

SAFEGUARDING REPUTATION: HUMAN RIGHTS AND NIGERIA'S INTERNATIONAL IMAGE IN THE BUHARI ERA (2015-2023)

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Abstract

Nigeria's international image is intricately linked to its human rights practices, especially under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023). Despite professed adherence to democratic ideals, the period was marked by heightened allegations of human rights violations, drawing global concern and diminishing Nigeria's credibility on the world stage. This study investigates the impact of human rights practices during Buhari's administration on the country's international reputation. The objective is to critically assess how domestic rights abuses influenced foreign perceptions and diplomatic relations. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study analyzes secondary data including policy reports, media coverage, and international human rights indices. Anchored on the Constructivist Theory of International Relations, which emphasizes the power of norms, identity, and perception in global affairs, the research provides a nuanced

understanding of how Nigeria's human rights record shaped its international image. The study is significant as it bridges the gap between domestic governance practices and foreign policy outcomes, offering insights into the reputational consequences of rights violations. The findings reveal that, although Nigeria remained diplomatically active, its global moral authority eroded due to persistent abuses such as police brutality, suppression of dissent, and disregard for judicial processes. The study concludes that Nigeria's international image can only be restored through comprehensive institutional reforms, stronger adherence to human rights norms, and the promotion of transparent, accountable governance. It recommends a deliberate shift towards rights-based policy frameworks and increased engagement with both domestic civil society and international human rights bodies.

Keywords: Human Rights, International Image, Reputation Management, State Responsibility.

Introduction

Nigeria has long straddled the dual roles of a regional power in West Africa and a complex, multi-ethnic federation grappling with deep-seated internal socio-political challenges. As Africa's most populous nation and one of its largest economies, Nigeria's domestic policies often reverberate beyond its borders, influencing regional stability and international engagement. Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, successive administrations have been tasked with the dual

responsibility of strengthening internal governance structures while simultaneously managing the country's global image.

The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) marked a pivotal chapter in this dual mandate. Initially welcomed by both domestic and international observers for its strong stance on anti-corruption and national security, Buhari's government soon became the subject of intense scrutiny over its human rights record. Allegations of civil rights violations, suppression of dissent, erosion of judicial independence, and infringements on press freedom emerged as defining features of his tenure¹.

These concerns sparked widespread debate regarding Nigeria's commitment to democratic values and the rule of law. The implications of these actions extended beyond national borders, affecting Nigeria's standing in international forums, its bilateral relations, and access to foreign aid and cooperation. As global perception increasingly intertwines with issues of governance and human rights, Buhari's presidency offers a critical lens through which to examine the interplay between domestic policy choices and international reputation. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how the human rights practices during this period shaped Nigeria's global image and influenced its diplomatic engagements.

Conceptual Clarifications

A clear understanding of key concepts is essential to appreciate the nexus between human rights practices and a country's international image. This section elaborates on the major terms central to this study: human rights, international image, and reputation management, offering an in-depth exploration of their meanings and interrelations.

Human Rights

Human rights are the fundamental entitlements and freedoms inherently possessed by every individual, irrespective of race, nationality, gender, religion, or socio-economic status. These rights are grounded in the principle of human dignity and are universally acknowledged as inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent. They encompass a wide spectrum of protections, including civil and political rights—such as the right to life, freedom of expression, and the right to a fair trial—as well as economic, social, and cultural rights like the right to education, healthcare, and employment.

Human rights are codified in numerous international instruments, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted in 1948, which lays the foundation for modern human rights discourse. In the African context, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights further expands the scope of human rights by emphasizing community rights and responsibilities². These legal frameworks oblige states to respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of individuals

within their jurisdictions. Any systematic abuse or neglect of these responsibilities not only leads to domestic unrest but also attracts international criticism and potential diplomatic consequences.

International Image

The international image of a nation refers to the composite perception held by the global community about that country. It is shaped by a confluence of factors, including the country's foreign and domestic policies, leadership style, and adherence to international norms, media portrayal, and crucially, its human rights record. A country's international image is not static; it evolves in response to shifting political dynamics, humanitarian actions, conflict resolutions, or violations thereof.

A positive international image can enhance a nation's soft power, improve its diplomatic leverage, and attract foreign investment, tourism, and strategic alliances. Conversely, a negative image—often resulting from sustained human rights abuses, authoritarian practices, or corruption—can isolate a country diplomatically and economically³. For nations like Nigeria, whose geopolitical significance is considerable, maintaining a favorable international image is both a strategic imperative and a reflection of internal governance quality.

