

Policy Formulation and the Prioritization of Public Opinion in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Ruga Policy of President Muhammadu Buhari Administration

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ABSTRACT

This paper generally appraised the degree of impact of the prioritization of public opinion on public policy formulation in Nigeria. The Ruga Settlement Policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration which this study selected as its specific study focus was used as a mirror through which this research work examined the extent to which the relative interplay between public opinion prioritization and public policy formulation has over time, contributed in determining the stability of the Nigerian polity. The study relied on secondary sources of data for reviewed literature and analysis. It adopted Elite Theory as its theoretical framework. Through the instrumentality of relevant literatures reviewed, this study revealed that the formulation of public policies in Nigerian has always been characterized by less attention given to the prioritization of public opinion, imposition, seclusiveness and preference to elite, ethnic and nepotistic interests. The Ruga Settlement Policy which is the primary focus of this study reflected the above mentioned symptomatic variables. With reference to the Ruga Settlement Policy, this study also revealed that the efficacy of public opinion in Nigeria has the capacity to halt the implementation of unpopular public policies. The study recommended that the Nigerian government should holistically promote the exclusive restriction of problem identification to the target beneficiaries, prior to embarking on public policy formulation. The study further recommended that civil society groups, as well as other well-meaning Nigerians and socio-cultural groups, should always provide a viable check against the implementation of unpopular public policies.

KEYWORDS: Public Policy, Governance, Elitism, Responsiveness and Inclusiveness

INTRODUCTION

It is indisputably ideal in any politically organised society for public policy formulation to draw strength from a fortress of a widely but comprehensively articulated view of the people for whom the policies are initiated. An intensive people-oriented approach to public policy formulation has over time, been globally tested and subsequently proved to garner a well-deserving popular spread and acceptance. In a democratic clime, the prioritization of public opinion as a sinequanon for public policy formulation gives a vivid definition to the degree of masses-leadership confraternity and also secures the legitimacy and relevance of the society's governing class.

Hence:

Framers of public policies should be duty-bound to intensively integrate the opinions of the general masses while articulating and synthesizing all alternatives to the adoption of policy proposals; in fact, it should form the bedrock of public policy formulation. This is because, beyond the realms of its legitimate importance, the factoring in of the bulk of masses' views, yearnings and aspirations makes for a fair and equitable representation of the people in the intricacies of governance. It also solidifies the mutual understanding and relationship between the leaders and the people. It extensively defends leaders'

mandate and guarantees social peace and stability (Ogunbiyi, 2016, p.25).

From the above excerpt, it suffices to state here that public policy formulation fundamentally taps sustainable relevance from the prioritization of public opinion. In the wake of this obvious fact, Nsofor (2014, p.13) posits that the valuation of the opinion of the masses over other interests and considerations, prior to the formulation of public policies should be an aspect of institutional strategies that should primarily be premised on the degree of regard for the constitutionality of public opinion by state actors. By implication, Nsofor stresses that it is the duty of government office holders who are the custodians of the law to recognise the place of public opinion in public policy formulation and consequently rein in policy formulators and designers to prioritize same.

The Nigerian experience represents a situation where little or no attention is paid to the preeminent role public opinion plays in public policy conception, as well as the processes leading to policy formulation. The role of public opinion in public policy formulation is undoubtedly pivotal, as the identification of a social problem- the latter which prompts the formulation of a public policy should ideally emanate from public views. Unfortunately, public policy formulators

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and designers negate such a basic but vital route, critical to arriving at problem identification. To that effect, in most situations in Nigeria, public policies are parochially conceived and formulated by policy makers. Consequently, these translate into policy statements and are imposed on the people by the government without recourse to tracing the source of problem identification to public yearnings and views. Hence, Chinweuba (2017, p.14) asserts that: "In Nigeria, Policy formulators relax in the comfort of their hotel rooms and concoct policy proposals on a social issue which they do not have any factual or empirical knowledge about". By implication, Chinweuba impresses that in most cases, the eventual policy statements often times, do not reflect the people's needs and opinions. Lawson (2019, p.4) is of the opinion that often, the government may come up with a particular policy formulation that tends to serve the interest of a section of society, at the expense of the larger society. Epelle (2011, in Wilson & Epelle, 2018, p.177) is of the opinion that "public policies in Nigeria are formulated based on the interest, mood, whims, and caprices of public officials".

The Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration which is the exclusive focus of this study has variously been criticized for its overall non-inclusiveness, seclusively ulterior agenda and predatorial imposition on regional rights and autonomy. To this end, Toromade (2019, p.3) has observed that owing to its inability to get the nod of the majority of Nigerians which cuts across several regions, ethnics and local communities, several socio-political and cultural groups in the southern and north-central states rejected the implementation of the RUGA policy.

Therefore, the main thrust of this study is to generally appraise the degree of impact and influence, public opinion has on public policy formulation in Nigeria. Beyond that, this study tries to evaluate the extent of the potency of public opinion in preventing the implementation of an already formulated public policy. Thus, was the widespread public outcry over the enactment of the Ruga policy of President Buhari suggestive of the derogation of public opinion and negligence of aggregated sectional interests, prior to the formulation of the said policy (Ruga)? Was the motive for the formulation of the Ruga Policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration premised on satisfying ethnic interest? Was the impact of public opinion on the enactment of Ruga Settlement Policy responsible for the latter's subsequent suspension. Specifically, this study directs elaborate focus on examining the controversies and confrontational agitations that surrounded the formulation of the suspended Ruga Policy of President Muhammadu Buhari. Attendant, this study is poised to make useful contributions that would, if utilized, change the previous trends in Nigeria where public opinions are subjugated and undermined in the course of formulating public policies.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Public Policy: Basu (2004, p.3) defines public policy as a system of courses of action, regulatory measures, laws and funding priorities concerning a set of an identified social problem. In their separate definition, Petticrew (2003, p.14) views public policy as a set of actions that affect the solution of a policy problem, i.e. displeasure regarding a certain need, demand, or opportunity for public intervention. In their view, Presthus (1975) in Obi, et al (2008, p.16) sees public policy "as a definite course or method of action, selected from

alternatives and in the light of given conditions to guide and usually determine present and future decisions". Furthermore, Ikelegbe (1996, p.4) defines public policy more explicitly as "the integrated course and programme of action that government has set and the framework or guide it has designed to direct actions and practice in certain problem areas".

Accordingly, this study defines public policy as a set of laws or guiding principles that direct the actions of the government, in which enactment or promulgation is prompted by a widely canvassed public concern, over an identified but pertinent social issue.

Policy Formulation: For the purpose of maximum appropriateness, this study is precisely focused on defining policy formulation from the perspective of its public connotation. Emphatically, this study is majorly concerned with defining what 'public policy' as a concept represents, as well as its contextual relevance to this paper.

Egonwam (1991, p. 5) considers public policy formulation to involve the following methodical processes, thus:

1. Public policy formulation must be prioritized by problem identification.
2. Closely following this must be the devising or formulation of goals, which ideally should be a task to be undertaken by complex groups or ethnic orientations whose interests might most times be diverse and conflicting.
3. This category involves the setting of agenda which is mostly the outcome of an ultimately resolved attempt to influence decisions by various groups or ethnic nationalities who have diverse interests.
4. The next step involves the adoption of alternative courses of action and also appraisals of the implications, inherent in them.
5. Lastly, the result of the aggregation of the four stages above would give birth to policy formulation.

Agreeably, steps 1&2 above capture significantly, the position of this paper which deliberately seeks to justify the importance of public opinion as a fundamental requisite for public policy formulation. Ikelegbe (2005, p.77), in corroboration with Egonwam's perspective on the definition of Public Policy Formulation, asserts that it entails the "identification of the policy problem, the development and analysis of policy alternatives and the choice or selection of an alternative". In their separate contribution, Wilson & Epelle (2018, p.177) posit that public policy formulation "involves the conversion of an endemic social problem/issue to a pandemic public problem, pushing it into the policy agenda of the government and getting public officials to legislate on it". Analytically, it can be understood that the definition as offered by Wilson & Epelle, like other preceding definitions has a broad spectrum implication, hence, it traces policy formulation processes from their inception to their finality. Specifically, though, the definition by Wilson & Epelle spotlights the vesting of the final responsibility of policy formulation in the institutions of public governance.

