Political Advertising and Smear Campaigns: Whither Nigeria?

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Abstract:
Political advertising is a crucial element in the political life of every nation. This is so because it holds the key to effective sensitization and mobilization of the citizens of any given polity. As a crucial political tool, it has often been used and abused by the political class. In Nigeria, the intensity of abuses in electioneering political advertisements has become a worrisome development. In the light of the above observation, this paper sets out to review political advertising practices, with particular attention to smear campaigns in the country’s political history. Adopting the content review method of research, the paper traces the etymology of smear campaigns in Nigeria, explores its taxonomy and examines the various dimensions of it; including probable causes. The study argues that the smear campaign is not an alien concept in Nigerian politics, neither is its practice peculiar to the country’s political class. It concludes that smear campaign is a necessary political evil, and recommends, among other things, an urgent restructuring of the country’s political landscape, as that will go a long way in ushering a new era in which political advertising practices would be devoid of ethno-religious, regional and frivolous sentiments.

Keywords: Political advertising, Smear campaigns, Political culture, Electioneering, Candidature.

Introduction:
It may be somewhat out of place to dabble into the discussion of smear campaign without mentioning political advertising. After all, smear campaign is an offshoot of political advertising. Political advertising according to Izuogu (2014, p.4), is the use of media by political parties and candidates to sensitize and mobilize the electorate for election. Robbs (2009) sees it as the use of media by political candidates to increase their exposure to the public. According to him, it provides the platform that links candidates with the relevant groups in the community, as well as communicating the candidate’s stand on selected issues.

On his own part Ijeh (2010, p.266) defines political advertising as the application of the principles of advertising to serve political interests, especially during electioneering campaigns. He further stresses that the exercise entails the formulation of advertising theme, identification of target audience, designing of the most appropriate advertising message, selection of the appropriate advertising channels and the most appropriate dosage of dissemination of the advertising message; all for the purpose of attracting votes in elections. It is worthy of note here that political advertising must of, necessity cover verbal and non-verbal statements, including visual presentations such as dresses, make-
ups, hair style, logos and every other element that makes up political identity and image (McNair 2003).

The simply implies that the ultimate goal of political advertising is “opinion management”. Reason, being that its contents and purpose revolve around the intentions of politicians to influence the political environment (Denton & Woodward cited in Udende 2011). In furtherance of that goal, politicians have come to embrace it as the only instrument to contend with the ever-mercurial and changing citizenry’s political behaviours, attitudes and demands in the complex and dynamic environment of politics (Ezeudu 2003, p. 227).

**History of Political Advertising:**

Etymologically, political advertising as a concept could be traced to the United States of America (USA) in the year 1956. In that year, Dwight Eisenhower was recorded to have taken his presidential campaign to the medium of television. Taking advantage of the potency and importance of television, Eisenhower was able to position himself as the best candidate to occupy the White House then. In his gentle and jovial nature, he called for questions from American electorate and answered them in his characteristic “no bull” way. Eventually, those questions and their answers were designed into political advertisements and campaign slogan entitled “Eisenhower answers America”. From that question and answer forum, the radio city music hall was able to film and produce forty (40) spots of twenty-second television commercials for Eisenhower in just one day. It could be recalled that those political advertisements were ultimately responsible for his winning the presidential election then. Onuorah (2008,p.7) notes that ever since then, there had been a steady increase in the use of political advertising in presidential campaigns in the United States of America (USA). Four years later, precisely in the year 1960, the phenomenon of political advertising had found its way into the United Kingdom, where it was embraced by British politicians. There, it was reported that the Conservative Party hired the services of a leading London-based advertising company, Saatchi & Saatchi to handle her electoral campaign advertising. Expectedly, the Conservative party emerged victorious at that election.