Reputation Management

Reputation management in international relations entails the strategic effort by states to influence how they are perceived on the global stage. This involves a range of activities aimed at building, maintaining, or restoring credibility and moral authority. Governments deploy several tools to this end, including diplomatic outreach, public relations campaigns, participation in international peacekeeping efforts, and cultural diplomacy. Effective reputation management also involves swift and transparent responses to domestic crises, especially those that attract global scrutiny.

In an era where information travels rapidly and public opinion can shape international policy, states are increasingly aware of the reputational costs associated with human rights violations. Reputation management thus intersects significantly with a state's internal policy decisions. Where human rights abuses are widespread or systemic, efforts at managing international reputation can be undermined, leading to diminished global influence and strained foreign relations⁴. Nigeria's experience under Buhari's administration reflects this delicate balance between domestic governance and external image-building.

State Responsibility: This refers to the legal and moral obligations of the Nigerian state, under both domestic and international law, to protect and promote human rights and to respond to any violations within its territory during the Buhari era. The concept underscores that the

state is accountable not only to its citizens but also to the international community, especially when it comes to upholding treaties and conventions to which it is a party. According to Okafor, a state's failure to act against human rights abuses or its active participation in such violations undermines its legitimacy and international standing.⁵

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Constructivist Theory of international relations as its guiding analytical framework. Constructivism represents a significant departure from traditional international relations theories such as Realism and Liberalism. Where Realism centers on the pursuit of power and survival in an anarchic international system, and Liberalism emphasizes the role of institutions and cooperation, Constructivism focuses on the influence of ideas, beliefs, norms, identities, and intersubjective meanings in shaping the behavior of states and the structure of the international system⁶.

The foundational argument of Constructivism is that the key structures in the state system are not merely material (e.g., military capabilities or economic strength) but social and ideational. These include shared understandings, cultural norms, expectations, and the identities that states construct for themselves. The theory holds that state interests are not fixed or given but are formed and redefined through social interaction with other international actors. Thus, a state's international standing and foreign policy conduct are shaped

significantly by how it is perceived in moral and normative terms, rather than by material capabilities alone.

One of the foremost proponents of Constructivist Theory is Alexander Wendt, who argued that “anarchy is what states make of it,” highlighting that the structure of the international system is not inherently conflictual but shaped by shared ideas and social practices⁷. Wendt posits that the identities and interests of states are not exogenously determined but constructed through ongoing interaction with other actors in the international environment. This perspective helps explain why two states with similar material power may behave differently based on their normative commitments and perceived roles in the global order.

In the context of this study, Nigeria’s foreign policy and international reputation during the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) are examined through this theoretical lens. Nigeria, as a regional power and a self-proclaimed leader in Africa, has consistently sought to cultivate an international identity rooted in democratic governance, anti-corruption, and peacekeeping diplomacy. However, these normative claims were increasingly called into question due to widespread human rights violations, suppression of dissent, curtailment of press freedom, and disregard for judicial independence during Buhari’s tenure. Constructivism offers a robust framework for understanding how this contradiction between Nigeria’s

professed values and its actual practices affected its international image.

Constructivist theory also underscores the importance of international norms and global expectations, which exert both direct and indirect pressure on states to conform. Scholars like Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink expanded on this idea by introducing the concept of norm cascades and norm entrepreneurs—actors and institutions that advocate for the adoption of global standards, including human rights⁸. They argue that states may alter their behavior to align with these norms in order to gain legitimacy, secure foreign aid, attract investment, or avoid diplomatic isolation.

Nigeria's interaction with international organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch illustrates how feedback loops from these institutions shape national behavior. Repeated reports of state-sponsored violence, suppression of protests (e.g., the #EndSARS movement), and media censorship not only attracted international condemnation but also challenged Nigeria's desired identity as a rights-respecting democracy. Consequently, despite active diplomatic efforts, the Buhari administration struggled to sustain a positive global image.

Constructivist Theory, with contributions from Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, and Kathryn Sikkink, provides a powerful lens for analyzing the

interplay between human rights practices and international reputation. It allows this study to interpret Nigeria's efforts at reputation management not just as pragmatic diplomacy, but as a response to evolving norms, international scrutiny, and identity-driven motivations within a socially constructed global order.

Human Rights under Buhari: Patterns and Controversies

The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) was marked by numerous human rights controversies that significantly influenced Nigeria's international image. This section explores four central areas of concern—suppression of protests, media censorship, judicial disregard, and the conduct of security forces—within the broader context of Constructivist Theory, which explains how global perceptions and norms shape the behavior and identity of states.

