



## Expectations of Personality Cult on Democratic Governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: The Case of President Muhammadu Buhari (Part I)

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### Abstract

The force of personality cult in human affairs is enormous and has a long history. In Nigeria's political trajectory, the achievements of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Amadu Bello, etc. remain indelible which earned them personality cult images. Though, Chief Awolowo never had a presidential opportunity, his innate desire to rule Nigeria was never hidden. Following his successful brief stay as Nigeria's military head-of-state between 1983-1985, General Muhammadu Buhari endeared himself to many Nigerians. Expectedly, it was the wish of many Nigerians for Gen. Buhari to have a second chance as president of Nigeria. A sort of personality cult was, thus, built around him. Little wonder, when Gen. Buhari unsuccessfully contested Nigeria's presidential elections between 1999-2011, the wish of some Nigerians to have him as president became more compelling. Luckily, Gen. Buhari became president of Nigeria following the 2015 Presidential Election. However, has President Buhari's personality cult image come to bear on the governance of Nigeria since 2015? Is it Uhuru for Nigerians under President Buhari? This paper, by means of qualitative data, evaluates the impact of President Buhari's personality cult image on his presidency since 2015. The paper concludes that whereas President Buhari's personality cult image is unquestionable; it has not come to bear on the governance of Nigeria. It recommends a deliberate introspection of the government's policies to identify, correct and retract policies that are discovered to have dampened the personality cult status of President Buhari.

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, Personality cult, Fourth Republic

### Introduction

Force of personality has a long history in playing fundamental roles in human affairs. This force can be observed in politics, governments, institutions, and even at the state level. Force of personality "developed in consequence of the periodic emergence of unique individuals whose ardent qualities of thought, conduct and temperament have compelled sufficient

admiration to serve as a model for others, and, on rare occasions, for large collections of humanity” (Strunsky, 1956, p.265).

In Nigeria, several personalities had rare privileges in playing historic roles that changed the discourse in Nigeria’s political trajectory. For example, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Amadu Bello, amongst others, all died as heroes to many Nigerians, especially to their respective ethnic nationalities (Otegbeye, 1991). This was on account of their sterling track records as premiers of Western, Eastern and Northern Nigeria respectively. This earned them personality cult statuses in the annals of Nigeria’s political history (Babatope, 1989). Whereas Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe served as a titular president of Nigeria between 1963-1966, Chief Obafemi Awolowo never had a presidential opportunity. Chief Awolowo’s innate desire to rule Nigeria was never hidden and this was regretted by the sage and his huge admirers alike that it never happened (Adebanwi, 2008).

General Muhammadu Buhari, as Nigeria’s military head of state between 1983-1985 was equally admired by many Nigerians on account of his policy of War Against Indiscipline (WAI) that endeared him to many Nigerians. Expectedly, therefore, it was the wish of many Nigerians for Gen. Buhari to have a second chance; as evidenced by Dr. Chuba Okadigbo’s thought on Gen. Buhari that:

The establishment might not allow us to rule now, but be that as it may, on a good day, at the appointed time, Buhari will rule Nigeria. What I do not know is whether I will be around when that happens. But even if I am not there, please, Muhammadu move on and fear not. The vultures will gather against you, but you know what we stand for. Be strong and continue for you shall overcome...it will not be long...if you must trust, always verify. (Nairaland Forum, 2019, para.4)

A sort of personality cult was, therefore, built around the personality of Gen. Muhammadu Buhari. Little wonder, when Gen. Buhari contested Nigeria’s presidential elections between 1999 and 2011, the wish of some Nigerians to have him as president became compelling. Against the opaque support of the intelligentsia of Northern Nigeria, the intelligentsia of South-West and South-South Nigeria, most of whom were ardent critics of Gen. Muhammadu Buhari as an unrepentant autocrat, suddenly went panegyric of the man even to consider Gen. Buhari as a ‘converted democrat’ who must rule Nigeria at all cost (Anele, 2018). But just as Dr. Chuba Okadigbo advised Gen. Buhari above, has Buhari been verifying those around his presidency?