In Nigeria, the phenomenon of political advertising, first manifested itself in the year 1979. The presidential candidates of the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), in the person of Late Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his National Party of Nigeria (NPN's) counterpart – Alhaji Shehu Shagari engaged in some form of political advertising. According to Onuorah (2008) the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was said to have engaged the services of Saatchi & Saatchi of London to promote her party and its presidential flag-bearer. Eventually, the NPN was declared winner of the 1979 presidential election. The impact of political advertising could not be felt by Nigerians, until the year 1993. In that year, Nigerians were awakened to the full impact of political advertising in electioneering campaigns. The highly creative political advertisements then were designed to promote the presidential candidature of Late Chief MKO Abiola of the defunct Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the National
Classifications of Political Advertising:
Political advertising can be broadly classified under three headings thus: Advocacy, Attack and Contrast.

**Advocacy:** This is a type of political advertisement that makes a case for the sponsor/candidate, but no explicit mention of the opponent.

**Attack:** An attack political advertisement makes a case against an opponent but does not make a case for the sponsor.

**Contrast:** It makes a case for the sponsor and makes a case against the opponent. It commends the sponsor and condemns the opponent. (Lau & Lee 2000; Jamieson & Campbell 2001; Goldstein & Freed 2002; Opeibi 2006).

Theoretical framework:
This research is anchored on the Action Assembly Theory of the mass media which stresses how human beings organize and make use of their knowledge. The Action Assembly Theory was developed by John Green to explain communication action. It is designed to examine how human beings organize their knowledge and how they use such knowledge in communication. The theory posits that human beings have (i) content knowledge and (ii) procedural knowledge. According to it, content knowledge refers to man’s knowledge about things, while procedural knowledge refers to man’s knowledge of how to do things. It argues that Man’s procedural knowledge consists of an awareness of the consequences of the various actions in different situations we face. It submits that “overall procedural knowledge consists of a large number of procedural records, each of which is composed of knowledge about an action, its outcomes and the situation in which it is appropriate” (Littlejohn cited in Izuogu 2009, p.3). The theory contends that for communication to be effective, the communicator must consult his procedural memory to select the most appropriate actions and arrange same in a sequence that befits the communication situation.

The implication of this is that for any communicative act to bear the needed fruit, the cognitive system has to coordinate the different levels of representation/behaviour in a single action comprising (i) the interactional representation-(overall objective of the communication) (ii) ideational representation-(ideas to be expressed in the communication) (iii) utterance representation-(appropriate language) and (iv) sensory motor representation - (sentence structure). Put differently, it means that every action implicates other actions in one way or another and invariably communicative actions become integrated into a hierarchy of knowledge in which each piece of knowledge in the overall routine is a representation of something that needs to be done. By implication, this theory suggests the fact that politicians must consult their procedural memory with a view to selecting the most appropriate actions and arranging such in a sequence that befits the communication situation. The Action Assembly theory illuminates political
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advertising as a phenomenon which requires the selection of appropriate actions and arranging them in appropriate ways.

Smear Campaign
Smear campaign can be simply defined as the act of attacking the reputation of one political party or candidate by another in order to boost the attacker’s chances of victory in an election. It is a campaign directed at promoting the sponsor at the expense of the attacked political party or candidate. The new Webster’s dictionary describes smear thus: to spoil the good reputation of someone especially falsely; something which casts a slur on someone’s good reputation, especially falsely etc. In other words, it could be taken as the act of criticizing a political party. It is the negative side of political communication, wherein political parties and candidates attempt to “get something” on their opponents during electioneering campaigns. The ultimate aim of which is to make such opponents appear unworthy to occupy political positions.

The concept of smear campaign is not a strange political development to political communicators, political scientists and media consultants. It is rather an old phenomenon whose origin could be traced to history. For instance, Sobowale (2007, p.19) asserts that “the deviation from issue based politics, to fighting dirty or negative campaigning did not occur until 1963”. That development, he blamed on the intra-party crisis that rocked the Action Group (AG) which resulted ultimately in loss of political ideology. In his own account on the origin of smear campaign in Nigeria, Ijeh (2010, p.270) points out that even though it may be difficult to say when exactly it crept into electioneering political advertising in the country, it was evident during the 1983 general election campaigns. By implication, it means that negative campaigning, mud-slinging, vilification, dirty politics or whatever name it may be called, predates the present democratic experience.

