



Strategic Silence as a Tool of Political Communication: A Reflection on Third Term Saga and Etteh Gate in Nigerian Politics.

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ABSTRACT

Politics is said to be a game of intrigues and part of that is the use of silence as a means of communication. This may sound strange as communication itself connotes the art of expression. However in politics, a political actor may chose to remain silent as a means of passing a message across to the public in a trouble situation when he is expected to make a comment. In this paper, effort was made to examine how silence has been used by public office holders in Nigeria at different times as a reaction to issues of public interest concerning them. The paper observed that whereas this strategy worked well in some instances such as in President Shehu Shagari preventing war between Nigeria and Cameroon, it failed woefully in respect of the late General Sanni Abacha as well as Patricia Etteh, first female Speaker, House of Representatives in Nigeria while it provided an escape route for Olusegun Obasanjo in his subtle attempt at perpetuating himself in power. The paper, therefore, recommended that politicians should be cautious in the use of strategic silence as a means of political communication in view of the nature of politics which calls for self- expression in the use of persuasion, clarification and conviction to win public support and sympathy. Maintaining silence when one is most expected to speak out could easily be misunderstood as a sign of incompetence, intransigence or outright arrogance by the public.

Definition of Terms:

Political Actor: An individual, group, organization or government that is directly or indirectly involved in the business of politics.

Strategic Silence: The silence maintained by a political actor when he/she is most expected to comment on an issue that has something to do with his/her political career.

Political Communication: All forms of communicative strategies employed by political actors to influence the thinking and perception of their audience.

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Third Term Saga: A time in Nigerian politics when ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo was rumoured to be scheming how to perpetuate himself in power after exhausting the constitutional two terms of office as president.

EttehGate: The furore that trailed Mrs Patricia Etteh's refusal to resign as Speaker, House of Representatives, following allegations of her abuse of office.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an all-embracing phenomenon in the sense that it cuts across every aspect of our daily endeavours. There is no doubt that life would be difficult to live in the absence of communication for we need to understand others just as others need to understand us. The complex demands of modern life defined by a relationship of dependency on one another compel individuals, groups and organizations to communicate with others around them. Communication is one thing that is known to keep every society going. Wilson (1997) in his introductory notes to *Communication and Social Action* observes that 'some see communication as what makes the world go round, a kind of life-giving elixir'. He further notes that '...without communication life would be very dull' and compares communication to an engine but one which works human activities. This is because in his view 'to communicate means to give life to symbols, words, relationships, to exorcise fear, to be at peace with oneself and others, to increase or reduce tension and to blast off the barriers to oneness and understanding among human beings'. Ibagere (1994:64-65) had noted that:

The absence of effective channels of communication can lead to the disintegration of society through the complex nature of the differences in its structures as well as the complex relations between roles performed by the different members of the society. It is through an effective channel of communication that the unity and corporate existence of a society can be guaranteed.

Marc U. Porat, quoted in *Communications for Tomorrow: Policy Perspectives for the 1980s*, observes that Communication has clearly been a part of every civilization in every stage of development. An aggregate of individuals make up a society and just as the individual cannot do without communication so does the society. It is incontrovertible, therefore, to say as it is widely held among communication scholars that '*No communication, No society*'. In organizations, communication plays a vital role in lubricating the organizational process, defining roles, delimiting authority and in acquiring and exercising power (Tosanwumi et al,1994). Little wonder then that communication is regarded as the 'life-blood', 'organisational embalming fluid', and 'the glue that smoothens the organisation's functions' among others (Goldhaber, 1975).

Communication is variously applied in human endeavours as in business, religion, politics, and military to mention but a few. Each of these aspects of human activities requires a distinct approach to the use of communication because of their individual peculiarities. Hence, one has to be acquainted with the communication technicalities applicable to any given field of human activity for one to be able to rightly apply communication in facilitating the social process regarding that aspect of life.

In this paper, our focus is on the use of communication as a tool in politics in what is generally referred to as political communication. Political communication obviously would occur in the sphere of politics where political actors in various categories act as gladiators and whose constant interactions keep the engine boat of politics roaring. When there is a breakdown or a lapse in such communication most likely, some problems would crop up in the relationship between the political actors and these usually spill over to the larger society. Of course, such incidents are pastime for the media who cash in on them to increase their revenue.