In line with the above, this study finds it convenient to assert that Public Policy Formulation fundamentally entails the logical steps involved in the conversion of an identified social problem into an official statement, edict or statement that has the formalization of public governing authority while at the same time, bearing the prior support, acceptance and endorsement of public opinion.

Public Opinion: The term, 'Public Opinion' has severally had its meaning portrayed from the standpoint of different authors who define the concept from the diverse ideological threshold. While the term, 'Public Opinion' is viewed by some scholars, in line with the general perspective as a mere expression of a fundamental right of citizens in any given society, others specifically impress that public opinion forms the basis for decision making in society. Unarguably, the idea that the latter conveys, gives the concept of public opinion a democratic countenance. Nsofor (2014, p.22) and Ogunbiyi (2016,p.39) posit in their scholarly contributions that regardless of the form of government practised in any society, the masses naturally tend to express their views and aspirations. In fact, Nnabuike (2005, p.44) informs that even in military regimes and the crudest Authoritarian nation-states, the tolerance of public opinion at least is symbolic of the existential relevance of the masses. However, Akande (2014, p.14) stresses that Public Opinion is the bedrock of democracy, hence, the leadership class is unavoidably constrained to factor- in the opinions and yearnings of the people before arriving at any decision or policy, relevant for public consumption. Similarly, Adegami & Adepoju (2017, p.148) argue emphatically that any public policy that exclusively emanates from the stables of the political class does not represent wide choice and preference and as such, will be deemed unpopular. Admittedly though, central to their views is the fact that as long as the society exists with human elements in it, Public Opinion should remain critical, inalienable and sustainable.

In their view, Clayton (2018, p.452) defines Public Opinion as a term that comprises the aspirations, needs and views of the majority of the masses. According to this definition, it involves a summation of the views of the people of a nation-state on a social problem. Nsofor (2014, p.38) sees Public Opinion as a demonstration of civic agitations which are expressed by the general public either in approval or criticism against extant socio-political issues. Watts & Dodds (2007,p.448) tendered a more encompassing and comprehensive definition of the term, 'Public Opinion' as they consider it to mean a flurry of dissatisfactions, wishes, expectations and demands by citizens in a society which is principally instrumental in determining, directing and shaping public policy outcomes.

From the perspective of this study, Public Opinion generally refers to widespread comments about a prevalent social issue that is of public concern. In particular, it denotes the position of the general public on a certain social problem, expressed in the form of written or verbal complaints, protests, dialogues and consultations. These various expressions of public concern in turn, influence the formation of public policy.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds it fitting to adopt the Elite Theory. The central idea of elite theory according to its foremost propounders like Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michael, Wright Mills, etc. is predicated on the assumption that every politically organized society is structured into two classes, namely, the class that rules and the class that is ruled. The former is further partitioned into the governing elites and the non-governing elites. The group of governing elites typically comprises, in the case of a democratic government, political office holders. The group of non-governing elites on the other hand is made up of very powerful individuals in the society who have earned their elite status by virtue of

affluence or vested influence. In a typical elitist practice, the formulation of public policies strictly reflects the wishes and desires of the ruling class. Particularly, the ruling class formulates policies that protect the interest of the other group of elites who are not members of the governing class (Nsofor, 2014, p.65). Clayton (2018, p.463) describes elitism as a disproportionate influence of the minority over the majority on policies that have a public outlook. In their submission, Wilson & Epelle (2018,p.176) stress that in an elitist society, the ruling class assumes that the masses are poorly informed, hence their inputs or opinions are inconsequential, and such cannot serve any useful purpose in public policy formulation. Hence, (Okereke, 1998,p.35) disputes the claim that the formulation of public policy represents the myriad of masses' demands and wishes. In their view, such belief is a myth. In their perception, Ogunbiyi (2016, p.48) observes that the theory of elitism encourages splitting of the society along with ethnic and religious sentiment.

In an effort to characterize elitism with regards to its effect on society's governing style and policy formulation, Nnabuike (2005, p.73) observes that the elite theory has the following features:

1. It has a high tendency to encourage an in-depth degree of social stratification.
2. In most countries, especially developing nations, ethnic and religious values and sentiments mostly influence certain policy issues, both at the formulation and implementation stage.
3. On account of its ideological exclusiveness, elite theory is generally deemed conspiratorial.