Luckily for his admirers, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari was elected president of Nigeria in the 2015 presidential election. Admirers of President Buhari like Nasir Ahmad el-Rufai (2015) continued in creating a personality cult image around Buhari saying “the people believe in you. They trust you. I have great confidence that you are determined to discharge that trust”. Midway into President Buhari’s first tenure, El-Rufai (2016, pp.1,7 &16) further demonstrates his unalloyed support and trust in the president’s personality cult saying unequivocally:

...Sir, I am of the strong opinion and belief that you are our only hope now and in the medium term of saving the Nigerian nation from collapse and enabling the north of Nigeria to regain its lost confidence, begin to be respected as a significant contributor, and not the parasite and problem of the Nigerian federation...so long as you remain in the political



landscape, no Northerner will emerge successfully on the national scene... a whole generation of Nigerians now believe that not only does corruption pay very well, but that honesty and hard work do not pay at all. This has to change and only you Mr. President has the antecedents to lead this... I believe in your integrity, commitment and sense of duty to make our country better.

However, following Muhammadu Buhari's presidency since May 2015, questions have been persistently asked. The following questions bear consideration: Has President Buhari's huge personality cult come to bear on the governance of Nigeria since 2015? Is it Uhuru for the lives of Nigerians under President Buhari? Is it Eldorado for democracy, rule of law, the economy, human rights, etc. under President Buhari? Why is President Buhari holding office as Minister of Petroleum, just as Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and President Goodluck Jonathan held on to the Ministry of Petroleum (hereafter MoP) personally or through surrogates? Was it to ensure efficiency? But where is the efficiency in the MoP and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Is it not opacity pervading the MoP and NNPC? These questions serve as the context of this paper. Following this introduction, Section II examines the literature on personality cult, Section III examines President Buhari's Personality Cult in the governance of Nigeria from 2015 to 2019. Section IV concludes the paper.

### **An Inside Overview of Personality Cult**

Carl Friedrich and Z. K. Brzezinski's 1967 work, *'Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy'* is the widely cited scholarly literature that made an interesting inquiry into "*Personality Cult*" in Political Science. This and subsequent studies trace the origin of "*Personality Cult*" to a letter Karl Heinrich Marx wrote in 1877 to W. Blos against Ferdinand Lasalle who was Marx' rival in the Communist League and one of the key leaders of German Workers Movement (Burch, 1964; Tucker, 1979; Paltiel, 1983; Gill, 1984). However, instead of historicising on personality cult, what is a personality cult?

A review of definitions of personality cult readily avail the following collection. Plamper (2001, pp.9-10) defines personality cult as a "godlike glorification of a modern political leader with mass media techniques and excessive popular worship for this leader". Elsewhere, Plamper (2012, p. xiv) defines personality cult as "the symbolic elevation of one person much above others". For Rees (2004, p.4) personality cult is "an established system of veneration of a political leader, to which all members of society are expected to subscribe... It is thus a deliberately constructed and managed mechanism, which aims at the integration of the political system around the leader's persona". Pao-min Chang (in Pisch, 2016, p.63) describes personality cult as "the artificial elevation of the status and authority of one man... through the deliberate creation, projection and propagation of a godlike image". Broadly, Popan (2015, p.13) defines the personality cult as the "quantitatively exaggerated and qualitatively extravagant public demonstration of praise of the leader... the central element of a personality cult is the overwhelming praise to the leader, which tends to occupy all communication channels in a society".

Similarly, personality cult is seen as a system where the political legitimacy of the state or organisation is a function of the leader; a scenario where the persona with the cult image is revered as the only legitimate authority of the state. The person is seen as a more legitimate source of authority instead of the actual government. Therefore, it is the personality and not

the position that compels obedience and loyalty and often seen as infallible and divine (Paltiel, 1983; Crabtree, Kern, & Siegel, 2018). It is in such contexts Hunter (2012, pp.3-4) argues that:

a personality cult exists when the person becomes more important than the formal position...a...support of the masses for the person rather than the position he or she maintains. The lack of need for institutional authority is what sets personality cults apart. They form only when the people believe more in the person rather than the institution.

Thus, personality cult is a public figure presented to the citizenry by means of propaganda as an admirable person that should be loved and honoured.