However, it is pertinent to note that contrary to what many may hold as an opinion, when there seems to be a breakdown in communication between political actors, it may not necessarily indicate absence of communication between the parties (Gail and Michele-Myers, 1985). What this means is that communication could be carried on through the use of silence particularly by one of the parties who is more expected to speak out. It may be on a crucial personal matter pertaining to the individual who maintains silence or it could be on an issue of national importance where the person keeping mute is occupying a public office. If such inexplicable silence is adopted, it becomes significant because it is assumed to be done on purpose. To that extent, the use of silence as a tool of political communication could be categorized as purposeful communication. Little wonder that people say: Silence is golden. If we are to go by the dictum: "*you cannot not communicate*" (Watzlawick et al, 1967), it becomes more convincing that maintaining silence in a particular situation could be communication in itself in the form of a feedback. For instance, when someone says a word of greeting to another or even asks a simple question and the other person refuses to reply, the impression created, all things being equal, is that the target recipient is not interested in that communication encounter. It is assumed here that the recipient understood the message sent. Equally, when one has written to another several times without getting a reply, it could be safely assumed that the other party has no interest in the communication act. In each of these cases cited above, a definite non-verbal communication in the form of silence has been adopted to function as feedback to the message source.

Ultimately, this would compel the message source to modify the nature of the message sent in case it was not properly understood, change the channel used in sending the message or completely drop the idea of engaging in communication with the other party. The last option would likely be adopted after many unsuccessful attempts must have been made at effecting the communication exchange between the two parties. In this case, the

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maxim: “Silence is the best answer to a fool” becomes a strong indicator that the communication act cannot just take place.

This paper sets out to explore how silence has been used as a communication strategy by two public office holders in Nigeria in moments of crisis although at different times and in different capacities. The two personalities under study are Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, ex- president, Federal Republic of Nigeria and Mrs Patricia Olubunmi Etteh, first female Speaker, House of Representatives. The issues covered are the Third Term Saga that was associated with Obasanjo and the impeachment of the Speaker. The paper also examines the effect such communication strategy had on the political careers of the two public officers in question and the lessons to be drawn from such experiences.

The paper is based on Expectancy Violations Theory in communication studies as expounded by Judee Burgoon reported in Griffin (2000:78). There are usually some expectations that parties to a communication encounter always have of each other and distance in the sense of how far apart or near the parties are to each other could determine the extent to which the expectation of either of the parties is violated. When either of the parties do not behave or respond to the impulse of the other as expected, then such expectation is said to have been violated. In relation to the conduct of political actors as it is explored in this paper for instance, the electorate may have a lot of expectations of what the politicians would do when they are voted into power based on the campaign promises of the latter. Usually, much of these promises are not fulfilled at last thus giving credence to the issue of credibility gap between what a politician says and what he does. In this paper, it is assumed that the failure of a political actor to speak out when it is expected of him/her is a way of violating the expectation of the public i.e. those who would support and others who would oppose him/her with regard to the issue at stake.

What Is Political Communication?

As earlier mentioned, communication in politics could simply be referred to as political communication. But such a definition rather appears nebulous because it does not indicate clearly who is communicating with whom; neither does it give an idea of what is communicated nor for which purpose. All these dimensions are involved in political communication. Therefore from this broad perspective, we would want to examine political communication as purposeful communication about politics. The significance of this definition stems from its idea of intention on the part of the originator of the political communication act. In essence, it indicates that political communication has a goal to achieve. It is communication targeted at a defined audience to achieve a defined objective. This view tallies with the opinion of Berlo (1960) although somewhat generalized, that “all communication behaviour has as its purpose the eliciting of a specific

response from a specific person (or group of persons)”. Wilson (2005) outlines three forms of political communication as:

- a) all forms of communication by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives
- b) communication by non-politicians such as voters, newspaper columnists, etc addressed to political actors, and
- c) communication about these actors and their activities as reported in the media or feature in other forms of public discussion of politics.

The overall interest pursued through political communication is to carve out a political ‘image’ or ‘identity’. Political communication involves the use of political language designed specifically to meet the peculiarities of the field of politics. Interestingly in the world of politics today, statements are judged on the basis of whether they are politically correct or not especially in the western countries. Doris Graber (1981) cited in McNair (1995:3) defines political language as comprising not only rhetoric but paralinguistic signs such as body language, and political acts such as boycotts and protest. This definition is important because it touches on the use of non-verbal communication (e.g. boycott) as part of political language. This, unarguably, agrees with our earlier view that silence could be an act of communication as this paper is set to discuss using the Third Term saga and Ettehgate as case studies.