Taxonomy of Smear Campaign
Available indices on the subject matter show that there are four levels of smear campaign:

i. **Intra – Party:** In this case, an aspirant can attack fellow aspirants who are jostling for the party’s ticket with him/her in the party’s primaries.

ii. **Inter Party:** This is a situation where one political party attacks the other/s like the one that was aired on the Bendel Television (BTV) Benin City during the 1983 electioneering campaign. In the period and circumstance under investigation, the defunct Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) corrupted in English National Party of Nigeria (NPN’s) slogan thus: “NPN! Soup don sour! Soup wey sour? Dem go through way am!” Note that the real slogan of the defunct National Party of Nigeria was “NPN! - Superpower! Superpower! – NPN!”

iii. **Candidate - to – Candidate:** Here, the flag bearer of one political party can attack flag bearers of the opposition parties. For example, in the 2007 gubernatorial election in Edo State, Comrade Adams Oshiomole, candidate of the Labor Party sponsored a press advertisement that portrayed the People’s Democratic Party’s candidate – Professor Osunbor as being bottle – fed by his
political god-father, Chief Tony Anenih. The lead line of that advertisement reads “Edo people choose one ….. puppet or leader” (Danesi 2008, p. 33)

iv. **Candidate to party:** This is a situation where a single candidate of one political party attacks a rival political party as exemplified in the case of Nahu Ribadu urging the electorate to vote out the PDP in the April 2011 polls (Izuogu 2014, p.11).

**Dimensions of Smear Campaign**

Smear campaign can assume any of the following dimensions; mild abuses, name-calling, quotes, comments of significant others and action/inactions.

**Mild Abuses:** Smear campaign could assume the form of mild abuses of opponents based on such personal characteristics as the opponent’s size of the lead, protruding stomach, bulged eyes, thick lips, hair style, customary attire etc.

**Name Calling:** This implies making derogatory remarks about the personality of the opposition or his/her political party. For instance, the Soul Lifters Political Organization of Kaduna State referred to a particular candidate to the 2007 presidential election as “homosexual, corrupt and disloyal”. That advertisement in question urged the electorate not to vote for yandauda, riba and munafiki. (Danesi 2008,p.33). In a similar development, the Alliance for Democracy (AD) in one of its political advertisements in the 2003 gubernatorial race in Lagos State, referred to the rival Progressive Action Congress (PAC) as “PACker” and urged Lagos State electorate to resist “Baba Packer from the packing of Lagos” which was started since 1967 (Olujide, Adeyemi & Gbadeyan 2011, p.185).

**Quotes:** These are statements made by other people, which could be used to support ideas, points, positions or arguments. Quotes have become veritable instruments in the hands of politicians who in most cases quote their opponents out of context, just to paint them black before the electorate. Example can be drawn from the newspaper advertisement of the Guardian of March 24, 2011 which was sponsored by the Anti-Graft Collective. In that publication, Nuhu Ribadu, a former Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Presidential Candidate of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) in the 2011 Presidential election was quoted thus: “the PDP government has achieved nothing in 12 years …” The sponsors of that advertisement went ahead to remind Ribadu that he was nobody prior to his appointment by the PDP government as EFCC Chairman.

**Comment of Significant Others:** This refers to statements or comments made by people in positions of authority. They could be politicians, pressmen, preachers, musicians, elders statesmen etc. Recall President Goodluck Jonathan’s charge to his then new ministers in the year 2011.

Our efforts in governance must be manifested in the revamp of decaying infrastructure, including steady power supply and good roads; provision of sound and quality education; the good health of our people; provision of jobs for our unemployed youths, security of life and property, commitment to free and fair elections and the very strict adherence to the rule of law…

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The above comment was criticized by the presidential candidate of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) in the 2011 elections, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu. With reference to the comment above, Ribadu reproduced a catalogue of unfulfilled promises made by the Jonathan administration to Nigerian electorate (Vanguard newspaper of March 26, 2011).

**Actions/Inactions:** Here, politicians attempt to get something on their opponents by recalling those actions of the opponents that didn’t augur well with the citizenry and those inactions of the opponents that would have improved the standard of living of the people.

