his hesitation to address the nation as well as the way the presidency put down every voice calling for the president to lead from the front (Aytogo 2020).

However, the presidency responded to the call for a presidential address and the president addressed the nation on March 29, 2020. Again, the PDP took the opportunity to criticize the president by calling his address "empty" and that he failed to address the real concerns of Nigerians who were under lockdown. They believed the address should have revolved around palliatives, tax cuts, reduction in the pump price of fuel, etc. (Vanguard News 2020b). The APC pushed back at the criticisms. They noted that the pandemic should not be treated with partisanship as the PDP had been doing. The APC also confirmed that some PDP governors and the 2019 PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, had already collaborated with the APC-led government to tackle the spread of the virus because the virus transcends party affiliation (Kwen 2020).

The APC went further to accuse the PDP of a sinister attempt to downplay and ridicule the efforts of the APC-led government to curtail the pandemic. The PDP had criticized the Kano state governor and the APC for denying the reports of mysterious deaths in Kano in April 2020. The APC on the other hand saw the criticisms as an act of desperation to politicize a global pandemic and pointed out the hypocrisy of the PDP for not cautioning Seyi Makinde, the governor of Oyo state and a PDP member, for making jokes about coronavirus and downplaying the pandemic. The APC stated that, instead of the PDP making positive contributions to overcome the pandemic, they were busy "dancing on the grave" of those Nigerians who had been killed by the virus (Adenekan 2020).

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Just like every other two-party or multi-party democracy, the opposition party tries to pick on every shortcoming of the ruling party to paint a narrative of and to show the ineptitude and the lack of will and capacity of the ruling party to address various social, economic, and political problems. However, there is always pushback from the ruling party to assure the citizens that they have everything under control and that the opposition is just dishonest, unpatriotic, and sinister. This is similar to the observation made by Braimah (2020) and Fritze & Jackson (2020) in Ghana and the US, respectively. In both countries, COVID-19 responses also led to disagreement and blame-trading between the two major political parties over the appropriate policy options for COVID-19 intervention.

The controversy of the imported Chinese medical team

A group of Chinese doctors arrived in Nigeria on April 8, 2020, to help fight the pandemic despite the pushback from the Nigerian medical and health community. For instance, the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) called the deployment of the Chinese medical team an embarrassment to the health workers in Nigeria fighting the pandemic in unfavorable conditions. The association saw the action as a disservice to the health workers and it said it demeaned their efforts against the virus (Vanguard News 2020a). Organized labor such as the United Labor Congress of Nigeria (ULC) also faulted the government’s acceptance of the Chinese medical team sponsored by the China Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) to help fight the pandemic despite the pushbacks from groups such as NMA. It also raised suspicion that the Nigerian government might be favoring the Chinese construction company which already had a big influence on the government, especially in the area of infrastructural projects (Young 2020).

Criticisms from the NMA and the ULC could imply that these groups felt excluded by the government, and the importation of the Chinese medical team seemingly portrayed the health community in Nigeria, especially the NMA, as incapable of handling the pandemic. Hence, the pushback from the health community to maintain their relevance and protect their interests.

On April 11, responding to this controversy, the Nigerian government said it wanted to learn and the experts to share how they were able to contain the virus in their country and also revealed that the Nigerian medical team would engage with the Chinese experts through video conferencing while they were in quarantine. It claimed the importation of Chinese experts was a gesture from Chinese companies working in Nigeria, which also included 1.5 million dollars worth of medical supplies (Nwosu 2020).

However, in a report, Sahara Reporters claimed the “kind gesture” of CCECC was to further cement its relationship with the Nigerian government, to boost its image, and to continue to be patronized by the Nigerian government after it was blacklisted by the World Bank for fraud and corruption in 2019. Also, the Corporation was involved in a scandal about scholarships offered to Nigerians to study Rail Engineering in China (Sahara Reporters 2020).

As expected, the main opposition party, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), also used the opportunity to throw jabs at the incumbent. The party said that Nigerians should hold the president’s response accountable for an upsurge in the number of cases of COVID-19 and COVID-19 deaths following the invitation of medical experts from China, which was a hotbed and the origin of the virus. The party also claimed that Nigerian health workers had been on top of the situation and the invitation was questionable (Lawal 2020).

