

# NON-DISCLOSURE OF HEALTH STATUS OF PUBLIC OFFICERS IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH ISSUES

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## ABSTRACT

The attitude of non-disclosure of public officials' health status before or while holding public offices in Nigeria is particularly worrisome. More trending is the health of President Muhammadu Buhari, which has remained constantly in the front pages of most national newspapers and magazines in Nigeria, as well as electronic media outlets. And, it has generated an unprecedented online discussion about the health of public officials. Using the survey research method and anchored on conspiracy theory and diffusion of innovation theory, this study assesses the impact of the non-disclosure of President Buhari's health status on the attitudes of Nigerians. Simple statistical technique was used to analyse the data from the study. The study revealed that government reports about President Buhari's healthcare are by far too scanty, vague, unfounded and marred with falsehood that border on propagandas. The non-disclosure of the particular illness and health status of the president have been identified as the major vehicles driving the rumours of his purported death, accusation and counter-accusations trailing his health. This, however, has the potential to undermine the nation's democracy and impacts negatively on national development. The study recommends a legal intervention to compel public officials to disclose their health status periodically, through available media channels, to their electorates before and during their tenure in office. This will not only help to avert the reoccurrence of this deplorable situation, but would also facilitate representative democracy, where elected officials are physically and mentally able to serve their constituents in all arms of government.

**KEYWORDS:** Non-Disclosure, Public Officials, Health, Rumours, National Development.

## INTRODUCTION

Information appears to be one of the most important needs of humans in recent times, with which they can function well as members of the society. Almost every household in Nigeria today

is exposed to one or more mass media channels, which are relied upon to seek information on current events in their immediate and far communities.

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The mass media have also made some commendable efforts in taking even the non literate members of the society along, as most media messages (especially in the electronic media) are being translated in local languages to cut literacy barriers.

There are also instances where people routinely visit newspaper stands to listen to arguments and discussions from others about current political, economical, religious and social developments in the country. In other cases, interpersonal channel like face-to-face interactions with highly informed persons, opinion leaders, family members, friends, etc are utilised to get updates on recent happenings in the country.

One of the trending issues of discourse in Nigeria today is that of the alleged depreciating health of President Muhammadu Buhari, the nation's president who had left the shores of the country on medical vacation to London. *Vanguard* (June 17, 2017) lamented that the whereabouts of the President was being shrouded in utmost secrecy and subterfuge. Therefore keeping Nigerians at abeyance-without official answers to the poignant questions of whether the President is actually dead or still alive? And, assuming he is, what particular disease (s) he is suffering from and what his present health condition could be. Though, the Presidency told the Nigerian publics that President Buhari has travelled out of the country yet no-one has seen pictures or footage of him going out of Nigeria or arriving in his preferred destination in that foreign land.

According to Amakye (2008), the health status of public officers is not a private affair, once elected or appointed into a public office, such a person's health becomes a public and political matter, and therefore it is legitimate to demand the health status of public officers since they occupy positions of trust. The Nigerian Medical Association (2017) had condemned the secrecy and lack of disclosure of President Buhari's health by the presidency, noting that as the number one

citizen of the country, it is important to disclose his health status to quell rumours and unnecessary tension generated there-from.

The practice of full disclosure of health of public officers appears to be the current trend in most developing countries-Cuba [Castro], Venezuela [Chavez], South Africa [Mandela], etc). Even in the United States of America where Nigeria borrowed their concept of democracy from, full disclosure of politicians' health records is now the norm. Almost every American knows the details of the health records of their presidents most times even before elected in to the office. During the tenure of President Barack Obama his annual health report and check-ups were often published for public consumption. Also, John McCain, when he was running for president, released 1,200 pages of medical records to demonstrate his fitness to vie for the office. President Ronald Reagan while in office got the media to cover in full details the four consecutive surgeries he underwent-two to remove polyps from his colon, another to remove skin cancer from his nose, and the last one was to extract a bullet after an assassination attempt (Picard, 2012).

Unfortunately in Nigeria, the reverse is the case as government keeps relying on the silence of the Constitution in mandating the President to disclose his health status. The government insisted that Nobody can force Muhammadu Buhari to disclose the nature of his ailment or health status, noting that it is only the president himself that can declare that (Naij.com, 2017).