Researches into personality cults have discovered the following findings. First, world known personality cults are nicknamed after diverse epithets that elevates and glorifies them. Crabtree, et al (2018, p.4) identified the following: Mussolini was called ‘social archangel, anenvoy of God, and a man of providence’. Hitler was referred to as ‘the greatest German of all times, the best imaginable expert in every specialised field, highest synthesis of his race’. Stalin was revered as the ‘genius of our epoch’, the ‘titan of the world revolution’, and the ‘wise helmsman’. MaoZedong was seen as ‘the reddest, reddest red sun’, ‘great leader, great teacher’, ‘great helmsman’ and ‘greatest genius of the world’. Ceausescu was known as the ‘genius of the Carpathians’ and in company of his wife Elena, both were referred as ‘the historic couple whose existence merges with the country's destiny’ and finally Hafez al-Assad was seen as ‘the premier pharmacist who knows all things about all issues’. What is common to all of these epithets is that personality cult possesses or is shrouded in mystery, belief system, rituals, etc. that adulate the leader (Crabtree, et al, 2018). Thus, it is essentially either a positive propaganda that is leader biased or ritual worships around a leader (Pisch, 2016).

Second, personality cults are easily identified by certain characteristics. Hunter (2012) among others identify:(a) *ideology* where personality cults arise on account of a nationalist surge or an ideology that binds; (b) *the ideal leader* where personality cults are formed around persons that are generally seen as the national ideal. This often happens by a deliberate or systematic presentation of the leader to the public by the party. It is deliberate because the public is made to see only the side of the leader the leader or his party want the public to know; (c) *state-controlled media* occurs when the persona work hard to endear himself to the public with the aid of state-controlled media. This practice, often succeeds because the press is gaged and instead used a medium to present to the public the persona and not the true identity of the real person. Therefore, for this scenario to flourish the media and the leadership has an unflinching relationship; (d) *what is in a name?* This creates a personality cult when places, days, buildings, squares, universities, stadia, etc. are named after a leader. The effect of naming is that the personality is ever made present in the memory of the citizenry; and (e) *erosion of institutions in favour of personality* ensues when the citizenry entrusts more faith in a leader instead of institutions of government. Where this scenario subsists, government institutions are apparently seen to be weak and incapable of providing the basic needs of the citizens; needs the personality readily provides.

Third, Popan (2015) identify the following models: (a) *the functionalist model* which argues that functionalists deploy personality cult as a means to secure legitimacy to an autocratic ruler and the political system that allows it; especially under a one-man rule to



flourish as a democracy; (b) *the mimetic model* which lays claim to the fact that in certain instances personality cults have dictatorial origins which affirms further that dictators mimic personality cults from other dictators. It is a truism that whereas autocracies are highly isolated, they are close to fellow autocracies but very a far from democracies; (c) *the psychological model* which avers that personality cults or autocracies are solely traceable to dictators; which further explain the phenomena through the internal characteristics of the leaders which manifest in form of thirst for power and adulation, disdain for criticism, low intellectual abilities and inferiority complexes arising from poor education; and (d) *the role of institutions model* which posits that state leaders or dictators often manipulate state institutions to promote yes-men, who in turn manipulate state propaganda to keep the leader in power. As an extension of the foregoing, state leaderships deliberately create, recreate or modify subsisting institutions to promote the personality cult of a leader.

Fundamentally, analysis of personality cults must take cognizance of the fact that personality cult is a huge phenomenon that pervades the entirety of any society; spreading into the power relations between the leader and the ruling elites, and between the authorities and the population (Rees, 2004).

### **President Buhari's Personality Cult Image and His Administration**

The ascendancy of Muhammadu Buhari as president of Nigeria, following the 2015 General Elections, was greeted with a heroic welcome; a leader accorded with messianic qualities and unparalleled praise. However, seven years into the lifespan of the President Buhari administration, scholarship has since engaged in midterm assessment of the administration (Nwabueze, 2018). Thus, the following question is asked: Would Nigerians have felt a sense of regret if Muhammadu Buhari had not ruled Nigeria? This section assesses President Buhari's mystified image vis-à-vis the actual governance of his administration.

#### **The Incorruptible Personality of President Buhari**

One major form that has characterised the mystique image of President Muhammadu Buhari is that he is incorruptible. Osita Okechukwu, spokesperson of the APC, South-East geopolitical zone eulogises President Buhari's personality cult thus:

Buhari said he would declare his assets once he is sworn in as president of the country... Buhari has only two houses in the whole of Nigeria. One house is in Katsina, while the other is in Kaduna. When he served as Military Governor in the North, he did not enrich himself. When he served as Petroleum Minister, he did not enrich himself. When he served in the Petroleum Trust Fund (PTF), he did not embezzle public funds. So, is it now the man is over 70 years that he will begin to acquire wealth? Buhari has outgrown that level of crass materialism that has blindfolded most public officers in Nigeria. Buhari also said he would lead by example. If he does not steal public funds, then those working with him will be afraid to do so. Buhari said he would not stop the courts from prosecuting public officials who soiled their fingers or hands in the oil of corruption. (Nairaland Forum, 2019, para.2)