The disagreements from sub-national governments

Governor Yahaya Bello of Kogi and Governor Ben Ayade of Cross River were ardent critics of the federal government and other states’ responses to the pandemic. They believed their states were free of coronavirus (Toromade 2020). Kogi is one of the two states (the other being Cross River) that had not recorded any cases of COVID-19 as of May 2020. The two states are believed to have been discouraging testing those with COVID-19 symptoms within their jurisdictions. As of late April, and early May 2020, controversy trailed Kogi as the state officials and federal officials were at loggerheads over the state’s

claim of having zero cases virus. The state government said it would not “manufacture” COVID-19 cases to satisfy federal health officials and also claimed that there was a plot by unnamed people to ensure that Kogi records some cases (Adebowale 2020).

During his address to the federal team sent to Kogi on May 7, 2020, Yahaya Bello criticized the health officials, political leaders, and the media for causing panic with their reaction to the pandemic. He was quoted saying, “There are so many merchants now marketing COVID-19 as if that is our priority” and also saying, “Our struggling economy that Mr. President is trying to revive, we’re further killing it.” He also quoted asking the federal team “Is this the first time we’re having these kinds of symptoms in Nigeria” and “Haven’t we been living with it and teaching ourselves and moving on? The Governor complained about how the stringent measures put in place by the FG and by the neighboring states had dwindled Kogi’s revenue and accused the NCDC and WHO of increasing the mortality of the virus to cause panic (Toromade 2020).

The Federal Minister of Health was reported on May 8, 2020, saying the federal government’s efforts to support Kogi’s pandemic efforts failed. A team from the Ministry of Health and the NCDC were sent to the state but it was reported that the team had to flee the state because of the fear of being quarantined by the state government (Adebowale 2020). As of May 17, Kogi state had only conducted only one test while Cross River had conducted seven tests, making them the lowest in terms of testing in Nigeria. The health authorities expressed that the reason for low testing was that the two states were not taking the pandemic seriously (Toromade 2020).

Furthermore, a prominent senator from Kogi, Smart Adeyemi, also came out in May to claim Kogi West (his district) was COVID-19-free and mentioned that the controversial death of a prominent Chief Iman of Kabba was a result of an ailment caused by bee sting and had nothing to do with coronavirus contrary to the popular claim. He believed this was a plan to undermine the efforts of the state government to keep Kogi COVID-19-free (Tyohemba 2020).

The NMA also waded into the Kogi and Cross River debacle and asked the federal government to investigate the coronavirus-free status of the two states as well as the states’ response to the pandemic. The NMA complained that the two states had prevented the NCDC from carrying out its duties as spelled out in the NCDC (Establishment) Act of 2018 (Onyeji 2020). In response, the Kogi state government pushed back at the NMA and claimed that the NMA was “probably enraged that the state has refused to join the coronavirus money-making train.” Around late May 2020, the state government rejected the COVID-19 cases reported for the state by the NCDC and claimed it was fictitious and untrue as well as claiming that a patient tested positive for coronavirus in the FTC was recorded for Kogi state (Leadership Newspaper 2020). Similar to some leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Rodrigo Duterte, as observed by Lasco (2020) and Camobreco & He (2022), the governors of Kogi and Cross River treated the pandemic as a hoax or, at best, as nothing serious; asking people not to panic while equating it to the common cold among others. They were more concerned about the economic impact of policies such as lockdowns and social distancing than the public health impact of the pandemic.

COVID-19 palliatives scandals: Accusation and counter-accusation

There was war of words between the two major parties at both national and sub-national levels. For instance, the PDP accused the APC-led federal government of donating expired bags of rice to Nigerians in the name of COVID-19 palliative. The PDP believed that this was an indictment on the federal government for its willingness to give Nigerians food that was not fit for consumption and it showed the government did not have regard for its citizens. This allegation has some elements of truth in it as it was evident that both Oyo and Ondo state had to reject and asked for the replacement of expired food items (Johnson & Akinrefon 2020).

This same pattern can also be found at the sub-national level. For instance, in Ekiti State, the PDP described the palliatives provided by the APC-led state government as scandalous and insufficient. The PDP claimed they were given about 250 packets of relief materials containing various food items such

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as spaghetti, wheat, rice, and semolina. The PDP claimed that these food items could not solve the problem of hunger induced by lockdown and could barely feed a family of three. The APC-led state government, however, accused the PDP of being sinister and dishonest. The state government noted that the palliatives were not shared along party lines (Ayeleso 2020).