**Causes of Smear Campaign**

The under-listed factors have been identified by scholars as causes of smear campaign: Lack of ideas, ethnicity, fear of failure and settlement of old scores.

- **Lack of Ideas:** A good number of politicians are bereft on how to better the living conditions of the people. The implication of this is that during electioneering campaigns, such empty politicians are left with no option but to resort to attacking the ideas and personality of their opponents. This has often made political advertising to deviate from being ideologically-based, to being “exchange of diatribe and destructive campaigning by various campaign teams” (Ijeh 2010, p.271).

- **Ethnicity:** According to Agba (2006, p.194), political parties in Nigeria are usually formed along ethnic lines. He pointed out that the First Republic’s political parties of National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) were ethnic confraternities in political party garments. Since political advertising practices are reflections of the inter-play between the political class and the political environment, ethnic prejudices have always been placed above other considerations. **Fear of Failure:** Fear of failure at elections is responsible for the opposition’s indulgence in smear campaigns. For example, during the Second Republic in Kwara State, the opposition Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) countered the campaign song of the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) which sang:

  *Saraki mi gboro titi, o mi gboro  
  Oloye mi gboro titi, o mi gboro.*

This song means: Saraki (NPN strongman) is shaking the city. The Chief is shaking the city, he is shaking the city. For fear of losing the election, the UPN countered thus:

  *Ile won na nu ni (x2ce)  
  Ile abere wo bi ile ekute. Ile wo na nu ni.*

The counter version translates to: This is their house (x2ce). Their house like the rats house.(You have to bend down to enter). This song is a clear derision of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) as materially and mentally poor (Olujide et al. 2011, p.181).

- **Settlement of old Scores:** One other cause of smear campaign is settlement of old scores by political rivals. Politicians have always been found to cash-in on the opportunity provided by electioneering campaigns to settle old scores with perceived political enemies. For example, Ijeh (2010, p. 277) observed that the rivalry between Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari was responsible for the prevalence of smear campaigns in the 2003 presidential election campaigns.

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Select Cases of Smear Campaign

In the 1993 general election, some of the National Republican Convention (NRC’s) political advertisements were meant to besmear the opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP). In the “horse” political advertisement sponsored by the NRC, the advertisement described the SDP as a “dead horse”, pointing out that there was no gain in trying to spur on a dead horse (Ijeh 2010, p.270). It could be recalled that the symbol of the defunct Social Democratic Party was a horse.

Leading to the 1999 general elections, there was this Peoples Democratic Party PDP-sponsored advertisement in which the chairman of the All Peoples Party (APP) was quoted thus: “Out-rig opponents, APP chairman tells members”. In other to poison the minds of the electorate, the PDP then replied “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. They have said it. Will you let them do it?” (The Guardian newspaper, 1998). Consider this 2003 political advertisement sponsored by the Alliance for Democracy (AD) against her major opposition, the Progressive Action Congress (PAC) in Lagos state:

Baba PACker!
Dem wan Finish di PACking
(of Lagos) wey dem begin
Since 1967 Haba! We no go gree!
Vote TINUBU/ PEDRO 2003
Let’s vote AD again.

In a swift reaction, the Progressive Action Congress (PAC) queried:

LET’S DO WHAT AGAIN?
LET’S NOT DO IT AGAIN LET’S VOTE FOR CHANGE
LET’S VOTE FOR PROGRESS AFENIFERE LAGOS STATE
VOTE FOR PROGRESSIVE ACTION CONGRESS
GANIYU DAWODU FOR GOVERNOR

A similar scenario was also experienced in the 2003 gubernatorial election in Kwara state. In the year and event under review, it was the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) that fired the first shot thus:

You’ve served The father
Why serve The son?
Kwara must be totally free Up Kwara, Vote Lawal.

As a counter offensive, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) reacted this way:

Four years ago, He promised Kwara people
Light, Agriculture, Water, Accountability, Lovely Hospitals
Today, everybody knows the truth…

- Note also the campaign slogan of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP’s) gubernatorial candidate in that election:
  
  Up Lawal, No shaking!
  Second term, Continuity forever!!!
This campaign slogan was adulterated by the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) thus:

Poku Lawal, Bukola for Governor.