Previously, we mentioned political actors as parties to a political communication act. Wilson (ibid) has identified politicians and non-politicians (like voters, columnists, etc) as political actors. While it may be easy to identify the politicians as political actors, since that field of human endeavour ordinarily belongs to them, the non-politicians may need to be more carefully categorized. The interaction of politicians and non-politicians in the political sphere brings about ‘political action’ which according to McNair (ibid) is conceived and realized through the interplay of three elements in a process viz: political organizations, media and citizens. These constitute the non-politicians category of political actors which the author narrowly defines as those individuals who aspire, through organisational and institutional means, to influence the decision making process.

Political organizations in this context comprise political parties, other public organizations, pressure groups, terrorist organizations, governments, etc. The media moderate the political discourse through news reporting, editorials, commentary and analysis while the citizens vote, write features/opinion articles and letters to the editor, participate in opinion polls among other things. The above mentioned groups adopt different strategies in carrying out political communication. Some of such strategies include political marketing, political advertising, and political Public Relations. Katty Bonk, et al (1999:3) define strategy as “a plan, method or series of maneuvers for obtaining a specific goal or result”. Political actors strategize a lot in their interactions with one another and part of this maneuvering is strategic silence.

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What Is Strategic Silence?

Strategic silence is the deliberate use of silence to communicate certain feelings like anger, distancing, rejection, etc, in order to achieve a set of personal objectives (Wilson, 2005:43). It is not only individuals that use strategic silence in communication but also the media who selectively report news events while ignoring some others which might be newsworthy in order to create a version of reality for the audience. This is known as distortion by silence which has become a veritable tool in the hands of the western media in their seeming endless war of media terrorism against the third world countries.

An individual or a group would resort to strategic silence when it refuses to talk, speak out or comment on an issue of public importance and which has something to do with that individual or group. Wilson (ibid) again notes that strategic silence or non-talk refers to a violation of public expectations by someone refusing to make a statement at the 'appropriate' time determined by the politician's publics. Such a situation acquires some political significance when one of the non-talk persons is a political figure, and more important when the issue has to do with the individual concerned. Watson and Hill (2000:287-288) as reported in Wilson (ibid) note that a non-talk situation "can of course communicate just as effectively as speech". Strategic silence as a tool of political communication is intended to achieve a desired effect on the target audience. In other words, the individual or group that has adopted strategic silence expects the target audience (the other party in the communication act) to understand a certain feeling that the former is trying to pass across to the latter. Hahn (1998:103) cited in Fred Amadi (2006) has explained the act of saying nothing as a process which begins with ensuring that the audience overlooks the fact that the real issue/question is being avoided.

This approach found expression at a time in the heyday of the late Gen. Sani Abacha in Nigeria when the use of state terrorism against citizens (particularly the political class) compelled the late Chief Bola Ige, a politician, to coin the pidgin phrase *siddon-look* as a reaction to the junta's unbridled repression. What this meant was an adoption of silence and a seeming inactive posture or rather a stance of indifference to what was going on in the government of Nigeria at that time as a way of letting the government know of the people's disappointment and discontent with it. Brummet (1980) cited in Wilson (ibid) notes that strategic silence has unique meanings in politics and that it is the refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal

- a) violates expectations
- b) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings
- c) seems intentional and directed at an audience.

Strategic silence as a communication tool hinges on the use of chronemics (use of time) and proxemics (sequencing or spacing) in communication. C. Seymour-Ure (1974) has observed that 'timing of communication processes

is probably one of the most important determinants of mass media effects'. One would hastily add that this is also applicable to the field of political communication since political actors would want to wait for a psychological time (usually a more convenient time to them) to react to issues which concern them no matter the amount of pressure or public outcry generated in the polity. After all, it is said 'time heals all wounds'.

By spacing, the political actor who is maintaining strategic silence keeps a distance from the target audience (Edelman, 1964). In other words, an imaginary gap could be said to have been created which prevents further interactions between the two parties. By so doing, the silent political actor intends to register some feelings on the minds of the target audience even though such an approach has the potential of easily being misunderstood by the latter.