Suppression of Protests

The 2020 #EndSARS protests against police brutality represented a critical flashpoint in Nigeria's democratic evolution. What began as a decentralized, youth-led movement against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) quickly garnered international attention. The turning point came on October 20, 2020, when security forces allegedly opened fire on peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos. Amnesty International and other human rights bodies condemned the use of excessive force and called for accountability.⁹ The

Nigerian government's initial denials and eventual contradictory responses damaged its credibility globally.

From a Constructivist perspective, this event catalyzed a narrative shift that reshaped Nigeria's international identity. It moved from being perceived as a reforming democracy to a state struggling to uphold basic civil liberties. The global outrage, amplified by social media and diasporic activism, acted as a form of normative pressure, aligning with Constructivism's emphasis on how ideas and global expectations influence state behavior and reputation.

Media Censorship and Civic Space

Another controversial feature of the Buhari era was the narrowing of civic space. Journalists, bloggers, and activists were increasingly targeted under broadly defined legislation such as the Cybercrime Act (2015), which criminalized “offensive” speech.¹⁰ The 2021 Twitter ban, imposed after the platform deleted a tweet by the President that was deemed inciting, drew widespread condemnation from tech companies, civil society organizations, and foreign governments.¹¹ This clampdown on digital freedom stood in direct contradiction to Nigeria's international commitments to free speech and democratic governance.

Constructivism explains how such actions erode a state's normative legitimacy. By violating globally accepted norms on freedom of expression, Nigeria isolated itself diplomatically and attracted criticism from international

media, NGOs, and democratic allies. The state's identity as a promoter of democratic values was thus contested and weakened.

Judicial Disregard and Detentions

The prolonged detention of individuals such as Omoyele Sowore, a journalist and former presidential candidate, and Sheikh Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, despite multiple court orders for their release, raised red flags about judicial independence in Nigeria.¹² Both cases were heavily publicized by global legal and human rights institutions, with criticisms focused on the government's blatant disregard for the rule of law.¹³

Under Constructivist Theory, such defiance of domestic legal rulings and international legal norms damages a country's moral credibility. The perception that the judiciary is subordinate to the executive undermines democratic identity and invites scrutiny from institutions that monitor global governance and the protection of rights.

Security Forces and Human Rights

Nigeria's military campaigns, particularly against Boko Haram in the northeast and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the southeast, were frequently accompanied by allegations of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and collective punishments.¹⁴ Reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch detailed various instances of abuse, including unlawful

detentions and indiscriminate airstrikes affecting civilian populations.¹⁵

These reports served as tools of norm entrepreneurship—where international bodies acted to shape and reinforce global standards of human rights behavior. Nigeria’s failure to adhere to these norms undermined its attempts at identity construction as a responsible regional power and contributed to its reputational decline.

Therefore, the Buhari administration’s record on human rights became a focal point for international critique, reshaping Nigeria’s global image through the lens of Constructivist Theory. Constructivism helps to understand how international norms and perceptions—especially those related to democracy, rule of law, and human rights—become central to a state’s legitimacy and identity. The pattern of rights violations under Buhari led to a rupture between Nigeria’s self-projected image and the external normative expectations of the global community, resulting in reputational damage that extended beyond immediate diplomatic consequences.

Nigeria’s International Image and Diplomatic Implications:

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Reputation Management during the Buhari Era

The administration of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) was acutely aware of the need to manage Nigeria's international image amid growing criticisms over human rights violations. As international actors increasingly spotlighted the government's authoritarian tendencies, efforts were made to reconstruct a more favorable perception through various diplomatic and strategic channels. Within the framework of Constructivist Theory, these efforts can be interpreted as deliberate actions by the state to shape and sustain its normative identity and moral legitimacy on the global stage.

Government's Public Diplomacy

The Buhari administration consistently responded to international criticisms with strong rhetoric, often characterizing such concerns as undue foreign

interference or deliberate misinformation. This defensive posture became a defining feature of Nigeria's public diplomacy. Government officials and spokespersons repeatedly described international human rights reports as biased or exaggerated, arguing that they failed to contextualize Nigeria's internal security challenges.²³ These rebuttals were disseminated through official government platforms, national broadcasts, and press briefings.