To many in the country, a particular group of persons in the presidency popularly called "The Cabal" have allegedly conspired against the over 170 millions Nigerians to keep the health updates on the president a top secret while they derive benefits from his continuous absent from the country. This is coming barely after the country recently recovered from similar issues during President Umaru Yar'adua's health travails in

2010, which was shrouded in secrecy and his death was not announced for several days, and some would say weeks (*Punch*, 9 May, 2017).

Pitiably, the non-disclosure of the president health status had generated serious anxiety among Nigerians. According to *Daily Post* (May 3, 2017), some people are hiding under the disguise of the president's health to grab power and heighten public apprehension about the health of the President. It has also resulted to unwarranted rumours, which are today causing problems to the polity. Opposition political parties and adversaries of the government have hidden under this obvious lacuna of information to spread malicious propagandas capable of undermining the country's democracy and bring about violence and animosity among different ethnic groups. If not properly managed, a state of anarchy is imminent.

This study seeks to examine the effect of the non-disclosure of president Buhari's health to the Nigerian publics with a view to unravelling its impact on rumour generation, governance and national development in Nigeria

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Information bothering on health of public office holders in Nigeria is often treated with top secrecy. Some argue that such "secrecy" is necessary to maintain the confidentiality of an official's health status, as would be accorded to any other citizen. Others argue that the public official status of such individuals robs them of the privacy expected of those who have not voluntarily thrust themselves in public affairs that affect society. However, the question here is whether the president of a country, who is obviously ill, can relocate to another country for medical treatment without disclosing to the nation his health status? It would be an understatement to say there is no foundation for such a question.

In 2010 late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua left the country for medical treatment in a foreign land without detailed information and updates from the government on his true condition of health as well as the exact location or hospital he was receiving treatment. This created a constitutional lacuna that took the National Assembly's intervention to invoke the doctrine of necessity to salvage the situation through the appointment of the then vice president (Dr. Goodluck Jonathan) as acting President.

The non-disclosure of President Yar'adua's health generated so much rumour and panic that many still reasonably believe he died several months before his death was publicly announced. And most Nigerians believe that this secrecy was orchestrated by certain groups of persons that held the presidency hostage for their selfish interests. Barely seven years later, Nigerians are confronted with similar dilemma as President Mohammadu Buhari has yet again left the shores of the country for some months without full disclosure of his whereabouts and the particular sickness or hospital he is being treated. Nigerians are tensed and eager to know what is happening with the health of their president.

This study poses the question: How does the non-disclosure of president Buhari's health status to the Nigerian publics affect rumour generation, governance and national development in Nigeria?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To drive the theoretical framework for this study, two theories were proposed, namely: the *conspiracy theory* and *diffusion of innovation theory*.

Conspiracy generally, occurs when a group of powerful persons in the society come together to plan and carryout an improper action particularly one that deviates from the norm in that society (Knight, 2003). Conspiracy theory argues that the undesirable happenings in the society are as a

result of direct design by some powerful individuals or group (Popper, 1963). This theory explains the activities of a certain group of individuals in the presidency "The Cabal" who have allegedly shrouded the health of the president Buhari in secrecy to advance their personal aggrandisement which is considered detrimental to public interest (Today's Impact Newspaper, May 6, 2017).

Diffusion of Innovation theory as proposed by Everett Rogers in 1962 is concern with how an innovation- new idea, practice, or object which is obtainable in developed climes can be communicated through certain communication channels to achieve the desired change over time among members of a social system (Rogers, 2003). This theory emphasises on those tested and proven ideas, innovations, practices or solutions to problems suitable for human advancement to be imported or diffused to other nations with similar problems. This theory supports the argument that full disclosure of health of public officers as practice in other advance democracies should be replicated in Nigeria to promote, maintain and sustain our nascent democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The health status of the president is one of the most trending issues in Nigeria, which is evidenced by the continuous coverage of this issue in national daily newspapers and electronic media outlets. In what started as a "short leave" for routine medical check up on the 19<sup>th</sup> January, 2017 billed to last for 10 days, later metamorphosed into weeks of disappearance of the president for acclaimed health issues and later came back on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2017 without concrete information on his health status. Few weeks later, he went back for the same medical check up on 7<sup>th</sup> May, 2017 leaving Nigerians almost completely blank on his whereabouts and the particular health predicament he was receiving treatment for. This non-disclosure of

the president's health had prompted calls by civil societies, human right activists, opposition political parties and concern citizens for his resignation as well as ultimatum to the presidency to make public his health status or declared him unfit to hold such office (*Panapress*, May 6, 2017).