In Nigeria, strategic silence has been used by leaders such as Alhaji Shehu Shagari, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979-1983) and the late Gen. Sani Abacha, a military head of state who ruled the country between 1993 and 1998. Their varied use of strategic silence in addressing crucial national issues is well documented by Wilson (ibid). In the case of Shagari, while the president was unusually silent on some salient national issues, his political adviser, Dr Chuba Okadigbo (of blessed memory) was more or less speaking for the former so much that observers were left to wonder if the silence of Mr President was intentional or inadvertent. Among some crucial issues that President Shagari 'refused' to or delayed in commenting on contrary to public expectation according to the above source include:

- a) criticisms of the government's economic policies and mismanagement of the nation's economy as alleged by the opposition leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo
- b) the NLC strike of 1982
- c) invasion of Nigeria's territory and killing of five Nigerian soldiers by Cameroonian gendarmes, and
- d) Maitatsine inspired religious riots in northern Nigeria.

As Wilson has noted, in some of the above cases, the president's silence had positive results such as preventing the outbreak of war between Nigeria and Cameroon over the invasion and killings. Wilson puts it in this way, 'most likely the president knew more than the public knew. The president's silence also seemed to have won the peace and triumphed over the jingoistic and inflammatory rhetoric stirred up during the period'.

In the case of Gen. Sani Abacha, the issues of national importance cited by Wilson include:

- a) arrest and detention of Abiola
- b) ASUU strike of 1994
- c) Self-succession saga.

This source also notes that most likely Gen. Abacha maintained silence on these issues because he was not aware of or given accurate information about them. For instance, Abacha was reportedly not aware of the ASUU strike

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referred to above until the union leaders delegation met with him in the presidential villa. His reaction to the strike was immediate stoppage of ASUU members' salaries. Wilson argues that the silence displayed here by Gen. Abacha cannot be taken as strategic. On the detention of Abiola, Abacha resorted to legal defence as an alibi for not commenting on the issue since the matter was pending in court. At some other times, he refused to make his intentions known publicly as it was in the case of self-succession.

Use Of Strategic Silence By Obasanjo In The Third Term Saga

Third term saga in Nigerian politics could be taken as a brief episode in the unfolding political drama that characterized the early post-military dictatorship in the second dispensation of the Third Republic in Nigeria. The military had held on to power for another six years (1993-1999) after the aborted third republic. With the successful conduct of the presidential election and subsequent handover of power from military to civilian administration, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo became the second executive president of Nigeria on 29 May, 1999.

Obasanjo ran a successful first tenure and re-contested the presidential election in 2003. He was returned to office and thus began another round of four years in office for him. It was towards the end of the second term that the issue of extension of stay in office broke out first as a rumour in the press but was later confirmed by the actions of those who were in the corridors of power. By third term is meant the president could contest the presidential election for the third time after exhausting the constitutionally approved two terms. According to the proponents of third term, Obasanjo had done so well that he should have been allowed to continue in office. However, some other people felt that such a development would lead to dictatorship. Thus the move was branded several appellations: *Third Term, Tenure Elongation, Continuity, Tarzarce* (Hausa word for continuity), etc.

Apart from the well publicized debate in the media on the issue, the advocacy for tenure elongation for the president got some impetus with the move to amend the constitution of the country, in which the issue of extension of the president's tenure was prominent as a proposed amendment. There is, therefore, no doubt that within the government circles, third term had some backing as demonstrated by the open support or legitimacy that the project received from the president's men comprising cabinet ministers, National Assembly members, serving state governors, special advisers and even the business community in and outside the country.

Our concern here is that third term as an issue of national importance required the attention and comment of Mr President who incidentally was in the centre of the storm. It would not have taken the president time to clear the air as to his intentions or feelings about what was thought to be a push from the people on their leader. It is a fact that sometimes those in leadership positions are compelled to take certain actions as a result of popular demand from the governed. However, it is up to the government concerned to make a

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policy statement on whether it accepts or turns down such a plea. A case in point is ex- President Nelson Mandela of South Africa who boldly but politely turned down such a tempting offer to run for a second term of office after his first tenure.

