

The 2015 Nigerian Presidential Election: How Money Became President Jonathan's Albatross

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Introduction

It is axiomatic that the two most important factors for winning elections in Nigeria are money and the power of incumbency (Adamu and Ogunsanwo; Ihonvbere and Shaw, 1985 and Joseph, 1987). Going into the 2011 presidential election, President Goodluck Jonathan had both of those factors in his favor. He had been either a vice-president, acting president or a substantive president since 2007. Money and incumbency proved a decisive advantage to him and his political party in 2011 when he beat his nearest opponent, General Muhammadu Buhari, by over ten million votes. Jonathan stood for re-election during the 2015 presidential election and again, Buhari was his main rival. Even much more than in 2011, Jonathan went into the election with a formidable financial war-chest. In a single night, over twenty-one billion Naira was raised for his re-election bid. His incumbency power was also quite impressive. By the time the election was held on March 28th, 2015, Jonathan had had almost six years in the saddle as Nigeria's president. Unprecedented revenues from petroleum exports had substantially increased his power of patronage. He did not face any challenge to his candidacy within his political party. Money and incumbency placed Jonathan in a seemingly unassailable position over his main challenger. Buhari had contested on three other occasions without coming close to winning. Moreover, Jonathan had beaten him quite decisively in 2011.

Unlike 2011 however, Buhari beat Jonathan by almost two-and-half million votes. Buhari's political party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) also wrested legislative power from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Jonathan performed very poorly, receiving ten million votes fewer than he did in 2011. Buhari, on the other hand, raised his vote total from twelve million to over fifteen million. Jonathan became the first incumbent Nigerian president to lose an election. Although Jonathan has tried to downplay the margin of votes between him and

Buhari, the fact that he lost the election at all despite his overwhelming advantage of money and incumbency was monumental in the annals of electoral politics in the country. In addition, his loss ended sixteen years of uninterrupted governance of Nigeria by a party that had claimed that it was not only the largest political party in Africa but one that was destined to rule Nigeria for sixty straight years. Not only did the loss make that boastful stance hollow, it has seriously threatened its very existence as a viable party. It is instructive that a party whose leaders bragged that it would rule Nigeria unchallenged for sixty years is now desperately struggling to survive the next four years as a defeated, demoralized and dejected party in opposition at both the federal and state levels. A party that had boasted of being the only party with popular appeal in every region of the country has now been reduced to a regional rump centered in the South-East and South-South geo-political regions.

What caused this dramatic reversal of fortune in view of the fact that both Jonathan and the PDP had enormous advantages in both the power of incumbency and money over Buhari? Why did Jonathan's support base erode so quickly within four years? What happened to the twenty-two million people who had voted for Jonathan four years earlier? What lessons can we glean from Jonathan's loss despite the huge advantages at his disposal? What implications does Jonathan's loss have for the role of money and the power of incumbency in Nigerian politics? Does Jonathan's loss signal the waning power of money to influence electoral contests in Nigeria or does this represent a one-time episode in which the possession of a huge campaign war-chest does not guarantee victory at the polls?

Theories, conjectures and speculations have already emerged to explain Jonathan's loss. I shall however argue that scholarly and on-the-spot explanations of why Jonathan was badly defeated have missed a very important factor. I shall contend that Jonathan's huge financial war-chest and his presidential incumbency became an albatross that contributed to his defeat. Among other factors, misgivings over the moral propriety of the sources of the Jonathan campaign funding, the manner in which funds were disbursed, and Jonathan's lavish campaign spending in the context of rising poverty and growing economic inequality in the country turned Jonathan's financial advantage into a huge burden.

