DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL PROTEST AND TRANSITIONS

Idayat Hassan: «In Nigeria, disinformation is driving dissent and threatening national cohesion»

Idayat Hassan, Oscar Mateos



Idayat Hassan is a lawyer and Director of the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), an African think tank based in Nigeria. For years, she has been doing research on social media and the use of ICTs for development in West Africa. She has also reflected on democracy, peace and security. In this interview with Oscar Mateos, Hassan discusses the Nigerian reality, including issues such as the phenomenon of misinformation and its impact on the upcoming 2023 elections, security threats, the fight against Boko Haram, the role of women and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nigeria is one of the most important countries in Africa. It is the most populous country in the continent as well as its largest economy. However, progress doesn't come without its challenges and stable socioeconomic indicators, human rights

abuses, poverty, insecurity, corruption and lack of trust in the political system have led to the disenchantment amongst the electorate. How would you describe the current political landscape of Nigerian politics?

At present, Nigeria continues to be very important not just for the United States, but for other parts of the world due to its size, its economic potential and enterprising people. However, despite democracy returning more than 22 years ago to Nigeria, the dividends of democracy itself continue to elude the people in terms of public goods and services including security of lives and property. When you ask Nigerians what they want, they will largely respond: to have food on the table, to have good roads and water. But more and more, increasingly, people are asking for security from Nigeria. Insecurity is thriving across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. These are driven by both perceived and real grievances bordering on marginalization, failure of justice and accountability, and poverty. Disinformation is driving dissent and threatening national cohesion. The forthcoming 2023 elections will determine is important in the lives of Nigeria and her people. The Who gets to be the next president, where he or she will come from, what part of the country will she or he be from in terms of ethnicity is particularly interesting as we enter into the 2023 election year because the country will be moving on fully for new elections and these elections are important for varying reasons. It will not be coming without its challenges as the political environment remains very convoluted.

The Center for Development and Democracy (CDD) that you lead previously released a statement about disinformation in Nigerian politics. Considering that the youth population who make up 51% of the 84 million registered voters and that social media is increasing exponentially among the youth. What do you expect for the 2023 elections?

In Nigeria, elections are won instrumentalizing three different strategies, they are disinformation, violence and money politics. These three issues define who wins but the problem of disinformation is not restricted to Nigeria as it's a global problem. However, responses are what differentiates countries and you find that the EU has got one of the best cohesive strategic responses in terms of fighting disinformation unlike in Nigeria, where there are some laws such as the criminal code, cyber act and even the electoral act that the implementation of a disinformation aw remains a challenge, aside from the challenges of delineating between online and offline. In Nigeria, disinformation both online and offline are intertwined, and shape and influence each other. Tweets and Facebook posts are regularly reported in print media or become the topics of discussion on radio and television programs in Nigeria

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Disinformation will not only define the outcomes of elections in countries like Nigeria but

also help in further decimating citizens' trust in democracy itself. Importantly, it also affects health outcomes in terms of people not wanting to take the COVID vaccine, obeying the COVID protocols, or even believing that there is actually COVID. Most of this goes back to the lack of trust in government and information

It's been more than 20 years since Boko Haram was founded and after more than a decade of continuous efforts to combat this group, Boko Haram has split into two factions but continues to be active. We also know that the multinational combined Joint Task Force led by Nigeria and at the national level the Joint Civilian Task Force have both been accused of committing human rights violations despite military gains on the ground. However, the insurgents have consistently avoided dialogue and are committed to establishing an Islamic State in Nigeria. What is, all in all, your assessment of Nigeria's security and civilian forces performance against Boko Haram? Which is the situation nowadays according to your perspective?

We've been waging the war against Boko Haram in Nigeria for more than twelve years but this country has not been able to decimate them, which tells us a lot. The first conclusion is that kinetic (military) efforts are not enough to address an insurgency and that there is a need for winning the hearts and minds which actually comes from non-kinetic (civil) measures that entail a lot of things. It entails addressing the grievances that led to the insurgency itself. This means accountability of the people who were wrongfully killed, a reparations system and taking into consideration the humanitarian needs of these people. Then, we also need to interrogate the rules of engagement adopted by the security agencies. There has to be rules of engagement and protection of rights in counterinsurgency operations. The country has to start rethinking once again Security Sector Reform (SSR). We have to imbue trust in the process so people can voluntarily drop their arms and embrace amnesty.