But this was not so with President Obasanjo. When the heat intensified, the president tried to speak but he chose to do so in figurative ways which even tended to complicate matters the more thereby “portraying himself as adept at doublespeak”. For instance, when asked by a foreign journalist to clear the air on the controversial issue of third term, the president wittingly responded, “I believe that God is not a God of abandoned projects. If God has a project, he will not abandon it”. Still at another forum precisely when the president received a delegation of Chinese investors in Abuja on February 27, 2006, he remarked thus, “everything I do now is to protect Nigeria’s interest and if that will cost me my life so be it” (reported in *The News* 2006:26). Yet Obasanjo, as reported in the *Washington Post* (2006), could say he “remained undecided about whether or not to seek a third term in office”. Does this betray the interest of the president on the third term package? Was the president alluding to the continuity of his administration’s policies in a self-succeeding government? Was the president trying to gauge the feelings of Nigerians about his continued stay in office by flying a kite? The answers to these puzzles were carefully wrapped in silence till when the Senate threw away the proposed amendment including the third term clause. That marked the death of the third term saga.

The Etteh Gate Saga

A new dimension was added to Nigerian politics in the election of Mrs. Patricia Olubunmi Etteh as the first female speaker of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of the National Assembly in the 2007 general elections. The remarkable achievement was greeted with euphoria especially from the camp of feminists who saw Nigeria acting in line with the global clamour for gender equality and an appreciable level of women participation in politics. However, Mrs. Etteh’s tenure as a Speaker was uncharacteristically ephemeral because of the allegation of corruption leveled against her, although she retained her seat in the House thereafter as an ordinary member. *Madam Speaker*, as she was fondly called, was indicted by the David Idoko panel set up in the House of Representatives to investigate the allegations leveled against the House leadership by a group of lawmakers who choose to identify themselves as Integrity Group led by Hon. Farouk Lawan.

Mrs. Etteh was reportedly accused of abuse of office in which case she was said to have renovated her official residence with the sum of ₦628m, a capital vote that was not formerly approved by the House of Representatives. What this means is that the Speaker did not follow ‘Due Process’ in the award of the contract. It was even discovered that some of the companies that handled the projects were not duly registered with the Corporate Affairs

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Commission. Due process referred to above was a policy drive of the Obasanjo administration during which Mrs. Etteh served as a Speaker, to ensure that all contracts awarded by government were publicly bid for to pave way for transparency in the conduct of government's business.

When the allegations were made, the House took it upon itself to investigate the matter. In order to do this effectively, the House needed to set up a committee but on one condition: that the Speaker should step down temporarily while investigations were going on. This led to schism in the House with some members taking sides with the Speaker (Pro-Etteh Group) and some other members, which labeled itself as Integrity Group, opposing. Expectedly, the media took up the debate in line with the agenda setting theory and the controversy raged for quite some time.

Our concern here is the undignified silence that Mrs Etteh maintained throughout the controversy. The Speaker refused to speak to the press on the issue except for her supporters who were making personal comments. Here again, we ask: what was the Speaker's intention for not commenting on the issue? Was she using that as a measure to test public opinion on the matter? Was she so confident of her ability to weather the storm no matter what anybody said about the issue? Was the Speaker just out to keep everyone in suspense so as to sustain the controversy as a way of projecting some of her colleagues in the House as trouble-shooters? Was she keeping silent deliberately to earn public sympathy and support? Like in the case of Obasanjo cited earlier, the answers to these questions are best known to the Speaker and perhaps, her cronies even up to this moment.

Implications of the Use of Strategic Silence on the Cases Cited

Evidently, the outcome of the two cases examined above could not be said to be pleasant because both political actors ended up as losers in the game. Their resort to the use of silence compounded issues rather than helped matters. In the case of Obasanjo, his refusal to speak out must have fuelled the bitter opposition the third term advocacy received from both within and outside the country because as the *Washington Post* reported in *The News* (2006:27) observed, "rather than clearing the hazy air, President Obasanjo remained silent and the loud silence generated so much noise". Wilson (2000:59) notes that "while it is true that a leader uses silence deliberately irrespective of public anxiety on a subject, its use could be damaging if the situation is not handled with care". Obasanjo had failed to realize that the country was not ready to swallow the bitter bait of tenure elongation after all that she had gone through in the hands of the military whose deceptive game of power change was already a well known song to Nigerians. Secondly, Nigerians seemed to have fallen in love with their nascent democracy and would not want any relapse into dictatorship whether military or civilian.