Similarly, by cleverly making the election a referendum on Jonathan's six-year governance of Nigeria, the APC made incumbency a liability for Jonathan. By the time the

presidential election was held Jonathan was generally perceived as incompetent, weak, clueless, nonchalant and indecisive. His poor handling of critical national issues such as the Boko Haram insurgency, corruption and high youth unemployment reinforced the belief that he was one of the worst leaders Nigeria has ever had. Jonathan could not articulate cogent reasons why he should be re-elected. He relied on a vacuous “transformation agenda” whose purpose was unclear even to its principal proponents. Whenever voters used Jonathan’s six-year tenure as a road-map to what the next four years would be like, his candidacy was decidedly unappealing. Under Jonathan, Boko Haram terrorists had seized and controlled twenty-four local government areas in the north-east region. Jonathan was not able to address growing poverty, insecurity, corruption and a whole range of debilitating issues facing the country. Worst of all, he did not seem to care. In effect, his horrendous performance turned his potential power of incumbency to a major millstone around the neck of his re-election bid.

Explaining Jonathan’s Loss

Like many public phenomena in Nigeria, Jonathan’s defeat in the 2015 presidential election has been explained in terms of a conspiracy theory. A controversial columnist, Femi Aribisala, has attributed Jonathan’s loss to a political betrayal perpetrated by “the North.” As he puts it, “No doubt about it, the North betrayed Jonathan in the last election...Northern PDP governors secretly worked for Buhari’s victory” (2015-1). Aribisala (2015-1) anchored this contention solely on the claim that “the North” hated Jonathan simply because of his ethnic identity as an Ijaw from the South-South geo-political region of Nigeria. Since Jonathan did not change his ethnicity between 2011 when he received overwhelming support from “the North” and 2015 when his support base collapsed in virtually all the regions of the country, Aribisala’s argument has absolutely no credibility. Nonetheless, Aribisala is not alone in postulating that Jonathan was a victim of an internal conspiracy against Jonathan within his own political party, the PDP. Femi Fani-Kayode, the Director of Publicity for the Jonathan Campaign, also subscribes to the conspiracy theory that Jonathan was done in by his own men. As he puts it:

Two members of the NWC specifically were actually working for the APC and were on their payroll. That is just one shocker and there are plenty more. The time to talk is not now. That time will come. You will be shocked by what we know about these people and their sordid efforts to stop Jonathan and betray their own

party... I do not want to rock the boat out of respect for our President and our party elders; otherwise I would say a lot more that will shock the nation and the party faithful...I have a whole file on it which we compiled during the campaign. (2015)

In another version of his conspiracy theory, Aribisala (2015-2) claimed that Attahiru Jega, the Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), was the one who engineered Jonathan's defeat for the benefit of Buhari. As he forcefully contended:

As a matter of fact, Gen. Buhari did not win this presidential election: President Jonathan lost it. The president lost because he allowed himself to be defeated. Maybe he did not want to remain in power badly enough. Or maybe there was a side of him that felt there is honor in being the first incumbent president to lose an election in Nigeria. Whatever the case, he failed to heed the warning of many that, like Aminu Tambuwal and Lamido Sanusi, Attahiru Jega was working for the enemy. (Aribisala, 2015-2)

What Aribisala (2015-2) has deliberately chosen to overlook is that the same Jega was the INEC chief when Jonathan decisively defeated Buhari in 2011. Aribisala's tendentious speculation that Jega engineered Jonathan's defeat because of Jega's ethnic affinity with Buhari might have had some persuasive power if either or both Buhari and Jega had changed their ethnic identities between the two electoral periods.

On its part, the National Working Committee of the PDP has asserted that Jonathan lost the election because of the foul and disrespectful language employed by his campaign against Buhari. Olisa Metuh, the National Publicity Secretary of the PDP, categorically asserted that the campaign tactic used by the Jonathan campaign which maligned and impugned Buhari's character created a backlash against Jonathan and was the decisive factor in Jonathan's defeat. As he puts it:

For those of us in the North where the type of campaign that we generated made it impossible for our leaders in the North to garner support for our candidate because of the hate campaign that was generated we are not answerable for it. Whilst I am not holding any excuse for them we cannot be held accountable for issues that were generated that worked against our candidate in the North...This is clear, all Nigerians knew what happened. (Sahara Reporters, 2015).