However, President Buhari's horde of followership should pause to ponder on the following. First, they should seek answers to the unexplained \$2.8 million that got lost under Gen. Buhari's watch as petroleum minister under the then Gen. Obasanjo military regime and that was later traced to the Midland Bank in the United Kingdom. It is a known fact that:





Gen. Buhari's anti-press posture that culminated in the obnoxious Decree No.2 of 1984 (detention of persons without trial) is traceable to corruption. Gen. Buhari has not accounted for the \$2.8 million that got missing from the NNPC account in Midlands Bank, U.K, of which the Nigerian press had constantly pressed on him to account for prior to his ascendancy as a head of state (Egbe, 2014, p.218).

Second, President Buhari's headship of the Petroleum (Special) Trust Fund (hereinafter PTF) remains laden with issues bordering on financial improprieties. It may be recalled that in 1994 Gen. Buhari was invited by Gen. Sani Abacha to head the PTF; however, on terms dictated by Gen. Buhari, especially that he must go by the title of Executive Chairman and must be given a free hand to run the fund. The appointment of Gen. Buhari as the PTF boss was a child of necessity. Hitherto, Gen. Abacha had increased the pump price of petrol from ₦3.25 to ₦11, which of course, attracted a huge public outcry against the increment. The Nigerian populace had expressed the fear and anxiety that the accruing gains would rather benefit only but a few privileged Nigerians.

To assuage the agitations of Nigerians, Gen. Abacha insisted that the accruing gains would be solely committed to social and infrastructural projects. The PTF was, thus, formed to manage funds accruable from the increase in the pump price of petrol. To actualise his intentions, Gen. Abacha saw in Gen. Buhari as an incorruptible disciplinarian (often referred to as Mai Gaskiya, the honest one) to do the job of heading the PTF. However, Gen. Abacha was let down. The report of the Interim Management Committee (hereafter IMC), constituted on 7<sup>th</sup> July 1999 by the President Obasanjo Administration to investigate the fund, found out that the management of the fund was laden with financial improprieties. The IMC, headed by Haroun Adamu, discovered that:

They took in ₦500 million but by the time we came in, there was no one kobo from the deposit...When the IMC took over the management of PTF, there were no contract documents, drawings, or specifications relating to committed projects within the premises of PTF headquarters. All that were available were lists of projects and programmes in the following sectors: roads and road transportation, water supply, education, food supply, health and other projects. The client as it is mandatory in all contractual relationships, is expected to have in his possession, the client's copies of all documents relating to projects on which payments have been made. In PTF, this was not so...all documents (including the mandatory client's copies) were in possession of Afri-Project Consortium, APC, who were appointed as the sole management consultants to PTF...APC was actually the real PTF and yet it was a private company...With this power of the engineer, APC was able to award contracts and vary same without any reference to PTF. (Nkwocha, 2000, p.5)

However, in spite of such weighty allegations, Gen. Buhari on invitation by the IMC to make some explanations on the fund's management; especially the mysterious disappearance of ₦500 million belonging to the PTF, claimed that he was not aware of the existence of those allegations under his watch and even if otherwise, he never benefited personally from the acclaimed massive purloining of the PTF Fund. Despite the claims to the contrary, Afri-Projects Consortium had his total mandate to do what they did—the power to initiate new



projects—ensuring quality assurance of projects and making approval of variations on contract sums (Ugboaja, 2018).

Third, the issue of asset declaration, contrary to Osita Okechukwu's foregoing claims, has been politicised by the President Buhari-led APC Administration. Against the demands of the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) for Mr. President and his vice to declare their assets in their second tenure, the presidency through Mr. Femi Adesina insists asset declaration "is a voluntary will and not a compulsion. The president will do what the law requires of him and I can say for a fact that the president has declared his assets. Declaring that publicly is not in our law but voluntary. Therefore, he cannot be compelled to do so" (Kabir, 2020, p.2).