Most likely Mr President was waiting to see the reactions of Nigerians to the issue thereby shielding him from blame in case the response turned negative. On the other hand, an open declaration on his part that he was not interested

in the proposal would have gone a long way to adding honour to his name. Instead of toeing this line, the president decided to play a sort of hide and seek game and true to expectations, he promptly dissociated himself from the tenure elongation project at the end of the day. After all, nobody ever heard him saying categorically that he wanted a third term in office. To this extent, Obasanjo had successfully used strategic silence as a safety valve to avoid public criticism, embarrassment and possible condemnation.

On the part of Mrs. Etteh, her strategic silence was seen by many observers as an act of intransigence particularly when she refused to step down for the House to properly investigate the matter. Obviously, this approach aggravated public disaffection for her and the media actually played up the matter. According to Brummet (1980), "...because so much politics is conducted through the mass media, the leader who is strategically silent yet acting relinquishes to the media the ability to define and interpret actions". When she finally succumbed and abdicated the exalted seat, she cast all the blame on the media as the cause of her downfall. It would be recalled that while Mrs. Etteh's storm was raging in the lower House, the Senate had a similar allegation against its President (David Mark) but was maturely handled by the Upper House without much fuss. The point here is that the reaction of the Senate President went a long way to douse tensions as he humbly accepted to step down for proper investigation into the matter to be done. He never resorted to the use of strategic silence and it worked for him.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the use of strategic silence by political actors as a form of reaction to pressing political issues concerning them. Case studies of where this has proved helpful were cited as in the administration of President Shehu Shagari in preventing an open war between Nigeria and Cameroon. But at other times, it made people to cast aspersions on the competence of the President to lead the nation. Eventually the administration was short lived in the second term. The case of Gen. Abacha was also reviewed and his use of Strategic silence during the purported self-succession bid only heightened the people's odium for the government. The administration finally came to an abrupt end with the sudden demise of the General.

In the other two recent cases the paper primarily examined, the use of strategic silence did not help matters in either of them. Obasanjo fared better than Etteh because he used strategic silence as a cover to safeguard himself from blame in a project which evidently received his full support. But no one could actually hold him accountable for the aborted third term plan because Obasanjo never one day openly declared his intention to stay in office longer than was constitutionally allowed. "The President says he has not told anybody he wants a third term in office yet the police are brutalizing anti-third term political leaders. His campaign office has already been opened in

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Aso Rock, while the campaign has kicked off outside Nigeria” in the name of Obasanjo Solidarity Forum (OSF), writes the *Washington Post* reported in *The News* (2006:27). Evidently, Obasanjo used political sagacity in addressing a sensitive and highly unpredictable national issue.

Unlike Obasanjo, Mrs. Patricia Etteh, whose case was also reviewed in this paper, was not that lucky as her use of strategic silence not only exacerbated public outcry against her but eventually led to her downfall from power. Her reluctance to step aside for the House to conduct a probe into the allegations against her portrayed her as intransigent before the Nigerian public. Writing in the *Punch* newspaper, October 14, 2007 p.21, Komfebagu Ngozi made the following comment in confirmation of this: “I have discovered that the castigations she is receiving from Nigerians become stronger by the day because of her unremorseful attitude”. Ironically, the Speaker who refused to speak out during the crisis later had to cry out disgracefully when she was forced to quit office. On the contrary, the Senate President who was faced with a similar allegation did not resort to silence as a reaction but humbly yielded himself to probe, and he saved his job. Senator Joy Emordi, a member of the National Assembly (although withdrawn at the moment) in an interview with the *Vanguard* (2007:5) has this to say on the response of the Senate President to the allegation, “immediately the rumour of ₦400m began, the Senate President opted to step aside for investigation to be carried out”. Essentially, the import of this is that political actors should be wary in the use of strategic silence as a tool of political communication; where expedient, such silence should be broken so that distrust, misinterpretation and disaffection could be averted (Wilson 2000:59). The Spanish proverb that “repentance for silence is better than repentance for speaking” cannot hold true in all situations particularly in the field of politics where the ability to persuade is a dependable weapon in the armoury of every astute player. Rather, we should heed the advice of Ibrahim Tahir, ex-Chairman NITEL, cited in Wilson (2005:52) that ‘the new generation of politicians in the country cannot afford to indulge in a conspiracy of silence on occasions when they should voice their opinions to reinforce the freedoms guaranteed by the constitution and sanity in the politics of the country’. Indeed, in the Nigerian political context, according to Wilson (2005:59), silence is capable of eliciting more negative cues than positive ones from the public.

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