Deriving from the position impressed above, elite theory is not suitable for practice in any heterogeneously defined society and in any democratic clime where the principles of equality, fairness and rule of law constitute systemic virtues.

The Relevance of Elite Theory to this Study

The core gist of this study is premised on the impact of public opinion on public policy formulation in Nigeria. The key problem area identified in this study is centred on the fact that in Nigeria, the absolute usurpation of public policy making processes, exclusively by the governing class has over time, undermined the prioritization of public opinion in public policy formulation. The elite theory is fundamentally emphatic about class dominance and the preponderance of the interest of the ruling class over public interest and yearnings, hence, its relevance as a framework for this study.

Moreover, the study area in this research work which is the Ruga Policy of the President Muhammadu Buhari Administration has its formulation, allegedly predicated on preferences given to ethnic interest and solidarity, at the expense of general public opinion. One of the characteristics of elite theory hinges on the pre-eminent consideration vested in sentiments defined in ethnicity and religion, thus its relationship with this study.

A Summarized Overview of the Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy Formulation in Nigeria

The widening gap between public policy formulation and the influence of public opinion in the contemporary Nigerian experience is obviously not commensurate with democratic precepts-the latter which should guide the official conducts of policy makers. Good governance which is invariably traded as an exchange for a political mandate in a democratic space should ideally be a product of a keenly impacted

influence of public opinion on public policy formulation. Hence, the indicators of good governance, expectedly are a translation of the bulk of public opinions on an issue that a public policy formulation formally legalizes and brings into fruition when implemented. Therefore, any public policy proposal that countenances public opinion prior to or in the course of its formulation must address the following prerequisites:

1. The general public, through the instrumentality of public opinion, must first and foremost, convey a widely identified problem area to policy makers.
2. Policy makers should as a matter of exigency, test the popular acceptability of the identified public problem by conducting a plebiscite. This should be with a view to determining if the said identified problem actually represents the will of the general public or whether it is intended to serve a parochial interest.
3. Public opinion should be useful to policy makers in terms of the suitability of the policy to the target beneficiaries with regard to time frame and prioritization.
4. Again, and very importantly at that, public opinion must be needed in the test of the acceptability or otherwise of any policy proposal.

However, Akande (2014, p.70) has observed that typical of the Nigerian State, in the course of formulating policies, elitist manouvering and sectional interests most times, override public preferences.

Recurring cases in contemporary times in Nigeria have shown that political office holders have the propensity to formulate policies and create programmes to actualise their implementation as compesatory packages for political cronies. In most cases, such policies and the accompanying projects and programmes for their actualisation might not have been solicited by the supposed target beneficiaries. The idea of deviously awarding contracts by political office holders for the refurbishment of motorable roads in a particular community, at the expense of rehabilitating a deteriorating road network in another community is a deliberate displacement of administrative priority. Such unpopular and less public-driven accomplishments are usually achieved in defiance of public opinion.

In a likely situation, the formulation of public policies in Nigeria often reflects an unjust and discriminatory favouring of political party affiliation. Akande (2014, p.72) alleged that the initiation of laudable policies and the execution of meaningful projects in many of the south-western states of Nigeria from 2007-2011 mostly favoured local governments that were loyal to the defunct Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), hence, most of the State Governors in that geographical region won their elections on the platform of the Action Congress of Nigeria. The persistent public lament for the preponderance of political party affiliation over the prioritization of public opinion in public policy formulation was recently re-echoed by Governor Ayo Makinde and Governor Nyesom Wike of Oyo and Rivers States, respectively. According to the position of the two State Governors, in spite of the peculiarity in the harzardous health effects of the corona virus pandemic among the various states of the federation, and the attendant upsurge in public yearning for government's urgent action, the federal government's response in terms of quick legislations, policy guidelines and financial logistics favoured APC controlled

states more, to the detriment of states controlled by the opposition party.