Whereas these issues and comments subsist, uncommon mixed feelings have continued to trail the anticorruption crusade of the President Buhari Government. A wide spectrum of political watchers sees the anticorruption regime of the administration as more of a pursuit of vendetta, and as a tool to woo legitimacy and relevance from within and abroad. Curiously, questions without responses have continued to trail the hitherto stay in office of Ibrahim Magu on acting capacity as EFCC's chairman for over five years and whose confirmation was turned down twice by the 8<sup>th</sup> Senate under Dr. Bukula Saraki.

But why would President Buhari work with Ibrahim Magu, a man the 8<sup>th</sup> Nigerian Senate found unworthy to occupy the office of EFCC chairman? The Senate was not economical with the truth in explaining why it refused Mr. Magu's confirmation (Sahara Reporters, 2019). In his acting capacity, Mr. Ibrahim Magu was resolute in requesting Britain to extradite Diezani Allison Madueke, erstwhile Petroleum Minister under President Jonathan, to face corruption charges. However, Nigerians then asked Mr. Magu the whereabouts of Mrs. Kemi Adeosun, erstwhile Minister of Finance, with allegations of NYSC certificate forgery? The hitherto trended rhetoric was: Ask Magu to request Britain to extradite Mrs. Diezani Allison Madueke alongside Mrs. Kemi Adeosun (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

Fourth, why is President Buhari serving as the Minister of Petroleum vis-à-vis the fact that the Nigerian president commands enormous executive powers comparable to none in black Africa. If the intention is to ensure sanity in the Ministry of Petroleum, where then are the expected gains when the pump price of petroleum products have undergone several adjustments under President Buhari's watch.

### **The State of Insecurity in Nigeria under President Buhari**

One major trust accorded to President Muhammadu Buhari, at the heels of the 2015 Presidential Elections, was that as a retired general, his military prowess, which his then major opponent Dr. Goodluck Jonathan lacked, would definitely come to bear on the state of insecurity in Nigeria, especially in North/East Nigeria—one area of the country being ravaged by Boko Haram insurgency. However, this expectation has remained dashed since 2015. Insecurity in Nigeria has since become pandemic with diverse manifestations of insecurities: Boko Haram terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, etc.

The state of insecurity in the country has since elicited diverse reactions from Nigeria's different ethnic nationalities. The clamour for restructuring the Nigerian state has become the loudest under President Buhari. Whereas the South-South geopolitical zone has continuously clamoured for a restructured Nigeria under a new fiscal arrangement or as they call it 'resource control'; the South/East geopolitical zone has considered an independent entity

under the aegis of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB). The South-West geopolitical zone, in restating their continued stay in a federated Nigeria, has instead set-up a security outfit, the Amotekun, to safeguard the South-West region (Aytogo, 2020).

These contestations are a clear demonstration of a lost trust on the Nigerian federation. Interestingly, even the APC's National Leader, Ahmed Bola Tinubu, has reiterated the need for an 'Amotekun' to compliment the role of security in the South-West region (Premium Times, 2020). These developments have compelled the PDP, the main opposition party, to express their dissatisfaction with the state of insecurity in Nigeria under President Buhari (Aytogo, 2020).

There are equally accusations of insincerity of purpose on the state of insecurity in the country levelled against the President Buhari-led administration. For example, there are agitations within military formations that the government is insincere in tackling the Boko Haram sect; especially with the launching of "Operation Safe Corridor (hereafter OSC)" in 2016, which among others is an opening to de-radicalise and rehabilitate repentant Boko Haram members. Where as sections of soldiers are highly agitated on the release of captured Boko Haram sect members through Operation Safe Corridor (ElefOfe, 2020; The Cable, 2020); Onyema Nwachukwu, spokesperson of Defence Headquarters concurred in stating that "We have made some releases, that's the truth. We should know what the operation is about. But take note, it is not that we capture Boko Haram suspects and then go back and release them. No". According to Nwachukwu, OSC is under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Defence and thirteen civil society organisations including UNICEF, International Office on Migration (IOM) (The Cable, 2020).

### **The Challenge of Rule of Law and Human Rights**

In a UN General Assembly (UNGA) address, President Buhari (2015, p.2) reiterates Nigeria's commitment to and respect for the rule of law saying "my country, Nigeria, has lived by conviction, even when judgment went against us in territorial disputes with our neighbours we respected those judgments and abided by them as a mark of respect for the rule of law and the charter of this organisation". President Buhari was not wrong in his assertion, but the quick point to add is that the Nigerian state is Janus-faced when it comes to honouring the rule of law and human rights. Nigeria has a track record of honouring international obligations and the rule of law abroad, whereas the country's domestic record on human rights and rule of law stands abysmal and repulsive. The following points will suffice.