State-owned media such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), and other government-affiliated outlets played an active role in countering negative narratives. These platforms regularly highlighted the government's achievements in infrastructure development, anti-corruption initiatives, and counter-terrorism efforts, often portraying Nigeria as a victim of global double standards.²⁴

From a Constructivist perspective, such strategies represent efforts by the Nigerian state to influence global perception and reconstruct its identity as a law-abiding, sovereign nation unfairly scrutinized by external actors. Constructivism emphasizes the power of narrative and identity construction in global politics, and the Buhari administration's communication strategy can be seen as an attempt to assert a self-image rooted in national pride, resilience, and developmental progress.

Strategic Engagements

Beyond public diplomacy, the Buhari administration actively engaged in regional and international institutions to buttress Nigeria's status as a responsible and stabilizing actor in Africa. Nigeria maintained a strong presence within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations. Notably, it contributed troops and leadership to peacekeeping missions in Mali, the Gambia, and other conflict zones across the continent.²⁵ These engagements were not merely functional—they were strategic tools of reputation management.

The logic behind these actions aligns with the core tenets of Constructivist Theory, which posits that states engage in behaviors consistent with their desired identity. By participating in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, Nigeria projected itself as a promoter of regional stability and democratic norms. Such a portrayal was aimed at counterbalancing the negative domestic human rights narrative by aligning with global expectations of leadership and responsibility.

Furthermore, Nigeria leveraged its diplomatic influence in multilateral forums to advocate for African interests, host summits, and secure high-profile appointments for Nigerian diplomats in international organizations. These moves reinforced an image of Nigeria as a key actor in shaping regional and global agendas, thus attempting to shift focus away from internal shortcomings.²⁶

Constructivist Lens: Identity, Norms, and Reputational Balancing

Under Constructivist Theory, identity and the adherence to international norms are essential determinants of state behavior. The Buhari administration's reputation management efforts reflect a conscious attempt to negotiate the dissonance between domestic realities and global expectations. While domestic policies, particularly regarding civil liberties and judicial independence, drew criticism, the external diplomatic engagements served as a normative performance aimed at reshaping international perception.

This approach underscores how states, especially those under democratic pressure, performatively engage with international norms to sustain legitimacy. Nigeria's actions during this period mirror the Constructivist view that international standing is not solely determined by power capabilities but by the social and moral approval of the international community.

Therefore, the Buhari administration's dual strategy of defensive public diplomacy and strategic international engagement represented a complex form of reputation management aimed at preserving Nigeria's global image. Constructivist Theory helps unpack these efforts by highlighting the interplay between identity, norms, and perception in international relations. Despite internal contradictions, Nigeria's attempt to maintain a favorable international profile through image-building narratives and regional leadership illustrates the enduring

importance of soft power and normative alignment in global politics.

Conclusion

The Buhari administration presided over a turbulent chapter in Nigeria's human rights trajectory, one marked by deep contradictions between external diplomatic assertiveness and internal governance challenges. While the government achieved notable strides in regional diplomacy, counter-insurgency, and anti-corruption campaigns, these accomplishments were consistently overshadowed by systematic violations of civil liberties, suppression of dissent, and disregard for judicial independence.

Under the lens of Constructivist Theory, Nigeria's international image during this era was not simply shaped by its actions but by how these actions were interpreted within the global normative framework. Despite its efforts to curate a favorable identity through public diplomacy and multilateral engagements, Nigeria's recurring human rights infractions undermined its credibility as a democratic actor and weakened its normative appeal.

Consequently, the global community increasingly perceived Nigeria as a democracy in decline—an African power with regional influence, yet burdened by a growing rights deficit at home. This disconnect created diplomatic tensions, weakened soft power, and strained relationships with traditional allies and rights-based

organizations. The image Nigeria projected became one of paradox: a nation striving for regional leadership and international respectability while struggling to uphold the fundamental freedoms of its own citizens.

Ultimately, the Buhari era serves as a cautionary example of how internal governance practices can profoundly influence external perceptions and international relations, particularly in an age where human rights have become a central metric of state legitimacy on the global stage.

Recommendations

1. **Institutional Reform:** Strengthen institutions like the National Human Rights Commission to ensure independence and enforcement of rights.
2. **Security Sector Accountability:** Implement transparent and fair judicial processes for security personnel accused of abuses.
3. **Press and Civil Society Protection:** Repeal laws that limit free expression and ensure journalists can operate without fear.
4. **Judicial Compliance:** Uphold court rulings to demonstrate respect for the rule of law.
5. **Strategic Communication:** Engage proactively with international actors using fact-based, transparent messaging to rebuild trust.

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