The splintering of Boko Haram, the Shekau JAS and the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP) have actually distinguished themselves in terms of the strategies they have utilized. While Shekau led Boko Haram indiscriminately kills people, ISWAP has got a prototype state providing food and delivering justice in cases where locals disagree. This is the kind of justice the state is not able to give to people in ungoverned spaces. Historically, no war, especially terrorism or insurgency, has been won only through the barrel of a gun as people radicalize for a host of reasons. In Nigeria, we are talking about insurgents that have knowledge of the terrain and who are fighting for a cause that they truly believe in. While military men are not ready to die on the battlefront, Boko Haram or Islamic State combatants are ready to die at any point in time with the belief that if they die on the battlefield they will go to heaven. This is important because it's not just narratives but actual realities that we really have to deal with.

Social movements like #EndSARS, that denounce police brutality, abuse and impunity in law enforcement or other civil society conflicts related to farmer-herders and identity continue to disrupt the well-being of Nigerians. What is your assessment of the civil society movements that ask for better governance and law

enforcement in Nigeria? How can the Nigerian government implement better local governance practices from the lessons learned from the failed experiences, for instance, in Niger Delta or Borno?

You've touched on a very important point which is the failure of local governments. In most of Nigeria, this failure contributed to the breakdown of law and order and the fact that local government elections are not ever held regularly and government revenues are not released transparently make local governments ineffective. The citizenry themselves, they've been very active particularly as conflictivity increases in Nigeria. With #EndSARS we saw Nigerians irrespective of political class, religious or ethnic affiliations come out en masse to actually address the issue of police brutality and insecurity. One important trend has been the proliferation of non-state actors or vigilante groups (a volunteer committee organized to suppress and punish crime summarily when the processes of law are viewed as inadequate) who are trying to secure citizens. In fact, the governors of six states in South West Nigeria officially came up and established their own vigilantes called Amotekun and even in the South East, secessionists created their own vigilantes called the Ebube Agu.

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Currently, there are six nodes of insecurity in Nigeria. We have Boko Haram, banditry, the farmers and herders conflict, secessionists in the southeast and the southwest and, of course, incessant kidnappings nationwide. Insecurity is so prevalent it's almost become an epidemic and there is growing mistrust in the capacity of the security agencies, the judiciary and the government. Civil and social involvement in security matters is a positive trend but it's also a worrying trend. When non-state actors that have got arms in their hands are trying to position themselves as an alternative to the state, not in the form of the Islamic State but as the "man of the people" trying to solve the problem of insecurity, it gets really worrying because it has serious implications.

We want to know about the feminist movement and the role of women in Nigerian society. How do you assess the changing role and influence of women in Nigeria and in Africa in general?

In Africa, historically, there have been powerful monarchies led by women in power and women have been important agitators at independence movements that fought colonialists. After that women were relegated to benefit the male but currently women are back on track pushing for change and leadership. Women are agitating as witnessed in Sudan during the ending of Omar Bashir's tenure and they are also agitating against putschists. It's also the same in Nigeria. For instance, feminist coalitions made up of young women was established to address economic inequalities in Nigerian society and these women played

an active role in the #EndSars coalition. Even in Burkina Faso in the ousting of Blaise Campoaré, women actively contributed and referred to it as the "spatula movement" as they actually led with their home cooking spatula. So, in different parts of the continent, women are playing very important roles. Even in South Sudan, after being excluded from the negotiation table, women were not just included but eventually increased their presence both as non-state actors and as recognised actors in the negotiations.

Women also forced the negotiation to end the Liberian civil war and have continued to maintain peace in Liberia. it's the same here in Nigeria where, beyond the feminist coalition we also have the women manifesto composed by more than 8000 women, accomplished women in varying fields, who are getting into the discussion. Gradually more women are holding positions of authority in the public sector, but most importantly in the private sector and they are making changes in their own little fields and I think that this is a very important trend as we expect more of that to happen, particularly with a growing bipartisan movement of women supporting women across political parties.