Unprintable cases of court invasion by the Department of State Security (hereafter DSS) in the case involving Omoyele Sowore, Olawale Bakare, disobedience of court judgments involving Sambo Dasuki and Ibrahim el-Zakzakky and his wife as demonstrated by the President Buhari-led APC Government has indicated that the President Buhari-led administration prefers subjecting the rule of law to be subservient to national security (Campbell, 2019) and so have incurred the wrath of many Nigerians, media houses and even foreign nationals alike (Okonkwo, 2019) even as the following instances suffice. First, the Punch Newspaper arising from developments bordering human rights restated that:

as a symbolic demonstration of our protest against autocracy and military-style repression, PUNCH...will henceforth prefix Buhari's name with his rank as a military dictator in the 80s, Major General, and refer to his administration as a regime,



until they purge themselves of their insufferable contempt for the rule of law. (Punch Editorial, 2019)

In its response to the decision of the Punch newspaper to address President Buhari as Major General Buhari, the Buhari administration through Femi Adesina, Special Adviser to the president on Media and Publicity, alleges that the newspaper's decision was rather politically motivated (The Atlantic Post, 2019). Similarly, Chief Ralph Nwosu, the National Chairman of the African Democratic Congress (ADC) said:

What happened in the court is a clear manifestation of a completely failed democracy. It is also a clear case of fascism and it is even fascism of a questionable leadership. We have seen these signs creeping into the system for many years, not even a few months ago and it is giving us serious concern. It has come out in full blast. When autocratic governments start, there will be different kinds of pretentiousness, but by the time they lay out their full fangs, there is trouble. So, people must stand for country, and we commend a major organisation like PUNCH for standing for country. (Aworinde, 2019, para.2)

Still, foremost human rights activist, Femi Falana also notes that whereas Nigeria was for three decades ruled by military juntas "on no occasion did security operatives invade court premises to arrest political activists inside a court room. Therefore, the bizarre harassment of courts cannot be tolerated under a democratically elected government that claims to operate under the rule of law" (PM News Editor, 2019, para:20). Also, Campbell (2019) observes that the President Buhari administration is fighting hard to streamline national security (accusations of treason and seeking to overthrow the government) vis-à-vis human rights to establish a basis for the arrest of the duo of Omoyele Sowore and Olawale Bakere; however: in any event, the episode is a public relations disaster for the Buhari administration. Either the administration is, indeed, moving to restrict freedom of the press in Nigeria or the DSS is operating outside the president's authority. Either is bad for Nigeria. (Campbell, 2019, para.2)

Bob Menendez, a serving New Jersey Senator, also expresses his dissatisfaction with the DSS harassment of Mr. Sowore stating that Sowore is only exercising his right to free expression. The U.S. Senator notes that the developments around Sowore "is becoming symptomatic of the increasingly closing political and civic space in Nigeria... This is unacceptable in a country that calls itself a democracy" (Wahab, 2019, para.3).

No matter the official dressings of these political developments by officials of the President Buhari administration, these developments will go into history as one of President Buhari's lowest points.

### **The Economy under President Buhari since 2015**

The prevailing economic environment in Nigeria warrants the following questions: Has the economy of Nigeria fared any better or worse under President Buhari? What are the economic indicators under the President Buhari administration? Are they any better or worse than the 16 years of the PDP? Seven years into the President Buhari administration, should the PDP be continuously blamed for the state of Nigeria's economy? Has President Buhari's flawlessness of character come to bear on the economy of the country?

The President Buhari administration on 13 January 2019 assented to the Finance Act. Whereas the administration's reason for the "Finance Act" was to support the implementation



of the 2020 National Budget, it is a novelty in that the “Finance Act” made key changes to the Nigerian tax regime; especially the increase in the Value Added Tax rate from 5% to 7.5%. Though, the intentions may be genuine and proactive, taxation often raises concerns. In this direction, Itriago (2011, p.64) notes that:

The evidence confirms that a failure to find ways of taxing more fairly seriously constrains developing countries’ ability to fulfil poverty reduction and equity objectives, as well as their ability to build more stable states. Tax policy and public spending policy need to be yoked together in order to fulfil social goals...governments in developing countries have not made the most of tax policies as a tool for achieving such goals.

