Chapter 21

Fencism: An Unusual Political Alignment in Twitter Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Most twitter users supported either All Progressive Party (APC) or Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) during the 2015 Nigerian elections. In the midst of this, an unusual political alignment emerged which was called Fencism who neither supported any of the two political parties but claimed to be objective despite having a political opinion. This study investigated the definition and characteristics of Fencism using survey, quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The rational choice theory was the framework used in this study. Findings revealed that Fencism is a distinct political alignment and a manifestation of the rational choice theory. Yet there was no consensus on the definition owing to the irreconcilable ambiguity of remaining objective and but yet professing a bias.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerians are over 11 million on Facebook (CPAfrica, 2015) and Nigeria is the third largest African nation on Twitter (Augoye, 2012). The 2012 #OccupyNigeria Protests and the 2013 #BringBackOurGirls campaign for instance are the most recent global hashtags that have emanated from Twitter Nigeria (Valenzuela et al., 2014). The first was used during the protests against the cessation of fuel subsidy by the government of Nigeria. The #BringBackOurGirls was employed to up action on the plight of school girls abducted by the Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria.

Nigeria went to the polls to vote during the 2015 General Elections. The elections also polarized the Nigerian tweet-sphere. The dominance of two major political parties – the Peoples Democratic Party and the All Progressive Congress – meant an embittered tweet-sphere with two groups that jousted and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4197-4.ch021
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jostled for supremacy. The two groups were those who were in support of APC and those who were in support of PDP respectively. The polarization was such that there was little or no space for the emergence of a middle ground position.

However, there emerged a third group, a group with no discernible political alignment, save perhaps that of aligning with evidence and commonsense, temperance and moderation and seeking to further the cause of rational and polite discourse. This group was viewed with suspicion by members of the two dominant groups and soon a name, Fencists, was coined to describe them. Membership of this “unusual” and non-aligned political group generated a lot of controversy as the motives and intentions of its members were questioned. Fencists were neither for any political party and thus drew flak and invectives from those who had taken a stance. In addition, the seeming conceptual ‘confusion’ of what Fencism meant did not help matters.

WHAT IS FENCISM?

The Nigerian twitter community is very creative when it comes to word coinages. In the administration of former President Goodluck Jonathan words like “Jonathanian” and “GEJites” were used to describe persons whose views were sympathetic to those of the then president. “Buharist” was equally coined to describe someone with sympathies towards the then leading opposition candidate (now President) Mohammed Buhari. Currently, two words have slipped into Twitter usage in Nigeria. These are “wailing wailers” and “hailing hailers”. Whereas the former is a derogatory label to describe those whose tweets are critical of Buhari, the latter was employed in retaliation to describe those considered to be uncritical in their adulation of the new president. “Wailers” subverts a word that had acquired positive and radical significance through its association with Bob Marley in the seventies. So even though it was meant to be derogatory, in the current coinage, those opposed to the president are happy to be so labeled. “Hailers”, on the other hand seems more damaging because of its phonic closeness to Hail Hitler, with that an image of unreflecting followership. Incidentally, the use of suffixations as the preferred linguistic device for these coinages is interesting just as are the type of suffixes employed “-ian”, “-ite” and “-ist”. Variations and varieties of suffixes used certainly merits a separate study and the authors hope to engage with this in the near future. All the foregoing is to underscore that labeling in Nigerians Tweet-sphere though creative is part of the war of words and wits between persons at near extremes of the political continuum, a continuum that is not ideological but one that has emerged from the interaction of need, greed, creed and region of the political class.

Let us continue this section by providing some of the definitions of Fencism that have been advanced on social media. Egbonike defined Fencism thus:

*Fencism is not neutralism! I have my political bias but I will not be bullied into displaying it on Twitter. Fencism is objectivity, realizing that both candidates have their flaws and not turning a blind eye – as many do – on them. Fencism is having the courage to tweet for and against any of the candidates.*

(Egbunike, 2015)

Central to Egbonike’s observations are that Fencism implies an informed, detached yet engaged non-partisan and objectivity driven approach to behavior on Twitter as a social medium. Similarly, @