

Nigeria's Soft Power in the Face of COVID-19

Written by Fidel Abowei

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FIDEL ABOWEI, JUN 22 2020

As states come to terms with the destructive potential of COVID-19, its impact on the dynamics of global politics is becoming increasingly apparent, both in the nature of inter-state relations and the strategies states evolve to secure short and even long-term interests. While the United States and China are at loggerheads, and global alliances are struggling to withstand their steepest test since World War II, soft power – a country's ability to influence others through the instrumentality of the attractive components of its culture, external behavior and domestic political values – has assumed increased prominence and offers post-virus strategic opportunities to all states regardless of their geopolitical significance.

As with other dimensions of power, COVID-19 has altered the way states exercise soft power, especially in a global climate of 'reputational warfare'. The way and manner in which governments respond to the pandemic offer opportunities to affect the 'perceptive lenses' of people around the world and generate attraction. Increasingly, a nation's ability to effectively exercise its influence over others is more likely to be affected by how well it responds to a pandemic that threatens to destroy the very foundations of global as well as domestic governmental structures. This implies that a government's ability to respond effectively may showcase the strength and efficiency of its institutions, thereby, making its model of governance to be attractive to others. In other words, enhancing the domestic political dimension of that state's soft power.

At the moment, there is little doubt that African states are less concerned with regional political considerations than the domestic implications of a pandemic that has exposed the fundamental weakness of state institutions. However, that does not negate the fact that the battle against COVID-19 presents opportunities for African countries to boost their international reputations. Nigeria, the proverbial 'giant' of Africa, and a country particularly concerned with its regional standing in the continent, can seize the opportunity a public health crisis of this magnitude affords to project an image of a country responding adequately to a pandemic that has rocked even the most powerful countries in the world. What remains unclear is if this is achievable in the face of deep-rooted structural deficiencies exacerbated by weak institutions – the very tool that ought to undergird an adequate response mechanism.

Like most states with limited capabilities, Nigeria's response to COVID-19 has been largely domestically oriented. Awestruck by the challenges confronting the Global North in mitigating the crisis, the Nigerian government was spurred to react rather swiftly by initiating policies that were largely in line with the model of containment used in the Global North. However, in the face of contextual disparities compounded by severe structural deficits, these policies have been difficult to implement. Not unlike most countries across the Global South, economic security has, indeed, gained primacy over health security in Nigeria and rightly so. The sheer lack of financial muscle to navigate a crisis of this magnitude in the face of rising cases of COVID-19 tilts the pendulum in favor of easing lockdown measures.

If anything, COVID-19 exposes the perennial weakness of Nigeria's institutional and governmental structures at all levels, as well as the precarious state of its nationhood. As revealed in the course of evolving a national response against this coronavirus, Nigeria has fewer than 500 ventilators for a population of over 200 million people. This demonstrates the limitations of the nation's public health infrastructure. Even more alarming is the fact that despite oil and gas earnings amounting to US \$340 billion since the 1970s, federal, state and local government authorities are unable to provide economic palliatives for citizens who mostly operate on the fringes of the mainstream economy. In fact, measures devised to provide palliatives lacked transparency and spread, which in part explains resistance to

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lockdown measures in Lagos, prompting harsh responses by security personnel.

As the saying goes 'every cloud has a silver lining', so is the case of Nigeria's response. COVID-19 has spurred Abuja to look inwards for essential goods and services. The government invited the assistance of individuals, faith centers, companies, and NGOs, a move that highlights the culture of service ingrained in the Nigerian society. Beyond benefits to their brands, COVID-19 offers these actors an outsized voice to enhance the country's soft power in Africa. Religious organizations like the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) supported lockdown measures and even cooperated with state and local governments to ensure compliance with government directives.

In the same vein, Nigeria's billionaire philanthropist, Aliko Dangote, has been notable in mobilizing private sector support to aid the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria and beyond. Leaders of Nigeria's transnational charismatic Pentecostal churches – one of the country's most prominent sources of soft power – have also been vocal in ensuring compliance with government directives and providing relief materials for the less privileged. This is in addition to donating health equipment and isolation centers to state governments. However, a steady stream of misinformation on social media platforms threatens to upend these efforts.

In a digital age where the global public is attentive to the internal happenings of other states, social media has become the primary source of information for most people, spotlighting both the good deeds and missteps of governments. Nigeria's ministerial departments are using every digital tool at their disposal to disseminate information about the virus, but this may not be sufficient. The Nigerian social media space is awash with negative news on hundreds of mysterious deaths in northern Nigeria attributable to COVID-19 and cases of demonstrations in isolation centers due to lack of proper care. These reports, if accurate, calls into question the effectiveness of government strategies, and do little to inspire global confidence in the nation's response mechanism and model of governance.

Despite the structural and institutional weaknesses bedeviling Nigeria's response to COVID-19, the country still stands to make the best of a bad situation by projecting an image of a country addressing its deficits to tackle the greatest challenge of our time. After all, it was just in 2004 that the World Health Organization (WHO) described Nigeria's response to the Ebola virus as a "piece of world-class epidemiological detective work".

While it remains to be seen how current efforts by the Nigerian government to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 will be perceived globally, what is clear is that it has exposed the fragility of the country's institutions – a key component of a country's attractive power base. As such, authorities in Abuja may do well to pay attention to the strategies of countries with similar economic constraints, in view emulating effective measures. In view of its strategic aspirations, Abuja can also look to provide COVID-19 relief fund to its regional neighbors by reassigning funds meant for technical cooperation. Finally, addressing a better communication and social media strategy is key.

About the author:

Fidel Abowei is a PhD Candidate at the University of Buckingham's Center for Security and Intelligence Studies, where he is exploring the potency of attractive forms of influence intra-African relations by questioning what Nigeria's sub-regional neighbors are willing to accept in terms of its soft power and how likely is it to yield tangible foreign policy outcomes. He is also a Principal Administrative Officer with the Office of the Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta, which is saddled with the responsibility of disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating ex-agitators in the oil-rich Niger Delta. He is the author of *Oil and Violence: A Comparative Analysis of the Role of Oil in the South Sudan and Niger Delta Conflicts* (2012).