This literally means: Unimportant Lawal, Bukola for Governor.

_Called from March 16, 18 and April 4, 9 editions of Punch newspaper of 2003._

In the 2007 general elections, there were obvious cases of smear campaign. For example, in Lagos State, the classic Babatunde Fashola’s press advertisement—“Votes possibility” can still be recalled. That advertisement said:

- We Votes Not Depression Permanently Allowed (DPA), not
- Punishment Depressingly Present (PDP), not
- Lies Perpetuated (LP).

In an apparent counter-offensive, Jimi Agbaje came up with his “Agunmaniye’’ concept, which means ‘’Tall without wisdom’’.

That advertisement showed two trees:— (lean and robust), while the lean tree was rooted in Bola Tinubu, it’s branches showed pictures of Koro, Afikuyomi, Pedro, Gbajabiamila and Fashola; whereas the robust tree (with a Jimi branch) was rooted in the late Obafemi Awolowo.

“Why Osun says no to Aregbesola” press advertisement is another example of smear campaign in the 2007 election. The advertisement in question showed urban Jungle pictorials of deplorable Lagos roads, purported to have gulped #150 million by the ministry which Aregbesola presided over as commissioner (Danesi 2008, p.33).

The last general elections held in the year 2011 also recorded some smear campaigns, as exemplified in the following newspaper advertisements sponsored by the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP):

LET'S USE OUR THUMBS TO ERASE PDP OUT OF OUR LIVES.
LET'S TAKE OUR COUNTRY BACK FROM THEM NOW OR NEVER.

**Wait a minute!**

**Did they say you should vote out PDP?**

When next they tell you so, ask them:

- There is only one party in Nigeria today that is not somebody’s personal property or in the hands of a dictator, which party is that?
- Only one party that conducted a transparent, competitive and a democratic presidential primary. Which party is that?
- Only one party has been able to manage its internal crisis without breaking up or changing name or running from pillar to post. Which party is that?
- Which party is funded by members and well-wishers, not from Abacha loot or 15% commission from tax-payer’s money?
- Only one party is truly national, cutting across regions, religions and multicultural interests. Which party is that?
Conclusion
Smear campaign is by no means an alien concept in Nigerian politics neither could its origin be traced the country nor is the practice peculiar to its politicians. It is rather a global phenomenon by which an admixture of facts and lies are creatively packaged by politicians to attack the image and credentials of their opponents. In some quarters, smear campaign has been condemned as a terribly unhealthy political practice, in which ideological issues are sacrificed on the altar of mediocrity and triviality. This school of thought considers it therefore as an indecent and undesirable exercise that is incapable of creating the desired political atmosphere for the development and sustenance of democracy. The other school of thought commends smear campaign as a positive factor in the political development of Nigeria. It argues that such vitriolic exchanges provide the electorate with details of records and reputations of candidates, necessary for determining their suitability or otherwise for elective positions. Proponents of this idea perceive those vitriolic exchanges as normal electioneering practices, aimed at helping the electorate in taking informed political decisions.

In view of foregoing, we conclude that smear campaign is a necessary political evil. This conclusion is predicated on the fact that it exposes hidden facts about candidates for elections, which would have otherwise remained safe in their closets. Again, it influences voters choice of candidates at the polls and to a very reasonable extent, encourages political office-holders to strive to live above board.

Recommendations
There is urgent need for the federal government to restructure the existing political landscape of the country, so as to usher in a new era in which political advertising practices would be devoid of ethno-religious, regional and frivolous sentiments. Political parties should come up with directives on how political advertisements could give all necessary information about political office-seekers without violating the laws of nature and those of the country, especially defamation and sedition.

The Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) through its Advertising Standards Panel (ASP) should live up to its statutory responsibility by ensuring that political advertisements (controlled materials) undergo the mandatory pre-exposure screening and approval.

Media organizations should insist on professional practice by refusing to air or publish political advertisements that do not emanate from accredited copywriters or consultants.
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