Similar to Ekiti State, the APC (the main opposition party) called the COVID-19 palliative initiative of the PDP-led state government embarrassing and scandalous. The APC claimed that the palliative was embarrassing because the government gave out “3 cups of rice, 5 cups of garri (cassava flakes), and one sachet of noodles for a family” despite budgeting two billion Naira for palliatives. It also accused the government of mostly distributing relief materials to the PDP members in the state (Godfrey 2020). Similar accusations and counteraccusations were reported in other states of the federation such as Kwara and Akwa Ibom (Jimoh 2020, Ripples Nigeria 2020b, Ukwu 2020).

The disruptive aftermath of the 2020 #EndSARS protest against police brutality led to nationwide looting of both public and private property, especially COVID-19 relief supplies stored in warehouses across the country. These supplies were supposed to be distributed by state governments; however, they failed to do so. Various state governments, while trying to save face, denied accusations of hoarding or plans to sell relief materials or any irregularities. They also claimed that the looted relief materials were a reserve for an inevitable second wave of COVID-19. However, there were reports that some of these items expired while being kept in warehouses. Some Nigerians justified the looting and believed that these state governments had a hidden agenda for not distributing the relief material at the appropriate time (i.e., during the lockdown) (Dabang & Ukomadu 2020). The alleged hoarding of COVID-19 palliatives by state governments cut across party lines and so the two major political parties could not trade blame over the looted palliatives or relief materials.

Nonetheless, this did not stop the main opposition party, the PDP, from accusing the Federal Minister of Humanitarian Affairs, Sadiya Umar Farouq, of wanting to use the looted COVID-19 palliatives in various warehouses across the country as an excuse to escape investigation into the management of COVID-19 palliatives. The PDP claimed that the looted palliatives were not the ones the minister was expected to account for as they were donated by the private sector coalition (CACOVID) and not the government. They also claimed that the minister was trying to create an impression that the looted palliatives were part of the COVID-19 intervention she had to account for. The PDP believed that she was meant to give an account for the 500 billion Naira COVID fund released by the federal government and that any attempt to muddle up issues or any refusal to account for the funds confirmed the allegations of stealing, diversion of funds and palliatives provided by the federal government (Ogundele 2020).

Conclusion

As the coronavirus became a global threat in 2020, many governments around the world responded using various methods and approaches to curb the spread of the coronavirus among which was lockdown. The Nigerian government, in particular, responded through various policy actions that included lockdowns, mass gatherings and travel bans, schools, market and border closure, financial and social intervention programs, emergency food programs and so on. However, the actions of the Nigerian government in addressing the pandemic and its impact on the citizens were politicized and met with opposition, disagreements, and sometimes support from various conflicting groups and individuals.

As explained in the study, there were a series of pushing and hauling, disagreements, competing needs and opinions, and rivalry from different groups responding to the government’s COVID-19 intervention. This included the tussles between the two major political parties, the APC and the PDP, over the best approach to address the pandemic; disagreements over the importation of a Chinese medical team between the government and the Nigerian medical community; downplaying the severity and existence of the coronavirus by governors of Kogi and Cross River states; and well as the controversy that ensued from accusation and counter-accusation that trailed the management, hoarding, and looting of COVID-19

palliatives. All these were bound to occur because government policies and interventions do not operate in a vacuum and are not devoid of competing interests and needs. Groups, for whatever interest, tend to react and respond to policy actions either in agreement or disagreement, especially in a popular democracy or a pluralistic state that allows for the existence of competing groups, interests, choices, and ideologies. Unlike other studies that focus on the public health responses of the Nigerian government to COVID-19 and the socioeconomic impact of such responses, this study highlighted the nature of conflictual interests that shaped the government response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The implication of this, however, is that it may have distracted the polity and the political leaders from the most important issues (e.g., containing the pandemic and addressing its socioeconomic impact) while they were busy trading blame with opposition and other interest groups. This study, therefore, recommends constant dialogue and inclusion of various interests and perspectives in the formulation and implementation of government policies. This is to help remove unnecessary frictions and pushbacks that may hinder the effective implementation of government policies and the achievement of government policy objectives.

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