A report by *Daily Post* (May 6, 2017) condemned the non-disclosure of president's health which is reasonably believed to be responsible for the several rumours-dead, lost of memory or incapacitation surrounding his health and advised that full disclosure of same to the general public will douse a lot of rumours and tension in the country.

However, Nigerians have lamented the hijack of the president by a certain "Cabal" in the presidency for their selfish interest. This is coming barely after the president had on his inauguration to office assured the general public that he 'belongs to everyone and belongs to no one'. Musa (2017) remarked that an;

Abuja cabal or mafia are hiding the fact that Buhari's health is deteriorating fast, while they pretend that everything is well and at the same time looting. Nigerians should demand that the medical team treating president Buhari in London should make a statement as to the situation of his health they have the obligation to Nigerians as Buhari is not a private citizen.

According to *Daily Post* (May 3, 2017), this so called 'cabal' in the presidency has ethnic tilt and composition, which are up to something dangerous for the country. They are hiding under the pretext of President Buhari's health challenges to grab power and hiding his health information to further heighten apprehension about the health of the President.

While the public have continued to pressurise the presidency for a full disclose of the president's health, it looks like their hope is being dashed away as the presidency had insisted that only the

president alone reserves the right to disclose his health or not to the public and that he was not under any legal obligation to do so (Naij.com, 2017). In an interview with *Breaking Times* (March 05, 2017), a prominent northern politician and second republic lawmaker Hon. Junaid Mohammed, lambasted the presidency over such submission and insisted that, as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the electorates who voted him to power deserves the right to know what is wrong with him as he owes allegiance to the people. He insisted that the President is only entitled to his private life if he was living as a private man in his village in Daura or Kaduna, as nobody will care.

Also, a group called the Foundation for Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Crusade (FHRACC) as reported in *Vanguard* (April 2, 2017) had also demanded for the disclosure of the ailment the president was suffering from and the amount of money so spend on his medical bills abroad. The group argued that it is expedient to do so since President Buhari as:

a public figure is answerable to the people who foot his bills, The President is being funded by the taxpayers' money and thus he is under obligation, both in law and under all known conventional practices, to be accountable to the people who gave him their mandates. It is safe to demand that Buhari should declare his health status to Nigerians together with the money he has spent to treat himself in the United Kingdom. Refusal of the government to disclose the money spent on the President's health is the greatest disservice to Nigerians. "We are baffled with gross consternation over Alhaji Lai Mohammed's sermon that the money spent on Buhari's health will not be disclosed for security reasons. We believe that there is no security threat for Buhari to declare his health status known to Nigerians and or furnish us with the money he has spent on his health.

Concealing such vital information from the prying public is to say the least corruption itself. If security should be an excuse from disclosing public money the government has spent on public servants, then the law can also preclude public office holders from declaring their assets as required by the Code of Conduct Bureau Act.

As pointed out in a Newspaper report by *The Guardian* (June 14, 2017), the non-disclosures of the necessary details about President Buhari's health undermines the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 which mandates every government functionary to disclose official information of public interest, even if such information was not expressly solicited for, as such the Nigerian presidency continuous mum on this issue negates the provision of this law.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This study aimed at finding out public reactions to the non-disclosure of health of public officers in Nigeria, using President Muhammadu Buhari's health issues as a case study. Specifically, the objectives of this study will be to:

1. Analyse news reports to determine if there has been adequate information on President Buhari's health
2. Ascertain whether the information about President Buhari's health rises to a non-disclosure level that generate rumours surrounding his health
3. Evaluate public perception of government reports on President Buhari's health
4. Assess the extent to which, if any, the non-disclosure of the President Buhari's health status impacts on national development
5. To ascertain if the public believes a particular group of persons are taking advantage of the non-disclosure of President Buhari's health
6. To recommend methods that can be adopted to communicate updates on President Buhari's health

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. How adequate are information on President Buhari's health?
2. What is there relationship between non-disclosure of President Buhari's health status and the rumours surrounding his health?
3. What is the public perception of government reports on President Buhari's health?
4. Does the non-disclosure of President Buhari's health status impacts negatively on national development?
5. Do the public think a particular group of persons taking advantage of the non-disclosure of President Buhari's health status?
6. What are the proper methods that can be adopted to communicate updates on President Buhari's health status?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The findings from this study will be of immense benefits to both the government and the governed in Nigeria. The study would first of all provide general knowledge about how the presidency handled reports about Buhari's illness, suggest how best the government and lawmakers can handle issues bothering on the health of public office holders in the best interest of the general public and national development. The study will also contribute to the existing literatures and serve as a reference point for future researchers who intend to carryout similar researches.