Again, sentiment built on ethnicity has been responsible for the undermining of preference for public opinion in public policy formulation in Nigeria. This has largely been demonstrated in the tendency by political office holders to favour one region at the expense of others. To buttress the above claim, it is obvious that access to good and safe drinking water has always been a worrisome social bane in the entire northern part of the country, and thus, has been attracting a loud range of public opinion for solution. Yet, three years into President Buhari's Administration, formulation of social policies on water resources- related issues have predominantly been concentrated in the north-western region of the country, particularly Katsina State (the President's state of origin). Specifically, in a period of three years, the federal government had completed three water projects in Daura. In addition to that, the President has recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of the republic of Niger to construct a 150 daily barrel of oil refinery in Katsina. Unfortunately, this recent move by the President contends with the continuous rise in public opinion in the south-south and south-eastern part of the country about the need to construct more refineries in their region as duly justified by the principle of comparative advantage and derivation, hence, crude oil is located in those regions. Understandably, in terms of prioritization of public opinion, the regions of south-south and south east were short-changed, while the proposed refinery construction was vested in the State of Katsina with little regard to knowing if there was a wide demand for it in that region (Chiamogu & Chiamogu 2019, p.235).

Furthermore, the lack of prioritization of public opinion as a prerequisite for public policy formulation in Nigeria recently played out in the aftermath of the nationwide protest against Police brutality. The decision by the Inspector General of Police to immediately replace the disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) with a new unit, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) was viewed by critics as unilateral, predatorial and lacking in popular public consent. It was expected that the immediate response by the Police should have been to respect and uphold the public preference for the total scrapping of the dreaded police outfit (SARS). Thus, the general public viewed the motive for the immediate replacement of SARS police unit with SWAT as a mere delusive change of nomenclature, while the new outfit retains the personell and mode of operation of the scrapped outfit. Consequently, such wide public perception of the undermining of public opinion by the Head of the Police had given rise to the persistence of the nationwide protest against police brutality and bad governance.

Rural Grazing Area (RUGA) Policy of President Muhammadu Buhari: Rationale and Implication

The upsurge in the contemporary experience of herdsman-farmers conflict in Nigeria has over time, defied most institutionally defined approaches to combat. Like every other attempt aimed at confronting national security challenges, the Nigerian government, at the outset of the crisis has, through the military and other State security outfits, been launching offensives against the warring Fulani herdsman, whose activities have been globally viewed as acts of banditry and terrorism. While all aspects of militaristic responses to curtailing the spread of the Fulani herdsman-farmers violence have not yet yielded positive

results, current social approaches employed to tackle the ongoing crisis have remained largely unproductive. In the recent past, there have been series of meetings between the Fulani herdsmen, represented by the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) and Heads of Communities in the North Central and Southern regions of the Country. These meetings have always been summoned at the instance of the government and other stakeholders-the latter who are often drawn from the religious sector and traditional institutions. The central objective has always been anchored on dialoguing potent strategies aimed at bringing a permanent solution to the recalcitrant trend of farmer-herder crisis which has always been defined in acts of wanton destruction of lives. However, in spite of all these moves, the solution is not yet within earshot.

Consequently, the Nigerian government under the Administration of Muhammadu Buhari deemed it befitting to evolve a policy that would henceforth curtail the itinerancy of the Fulani nomads with their herds of cattle and their frequent encroachment into farmlands, hence, culminating in the destruction of food crops. To that effect, the Ruga Policy was formulated in 2019. According to Opara (2019, p.4), the Ruga Policy initiative was developed by the National Livestock Transformation Plan-the latter which was established in 2018. According to Udegbumam (2019, p.4), the federal government of Nigeria claims that the Ruga Settlement Policy, being a derivation from the National Livestock Transformation Plan was proposed to realize the following objectives:

1. The policy is envisioned to permanently settle migrant pastoralists in organised but large areas of land. This plan is intended to include other animal farmers, aside herders.
2. On account of the roaming nature of herders, the animals get exhausted and as a result, their productivity level plunges. This consequently leads to a progressive decline in the level of milk and meat production. To effectively salvage the above anomaly, deliberate confinement of animals is intended to improve the latter's vitality, which in turn will increase their productivity level.
3. The Ruga Settlement policy also intends to make adequate provisions for amenities such as schools, hospitals, good road networks, veterinary clinics, food processing industries and markets (local and international) within the confines of the projected large expanse of land allocated for each settlement in each state of the federation.
4. The policy also seeks to permanently solve the problem of incessant violence between herders and farming communities across the country.

Therefore, to effect a full implementation of the Ruga policy, the federal government advocated that each state Governor across the 36 states of the federation should complement the federal government's efforts by allocating large expanse of lands in their respective states for that purpose (Opara, 2019, p.4).