This reservation is germane after all, for example, the Nigerian public is curious that an administration that is increasing VAT and other tax avenues are at the same time allocating a huge ₦37 billion for renovation of the National Assembly complex that was hitherto built with ₦7 billion by a previous administration (Akinpelu, 2019). Further worries are that the President Buhari administration reopened his earlier 2016 to 2018 external borrowing plans to the National Assembly to reconsider and approve a \$30 billion loan to execute key infrastructure across Nigeria from 2016 to 2018. Recalling that this same request was presented to the Dr. Bukola Saraki led 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly in 2016 but was turned down; but it has resurfaced because the Ahmed Lawan led 9<sup>th</sup> National Assembly is executive friendly (Iroanusi, 2019). The Senate President Ahmad Lawan, in giving its tacit approval explains that “we are going to be critical that every cent that is borrowed is tied to a project” (Iroanusi, 2019, para 2). Senator Lawan further states that the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly turned down the loan request in 2016 for lack of sufficient details.

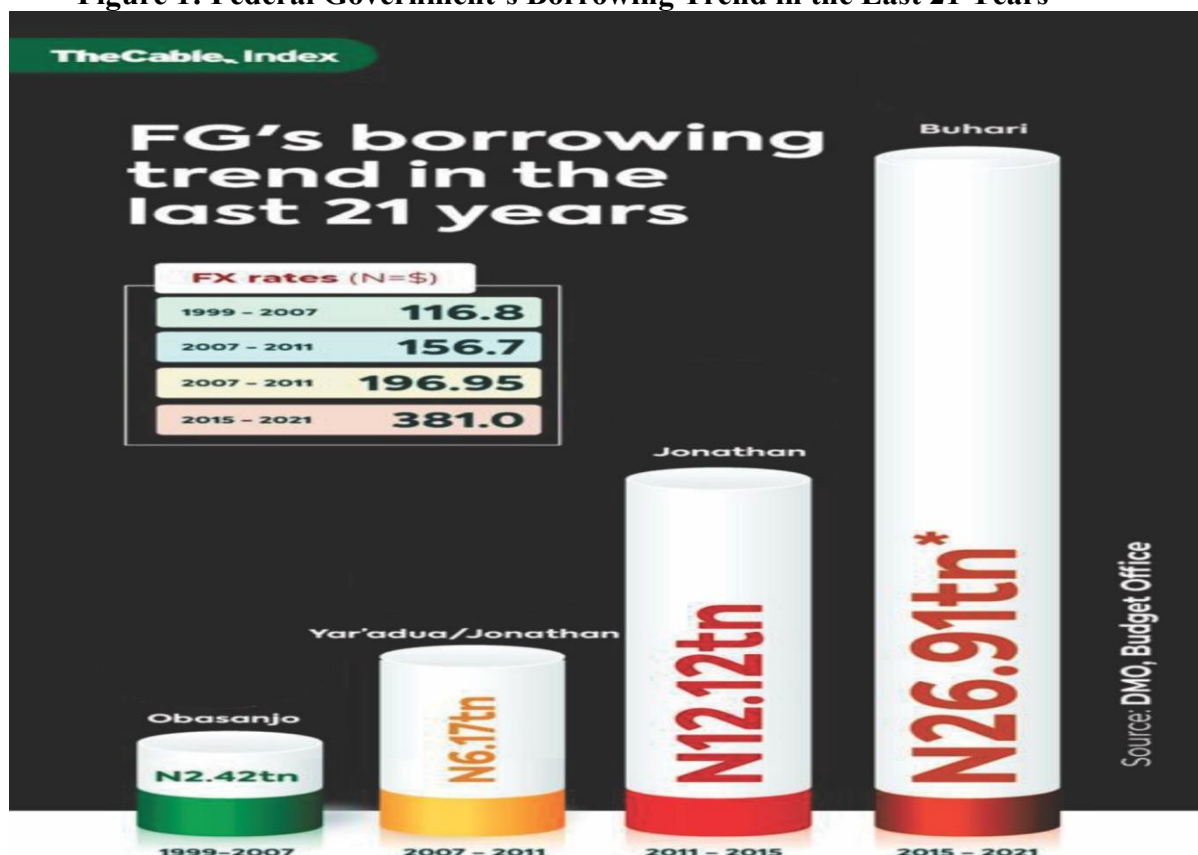
However, contrary to Ahmad Lawan’s explanations, Shehu Sani, former senator from Kaduna State, member of the 8<sup>th</sup> National Assembly and Chairman of the Senate Committee on Local and Foreign Debts explains otherwise that the President Buhari’s loan request was rejected to save Nigeria from:

sinking into the dark gully of a perpetual debt trap...the eight Senate did not want the country to be recolonised by creditor banks. Nigeria’s external debt in 2015 was \$10.32 billion and it escalated to \$22.08 in the second quarter this year—which is 114 percent. Had the eight Senate approved that loan request, Nigeria’s external debt could have catapulted to over \$52 billion and that is not sustainable. (Iroanusi, 2019, para.4)

Another scary development to the nation’s economy, as presented in Figure 1 below, is the borrowing spree of the President Buhari-led administration which has escalated Nigeria’s external debt profile. The Debt Management Office (DMO) claims that “Nigeria’s debt stood at ₦21.73trillion as of December 312017, while the figure as of 30 June2015 was ₦12.12 trillion. This means that within a period of 30 months—July 2015 to December 2017—the country’s debt rose by ₦9.61trillion, or 79.25 percent” (Amaefule, 2018).



**Figure 1: Federal Government’s Borrowing Trend in the Last 21 Years**



Source: DMO, Budget office

This state of the economy has become scary for even the sitting governors in Nigeria who under the auspices of the Governors Forum of Nigeria (GFN) distances themselves from the borrowing trend of the President Buhari administration (Ikhilae, 2020). The PDP, the main opposition party, is equally agitated by the state of the economy under the APC government. It claims that Nigeria’s economy has nosedived under the President Buhari-led administration. This is because of the sudden attraction to a culture of unexplained borrowings by the President Buhari administration that has caused the nation’s debt to rise from ₦21.72 trillion in December to ₦24.387 trillion in December, 2018 which represent a ₦2.66 trillion increase (TheCable, 2019).

However, the Director-General of DMO, Patience Oniha justifies government borrowing with the attendant increase in external debt that “the nation went into recession and the government could not abandon the economy but had to spend...the current government had been spending more on infrastructure than other administrations in the past...any foreign borrowing had to be tied to a project” (Amaefule, 2018, para.2).

As defensive as this could be for the President Buhari administration, past experiences on government borrowings say otherwise. For instance, General Sani Abacha in his 1997 Annual Budget broadcast reveals that the ruling elites often embezzle borrowed funds. According to him:

During 1996 an appraisal of project with loans from international capital market (ICM) was conducted with a view to determine whether the country obtained



commensurate value from the borrowings. This produced remarkable results. Field visits to the 145 projects with total ICM loans amounting to 13.157 billion US dollars revealed that 18 projects with total loan amount of 836 billion US dollars were never executed. The proceeds of the external loans obtained for their execution were drawn in all cases. These projects are classified as 'failed'. The failed loans are being serviced by government. Another 44 projects with loan amount of 4.81 billion US dollars are classified as 'distressed' were either not commissioned or were commissioned and then closed down shortly after. The potential economic and social benefits of these projects cannot be achieved with further injection of funds. The third category classified as 'successful' comprise 83 projects with an amount of 7.503 billion US dollars were surviving and at some capacity during the appraisal. (Uchenna, 2011, p.59)

### Conclusion

This paper concludes that whereas President Buhari's personality cult image may be unquestionable, it has not been reflected, applied or observed to have been adopted or reflected in the governance of Nigeria. Thus, the paper makes the following recommendations:

- a. That since it is still early into the second four-year term of the administration, a deliberate introspection of the government's policies, and their execution be made to identify, correct and retract whatever discovered that dampens the personality cult status of President Buhari.
- b. That President Buhari's personality cult image/status would have remained intact if not for his presidency. Persons of similar cult image in Nigeria such as Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Ahmadu Bello, etc. whose personality cult images have remained intact were because they never ruled the larger political unit called Nigeria, but their respective regions as premiers which they left behind enviable indelible track records.
- c. In most other climes, persons of personality cult status improve on their already built status by staying away or thread cautiously in politics. However, in Nigeria, it is observed that public offices tampers, and dampens personality cults. Thus, if elective offices in Nigeria adversely impact on personality cults, those with such sterling track records and enviable personality cult images should stay away from public offices.

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