While Metuh and other members of the PDP's NWC blamed the Jonathan organization for Jonathan's loss, some people with close ties to Jonathan have ascribed the loss to the incompetence and financial profligacy of the NWC. Metuh has flatly rejected that charge arguing that "We did not lead the party to failure. We were not involved

in the campaigns and our advice was ignored. If we had handled the campaign, Mr. President would have won the election. We cannot be held responsible when our advice was ignored.” (Sahara Reporters, 2015).

How Money and Incumbency Did Jonathan In

Section 91 (2) of the 2010 Electoral Act limits election expenses by a presidential candidate to one billion Naira. Section 91 (9) places a severe limitation on the amount of money that can be donated to a presidential candidate. In the words of the Act, “an individual or other entity shall not donate more than 1,000,000 Naira to any candidate.” Contravening the provisions of the electoral law with respect to electoral expenses or donations to a presidential candidate constitutes a criminal offense and anyone convicted for violating the Act is liable to a fine of one million Naira or a 12-month imprisonment.

(Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2010; Kumolu, 2015; and Aderibgbe, 2015)

Despite the clear provisions of the Electoral Act on individual donations and electoral expenses, Jonathan raised 21 billion Naira in a single night of fund-raising. Jerry Gana and unnamed “friends” donated five billion Naira. Tunde Ayeni and unnamed “associates” donated two billion Naira. The oil and gas industry donated five billion Naira, the real estate and building sector donated four billion Naira. PDP state governors donated 50 million Naira each for a total of 1.05 billion Naira. The food and agricultural sector, roads and construction sector and transportation and aviation donated 500 million, 560 million and one billion Naira, respectively.

The scandalous nature of these donations reflected very badly on the Jonathan campaign. Many Nigerians wondered how Jerry Gana, a government employee throughout his life, acquired five billion Naira to donate to Jonathan. Similarly, electricity companies that had not been able to generate electricity were a major contributor to the Jonathan campaign. Most of the PDP governors who claimed that they had no money to pay salaries of public servants shelled out over one billion to the campaign. The general disgust felt by many Nigerians over the donations was best summed up by Thompson Iyeye in his response to the news story on the fund-raiser. Iyeye said:

What a shame! This is what it is all about; money, money and more money. 21 billion Naira can do a lot of good for the suffering masses in this country. These big donors are not known to be generous to noble and good causes. Yet it is easy for them to dole out the money for politics which may turn out to be bribes for voters. What business does Jerry Gana do to be able to give 5 billion Naira as donation? This ruling party is certainly not a good example, in an environment of poverty and squalor, like Nigeria is. (Iyeye, 2015)

With so many corruption scandals (fuel subsidy scam, pensions scam, and Immigration Department's employment scam) under Jonathan, it was easy for many Nigerians to question the sources of these funds and to believe that these were proceeds of corrupt enrichment. It is also pertinent to note that Jonathan raised this huge amount knowing full well that the electoral law limited him to spending only one billion Naira on his campaign. Jonathan raised more than twenty billion over the maximum legal limit that he could spend on his campaign. Stung by criticisms of the illegality and immorality of the outrageous amount raised, Gana, the Chairman of the PDP Fund-Raising Committee, was forced to call a press conference to address the controversy. He argued that the money was raised to complete the construction of the PDP's national secretariat. Gana said:

We asked you to come so that we will lay to rest matters of funds raised; the funds are not for PDP presidential campaign, it (*sic*) is for PDP projects. The money is for the party's projects; of course campaign is one of our projects, but even if part of it would be used for campaign, it will not be for a particular candidate, it will not be presidential campaign.