Taking for granted the hypocrisy of the Global North in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian government fortunately had strong detection instruments and medical know-how in terms of protocols for disease and quarantine controls learned from previous diseases like Ebola, which by the way was successfully managed and praised for its success by the international community. What is your assessment of the effects of COVID-19 in Nigeria and how do you consider the response of the Nigerian government in dealing with this pandemic?

I think that the African experience with COVID 19 has been complicated, not just in Nigeria but in different parts of the continent, despite commendable efforts by governments to lockdown cities, close airports and run virus awareness programs and despite having experience with dealing with epidemics. Countries such as South Africa, with their sophisticated system where they are immediately able to sequence viruses is commendable. Africa does not have the huge human death toll as initially predicted. However COVID-19 has helped to inhibit democracy in Africa. One way has been the heavy-handed enforcement of measures during the lockdown by security agencies across the continent in Nigeria, Niger, Guinea, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

Authoritarian leaders have prevented civil society from holding rallies and organizing protests using COVID-19 prevention as justification. In the same vein, this justification has been selectively applied to actually detain several opposition members from holding their political gatherings or civil society protests. In Chad, for instance, before the death of Idriss Deby, after he finished his own electoral campaign, he immediately locked down the capital and prohibited campaigns. In Nigeria, COVID-19 pandemic prevention was used as a basis for quelling the #EndSARS protests but a few weeks later a governor was seen dancing in a very public place with large numbers of people.

COVID-19 has significantly affected citizens' livelihood and economic outlook. Strict lockdowns throughout the continent have been especially detrimental to the poor as poor

people cannot work from home and their children cannot access education because they do not have access to the internet. In the corporate sector there were lots of layoffs and while large numbers of people were able to work in the informal sector, our system does not have a very robust social welfare state and, as an illustrative example, in Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Congo the border closure led to food spoilage. In fact, tomato farmers had to leave tomatoes on the fields to rot because the local markets could not absorb them.

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Some of those measures that were actually used in the Globe and in the North were not suitable for the Global South. They were not well thought out. For instance, people locked down in most of the slums or the informal settlements could actually be living with 10 people in a room. We saw a lot of police brutality in Kenya, in Nigeria, South Africa and different areas. I think in Kenya there was a case of three people being killed for not wearing a face mask. According to the National Human Rights Commission, at a time that COVID-19 only killed 12 people the report actually showed that the Nigerian security forces killed 18 at that point. This heavy handed security sector approach was a lot while the pandemic did not really affect us in terms of numbers of deaths. Hopefully, we will get out of the democratic decline across the continent as there are positive signs of resistance from groups of citizens, civil society and opposition politicians coming up with ways of pushing against these restrictive civic spaces

What is your opinion of the global governance of this pandemic and what role does Africa play in it?

I think that Africans feel that they are not getting their fair share of the pandemic. There is so much fault and blame gaming in Africa. It seems that the Global North does not realize the extent of how interconnected the world has become so, if Africa does not enjoy vaccine equity, nobody is safe. Africans are unhappy particularly with all the travel bans because of Omicron. It should not be a negative that countries like South Africa are able to do very good sequencing and are transparent in reporting their findings. Then at the end of the day, this lack of free movement is affecting the economy. In one way or the other, it encourages countries like South Africa and others to be less transparent in the management of the COVID 19 pandemic. There is a need to recognise that the pandemic cannot just be addressed in Europe, India, the US or Canada individually without including Africa.



Idayat Hassan

Idayat Hassan is a Lawyer and Director of the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD) in Nigeria. Her interests revolve around Democracy, Peace and Security, Transitional Justice and ICT for Development in West Africa. As an expert on Nigeria and West Africa, she regularly appears in various international and local media such as Bloomberg, The Washington Post, Financial Times or The Guardian, among others. As Director of the Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), she has managed to rank this organization 11th out of a total of 94 think tanks in sub-Saharan Africa and number 1 in Nigeria, according to the *Global Index report. Go To Think Tank 2020* from the University of Pennsylvania. Idayat Hassan has reinforced CDD's position as a leader in civic technology with a portfolio of projects. Her research on social media has grown in popularity and has been cited by The Economist, the BBC, and various academic publications.



Oscar Mateos

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