With regards to the level of compliance, it was reported that 12 State Governors, majorly states from the North-Western and North-Eastern regions of the country, excluding Taraba expressed willingness to enlist in the proposed Ruga policy implementation. On the other hand, Governors in the southern and most north-central parts of the country have

overtly shown disinclination towards compliance with the policy directive(Udegbumam 2019, p.5).

A Brief Assessment of the impact of Public Opinion in the controversies surrounding the formulation of Ruga Policy and its subsequent suspension.

The introduction of the Ruga policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration was greeted with widely expressed rebuffs and condemnations from a teeming population in the country. Such magnitude of outcry over the introduction of the Ruga policy from various quarters nationwide represented the degree of public opinion about the new policy. The overt expression of public resentment nationwide, over the introduction of Ruga policy had its root traced to very obvious prejudices and suspicions about the consequences of the Ruga settlement policy. These prejudices and suspicions range from the unconvincing degree of legislative support for the formulation of the policy to the evident public outbursts of displeasure (especially from the southern and Middle Belt), born out of a deep psychological and emotional unease about the antecedence of the Fulani nation.

In their contribution, authors like Oluka et al (2019, p.2) allege that the rejection of an executive bill seeking legislative approval for federal government's control of the country's waterways and banks, earlier submitted to the 8th National Assembly was a proof of a translation of the impact of public opinion on that issue. Hence, the bill was thrown out by the majority of votes which sprang from Legislative members of Middle-Belt and Southern Nigeria extraction. According to the National Assembly members, the underlying implication of the bill purported a delusive way, devised by the federal government to grab banks of rivers and other waterways, historically located in the Southern and Middle-Belt regions of the country for permanent control and ownership by the Fulani Herdsmen. Opara (2019, p.5) observes that the push by the Muhammadu Buhari led the Administration for the legitimization of the water bill by the National Assembly was a subtle strategy, preparatory for the introduction of the Ruga policy.

Also in their input, Ezemenaka & Ekumaoko (2018, p.32) impress that the Fulani herders have an age-long history of land grabbing and territorial conquest. As a result, the seeming display of obstinacy over the rejection of the Ruga policy could have been an attestation to the level of cohabitation distrust towards the Fulani pastoralists by host communities in the Southern and Middle Belt regions of the country.

In congruence with the above position, the Southern and Middle Belt Leaders Forum alleged that the plan by the federal government to include the construction of roads, Islamic schools, hospitals, markets, etc. in the Ruga settlement policy was an expedient move to create separate territories and caliphates, within the geographical domain of host communities, thus, a fulanization agenda. Similarly, the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), claimed that the Ruga Settlement Policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration, by all intents and purposes, smacks of islamization agenda (Toromade, 2019, p.6).

Furthermore, Adesoji (2019, p.4) asserts that the purported introduction of the Ruga settlement policy meant the glorification of one ethnic group over the teeming others. In fact, according to them, the special attention is given to the

Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN)- 'a supposed to be trade association' leaves much to be desired of a government that is supposed to be championing the general and collective interest of Nigerians, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. They further stressed that the masses' outcry over the Ruga policy formulation unmasks the agitation that the eventual implementation of the policy would mean the official authorization of the advancement of 'ethnic cleansing'- a somewhat homicidal act that is supposedly carried out by the Fulani herders.

Still on the issue of a stiff opposition against the implementation of Ruga Policy, specifically emanating from the regions of Southern and Middle Belt, severally, State Governors, under the umbrella of Southern Governors Forum have met and reiterated their stance on the rejection of the Ruga Settlement initiative of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration. According to the Governors, their position on the rejection of the policy was a direct and unambiguous representation of the popular opinion of the masses in those regions. In fact, it was reported that a socio-cultural organisation in the south-western part of the country, the Afeniferehad threatened to initiate a process of a recall of their legislators, both at the State and Federal level, in the event, they fail to be true representatives of the people by vehemently standing up against the implementation of a widely- conceived obnoxious Ruga Settlement Policy. According to the group, the introduction of the Ruga Policy which primarily intends to allocate a large expanse of lands in various States of the federation was a display of ethnic bigotry/sentiment taken too far. In the same vein, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a socio-cultural group in the South East and the Pan-Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF) from the south-south region all re-echoed the voices of the masses in their regions which have always maintained a 'no-land' position for the Ruga Settlement Initiative (Opara, 2019, p.5-6).