Gana, however, could not lay the controversy to rest. Of the twenty-one billion raised, he said that ten billion would be used to complete the PDP secretariat. Unfortunately for Gana, that explanation made the matter worse. In a country where poverty had risen astronomically with a sizeable number of Nigerians living below the poverty level, it seemed highly insensitive on the part of the PDP to plan to spend 10 billion Naira on its secretariat. More fatal to the Jonathan campaign was that the money raised led to acrimony between the party and the president's re-election campaign organization. Campaign funds were not remitted to the party. They were kept and disbursed by the campaign organization itself. In a bitter dispute between the Jonathan presidential campaign committee and PDP's NWC, there were accusations and counter-accusations. The committee accused members of the NWC of misusing campaign funds. According to [Sahara Reporters](#), associates of President Jonathan gave the paper documentary proof of alleged "greedy amounts collected by each member of the NWC, including the party's

national chairman Adamu Mu'azu. The sources at the Presidency accused Mr. Mu'azu and other NWC officials of pursuing their private material interests at the detriment of the party's electoral prospects." (Sahara Reporters, 2015-1)¹ Metuh denied the charge noting that the party leadership:

Generated more than N7 billion, N8 billion or N 9billion. We generated more than N7 billion...The first initial donation we made was half a billion to the presidential campaign funds even though we were not involved in raising funds for the presidential campaign. They generated campaign funds up to N21 billion. The party was not involved in it and the party cannot account for it because we were not involved in that money. It was a Jerry Gana committee and they handled it and nobody can question us for that... We state clearly that we have not been given any money. Rather, this NWC generated billions of naira from the sale of forms from where we funded our candidates for governorship and state assembly elections in all the states of the federation—in addition to funds released to key leaders, including NWC and Board of Trustees members to prosecute the campaigns in their various areas. (Sahara Reporters, 2015-1)

Similar accusations of pilfering and diversion of funds trailed Jonathan's re-election campaign at the state level in most of the thirty-six states. In Bauchi State, the Director-General of the Jonathan Campaign Council complained that money meant for the council went missing. According to him:

The State Campaign council had already setup a committee headed by Governor Isa Yuguda to find the missing funds and whoever is guilty of the dubious act of diverting the missing funds will face the disciplinary action by the Party. The money was released to the State campaign council in two batches, one N80 million and N150million .They were diverted by prominent persons in the party and we requested the Governor to investigate and find the missing funds, (Vanguard, 2015).

In some cases, dispute over the sharing of the campaign money led to physical violence among PDP members. Pegba Otemolu, the South-West Secretary of the PDP was beaten by party members who accused him of stealing their campaign training stipends. According to Otemolu: "They beat me mercilessly, they tore my dresses, they were shouting Ole! Ole! (thief, thief) I could not believe that people from my party could treat me in that manner. They are from my party. I was stripped half-naked and beaten. They stole my personal money, wrist watch, my necklace, my bead and total cash of about N80, 000." (Otemulo, nd)

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Jonathan's campaign money was not spent wisely. There were allegations that much of it was disbursed as outright bribes to traditional rulers, party hacks, and others. In several cases, beneficiaries of the presidential largesse fought amongst themselves over the money. The dubious sources of the funding, the manner in which it was disbursed, the acrimony it generated between the party and the re-election committee accentuated the moral stench of the Jonathan government and campaign. As the expenditures were not yielding the desired support for Jonathan, desperation set in and ironically, Jonathan felt compelled to dole out even more money, include using campaign funds to court discredited and divisive organizations such as Gani Adams Odua People's Congress (OPC) and the secessionist Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). How the Jonathan campaign could recruit a secessionist organization to stage public protests against INEC was quite baffling.

Both the PDP and the re-election committee recognized that the campaign funds came largely through government sources disguised as private donations and it appeared that there was no qualm on the part of those with access to the money about helping themselves to the money. The logic of corruption, outright fraud and embezzlement that had characterized the PDP's sixteen-year rule came home to roost for the party. When it came to pilfering or misusing Jonathan's campaign funds, there was no honor among thieves.

Jonathan and the PDP failed to realize that corruption was a critical issue in the campaign and that much of Buhari's appeal lay in his perception as an austere and a fiercely anti-corruption fellow best able to tame the corruption monster. Jonathan's obscene campaign expenditures reinforced the perception among many Nigerians that his re-election would exacerbate corruption. Jonathan did not help matters by publicly claiming that the level of corruption in Nigeria was highly exaggerated. His promise to stamp out corruption by technological means sounded hollow for an administration that seemed to embrace and cuddle corrupt and questionable persons.