## **METHOD OF STUDY**

This study adopted the survey research method in addressing the research objectives and answering the questions posed by the study. It is one of the most frequently used methods in among behaviour scientists which helps the

researcher to draw up a set of questions around a particular subject matter to which members of a given population are requested to react or provide answers to (Sobowale, 2008 cited in Chukwuma, Ezeh & Umuze, 2016). Survey research, according to Osuala (2005), attempts to determine the incidence, distribution and interrelations among variables and focuses mostly on people, their beliefs, opinions, motivations and behaviour about a particular subject matter.

The population of this study was adults living in Calabar Metropolis. This comprises of two local government areas namely: Calabar South and Calabar Municipal, which has a projective population of 486, 300 (Brinkhoff, 2017). A sample of 300 was drawn from the entire population using the Taro Yamani's formula. Accidental sampling technique was use to select the respondents for this study. This allowed the researcher to select respondents that are of reach and accessible from the entire population without any attempt at randomisation (Farlex In, 2017).

## **PRESENTATION OF RESULTS**

The Data for this study were gathered using a structured questionnaire. The researcher used final year students of mass communication to help in distributing and retrieving the questionnaires from respondents. In 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed, all were duly filled by the respondents. The students also assisted the non-literature respondents in filling the questionnaire. All the copies of the questionnaire were returned and found useful for data analysis. Information gathered was analysed using the simple percentages to assist the researcher in providing answers to the research questions posed by the study.

**Table 1. On whether the respondents have heard that President Buhari is out of the country for medical treatment?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	400	100
No	0	0
Total	400	100

**Table 2. Responses as regards to how they got to know about President Buhari's health issue?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
A friend/Relative	120	30
Internet Sources	120	30
Newspaper/ Magazine	100	25
Radio/ Television	60	15
Total	400	100

**Table 3. On whether information on President Buhari's health is adequate?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	100	25
No	300	75
Total	400	100

**Table 4. On whether they think it is important to know the whereabouts of the President?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	400	100
No	0	0
Total	400	100

**Table 5. On whether the health condition of the President is important to them?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	360	90
No	40	10
Total	400	100

**Table 6. On whether there was official information from the government on the particular ailment the President is being treated of?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	60	15
No	340	85
Total	400	100

**Table 7. On whether they believe information so far from the government about the health of the President to be correct?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	80	20
No	320	80
Total	400	100

**Table 8. On whether they think there is a political conspiracy surrounding the health of the President?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	340	85
No	60	15
Total	400	100

**Table 9. On whether they will like the government to provide truthful information about President Buhari's health?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	400	100
No	0	0
Total	400	100

**Table 10. On whether the absence of the President is really affecting governance?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	200	50
No	200	50
Total	400	100

**Table 11. On whether they think it is proper to make a law mandating public officials to make their health public?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	340	85
No	60	15
Total	400	100

**Table 12. On whether they think President Buhari's absence is affecting National Development?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	220	55
No	180	45
Total	400	100

**Table 13. On whether they believe that the non-disclosure of the President Buhari's health is responsible for the rumour surrounding his health?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	340	85
No	60	15
Total	400	100

**Table 14. On what medium should the government provide information on the health of the President?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Radio/ Television	40	10
Internet/ Social Media	20	5
Newspaper/ Magazine	40	10
Official Circulars	40	10
Traditional Channels	20	5
All of the above	240	60
Total	400	100



**Table 15. On how often should the Presidency furnish Nigerians with the update on President's health?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Daily	100	25
Weekly	240	60
Monthly	20	5
Quarterly	0	0
Yearly	20	5
When the need arises	20	5
Total	400	100

**Table 16. On whether they think some group of persons are taking advantage of the non-disclosure of the President's health to the public?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	360	90
No	40	10
Total	400	100

**Table 17. On whether they do believe government reports on President Buhari's health?**

Options	Respondents	Percentage %
Yes	120	30
No	280	70
Total	400	100

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of findings is done here by providing answers to the research questions posed by this study as follows:

### RESEARCH QUESTION ONE RESTATED: IS INFORMATION ABOUT PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH ADEQUATE?