To further lend credence to the wide claims from various quarters across the country on the fact that the Ruga Settlement Policy was manipulatively designed and targeted towards the extension of Fulani territories to the Southern and Middle-Belt regions, a statement credited to Governor Abdullahi Ganduje of Kano State claimed that the Governor said that he had enough land for however magnitude of organised and restricted cattle grazing programme the country was planning to embark upon. In that regard, therefore, public opinion in the Southern and Middle Belt region was stirred in the direction of what could have informed the interest of the Presidency to extend the implementation of the policy nationwide (Amaize et al, 2019, p.3).

In spite of the series of information that emanated from the stables of the Presidency to the effect that the Ruga Policy implementation was not meant to compulsorily bind on all States of the Federation, the somewhat provocative, inciting and threatening statements traceable to the leadership of Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN) and other socio-cultural organisations from the core northern part of the country, contradict such claims. Particularly, the Arewa youths, under the umbrella of Coalition of Northern groups (CNG) had issued a 30-day ultimatum to the dissenting groups and governments in the Southern and Middle-Belt regions to accept the implementation of the Ruga policy or face forceful ejection of southerners from northern regions. Also, it was reported that a Media Aide to

the President once advised Southerners and Middle Beltans that for them to stay alive, it was better for them to accept the implementation of the Ruga policy. All these and more go a long way to confirm the bleakness, spuriousness and conspiratorial intentions that characterize the formulation of the Ruga policy (Ademola, 2020, p.115-116).

In response, on account of the mounting pressure on the government about the undesirability of the Ruga project, the government succumbed and suspended the Ruga Settlement Policy. These pressures ranged from several litigations in courts by eminent Nigerians and groups on the purported unconstitutionality of land grabbing in States to threats of embarking on mass protests by civil society groups (Amaize et al, 2019, p.7).

Findings from the Study:

This study, after a critical examination of the scholarly contributions in the literatures reviewed, this study has come up with the following findings:

1. The prioritization of Public Opinion in public policy formulation in Nigeria has over time, been undermined.
2. Policy makers in Nigeria are negligent about prioritizing the integration of public opinion in the course of public policy formulation.
3. Elite and sectional interest prevail over public opinion in the course of public policy formulation in Nigeria.
4. Ethnic interest and consideration prevailed over public interest and opinion in the formulation of the Ruga Policy of President Muhammadu Buhari.
5. The impact of the persistence of public opinion led to the suspension of the Ruga Settlement Policy of the Muhammadu Buhari Administration.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Based on the reviewed inputs of scholars, critics, analysts, as well as the insights portrayed by the researcher in this study, on the role of public opinion in public policy formulation, it is apparent that the former is undoubtedly pivotal in the sustainable development of any democratic society. The systemic tolerance given to the preeminent role the prioritization of public opinion during the course of public policy formulation goes a long way to guarantee the security of the stability of any society's public space. In contrast, however, non or partial tolerance/inclusiveness of public opinion while formulating public policies has the tendency to heat up the public space, especially at its implementation stage.

The theoretical depiction of the interplay between public opinion and public policy conveyed above tersely describes the Nigerian experience with the controversies that surrounded the formulation of Ruga policy and the subsequent attempt at its implementation.

In order to forestall the experiences of the past where the near lack of prioritization of public opinion prior to the formulation of public policy produces cases of implementation crisis and unending leadership-masses feud in Nigeria, this study recommends that the Government should adhere strictly to the utilization of the constitutionality of prioritization of public opinion in the course of formulating public policies.

The leadership of the country, both at the federal and state levels should shun sentiments defined in the forms of nepotistic bias, favouritisms based on class and ethnic solidarity/ interest.

Prior to commencing public policy formulation processes, this study recommends that 'Problem Identification' should be exclusively restricted to the determination of stakeholders who should be culled from the target beneficiaries.

Finally, with lessons sufficiently derived from the Ruga Settlement Policy episode, this study recommends that civil society groups, the media, socio-cultural organisations and eminent individuals in Nigeria should up their game in the firmly-resolved resistance against the implementation of public policies that do not reflect the prioritization of public opinion.

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