The Jonathan campaign expenditure pattern also became problematical. Huge posters of Jonathan, television ads, television documentaries, internet advertisements, paying people to attend political rallies, distributing foodstuff, clothes and other materials became the major avenues through which money was expended. Many of the television ads extolled Jonathan as an

accomplished president who had transformed Nigeria. He was even presented as Nigeria's best president. Doyin Okupe, Senior Special Assistant to the President on Public Affairs, responding to former president Olusegun Obasanjo's comment that Jonathan had performed poorly as president noted that:

We... wish to assert without equivocation that in terms of performance and achievements, no administration since 1960 when Nigeria gained independence from Britain, has done as much as that of President Jonathan. Every discerning and unbiased Nigerian will definitely attest to this fact as the evidence stare all of us in the face. Contrary to Chief Obasanjo's position, the Federal Government under President Jonathan has performed excellently given the prevailing circumstances and resources available. An assessment of key sectors of national life under the Jonathan administration will definitely controvert Chief Obasanjo's argument that President Jonathan has not performed well. (Okupe, 2014)

Effusive praises of Jonathan stood in contradistinction to the perception of him held by many Nigerians who saw Jonathan is an inarticulate, befuddled and clueless leader who seemed grossly overwhelmed by the office. His inability to make profound statements on any issue created doubts in the minds of some Nigerians that he possessed a doctorate degree. Even after the election when it was clear Nigerians rated Jonathan's performance as president very poorly, Okupe stuck to his gun that Jonathan was Nigeria's best president. He claimed that "President Jonathan has done well and served his country well. He exits office as a great President. Perhaps Nigeria's greatest President for all time. Greater than the best before him. He excelled in achievement, in humility, tranquility and simplicity" (Okupe, 2014).

The Jonathan campaign expected that its huge campaign war-chest would blow the APC out of the water. When the election was postponed by six weeks, the PDP expected to use the period to outspend the APC and guarantee victory for Jonathan. By then however, the Jonathan campaign's expenditures had become counter-productive. Amidst allegations that the federal government depleted the Excess Crude Account by \$20 billion, growing external and internal debts now estimated at over \$60 billion and the former governor of the Central Bank, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi's allegation that the national oil company had failed to remit \$20 billion to the federation account, the campaign's expenditures raised many troubling questions. Moreover, the issue was not helped when Diezani Allison-Madueke, the minister of Petroleum resources, donated 70 million to the Bayelsa State PDP for use in Jonathan's campaign. Not only did this led to conflict within the party over the manner it was distributed but coming from a minister who had lavishly spent 10 billion Naira renting private aircrafts and faced allegations of corruption, the donation had a serious moral odor. The more money the re-election campaign

committee spent, the more it reinforced the perception that the government was immorally freely helping itself to public funds to buy Jonathan's re-election.

Conclusion

I have shown that money and the power of incumbency became the albatross to the Jonathan campaign. However, it would be premature to conclude that the two factors would no longer be decisive in future elections. However, during the 2015 presidential campaign a confluence of factors combined to cancel out these factors from the prospects of Jonathan's re-election. His poor performance as president, the morally questionable sources of his campaign funds, the infighting over the money and the poor and uneconomic manner of the campaign expenditures nullified money and incumbency as advantages to Jonathan. Moreover, the use of the Permanent Voters Card and the card reader reduced the scope to which election officials could be bribed by candidates to sway the election in their favor. One can safely predict that a president who performs as woefully as Jonathan did and who raises campaign funds through dubious means when voters are concerned about corruption will equally do as badly as Jonathan did in 2015. Governments that perform well do not need to bribe voters or try to use dubious means to purchase electoral victory. It is only when re-election is anchored on good governance and the electoral umpire (INEC) is willing and able to rigorously enforce limits on electoral expenditures and donations that the nefarious role of money in Nigerian politics can be permanently kept at bay.

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