The data obtained from the survey as represented in table 3 shows that 300 (75%) respondents are of the view that information from the government are inadequate. While only 100 (25%) respondents agreed they were adequate. Also, data from table 6 shows that 340 (85%) respondents affirmed to the fact that there were no official information from government on the particular illness the president was receiving treatment for, while only 60 (15%) opposed the view.

### RESEARCH QUESTION TWO RESTATED: IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NON-DISCLOSURE OF

### PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH STATUS AND THE RUMOURS SURROUNDING HIS HEALTH?

Data from table 13 shows that 340 (85 %) respondents says yes that the non-disclosure of President Buhari's health status was responsible for the rumours so far generated from the issue while only 60 (15%) said no. This confirms the *Daily Post* (May 6, 2017) report that the full disclosure of the president's health is the panacea to quell the rumours surrounding his health.

### RESEARCH QUESTION THREE RESTATED: WHAT IS THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT REPORTS ON PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH?

Data generated from this study as presented in table 7 revealed that 320 (80%) respondents do not believe government reports on President Buhari's health, while only 80 (20%) believed. This shows that the public do not believe government reports on the health status of the

president, which confirms the view of Musa (2017).

**RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR RESTATED: DOES THE NON-DISCLOSURE OF PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH STATUS IMPACTS NEGATIVELY ON NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?**

Data from the study as presented in table 12 shows that 220 (55%) are of the view that the non-disclosure of the president buhari's health status impacts negatively on national development, while 180 (45%) do not support the view. This shows that the non-disclosure of the president's health negatively impact on national development.

**RESEARCH QUESTION FIVE RESTATED: DO THE PUBLIC THINK A PARTICULAR GROUP OF PERSONS TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE NON-DISCLOSURE OF PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH STATUS?**

Data from this study as showed in table 17 affirms that a particular group of persons are taking undue advantage of the non-disclosure of the president's health status as 360 (90%) respondents support this view, while only 40 (20%) do not. Also table 8 reveals that there is a political conspiracy surrounding the non-disclosure of the president's health by a cabal. This is as 340 (85%) respondents say yes and only 60 (15) respondents say no. This confirms the reports by *Daily Post* (May 3, 2017), that there exists a certain group of persons (The Cabal) who are taking advantage of the non-disclosure of the president's health for their personal benefits .

**RESEARCH QUESTION SIX RESTATED: WHAT ARE THE PROPER METHODS THAT CAN BE ADOPTED TO COMMUNICATE UPDATES ON PRESIDENT BUHARI'S HEALTH STATUS?**

Data gotten from this study as shown in table 14, emphasised that about 60% of the respondents are of the view that all available media of communication should be utilised by the

government to reach the public on issues bothering on the health of the president. Also, data from table 11 shows that 340 (85%) respondents says yes, there should be law mandating public officers to disclose their health status to the public, while only 60 (15%) says no. Table 15 shows that 60% of the respondents are of the view that such information should be provided to the public on weekly basis.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Information bothering on the health of public officers is of utmost importance to the public who elected them and whose monies are expended for their treatment as well as pay for their services. Unfortunately, the Nigerian public have been denied their due for a full disclosure of the health status of president Buhari's who had travelled repeatedly four times to London for medical treated since after his assumption inauguration on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2015.

The federal government had refused to disclose the full details of the health conditions of the president insisting that it was against national security to do so. This study revealed that government reports on the president's health are obviously scanty and grossly inadequate as compared to what is obtainable in developed climes. It was observed that the a certain groupof persons (Cabal) in the federal government have conspired against the general public by continuously shrouding the President Buhari's health in an unbearable secrecy which is today overheating the polity, generating panic and unwarranted rumours of his dead and gross mental as well as physical incapacitation.

This study argues that the continuous non-disclosure of the president's health undermines our democracy, affects smooth governance and also negatively impactful to national development. It is recommended that the National Assembly passed a law that could compel the president and every public officer in Nigeria to disclose their health to the public

before and during their stay in office and on weekly or daily basis while away for medical vacation. This will help in reducing the rumours, tension and anxiety among members of the public due to unavailable health updates. It is also recommended here that there should be a law compelling public officers to resign on severe health conditions.

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