

Tinubu's Regime: Many Spokespersons, Zero Communication

By Temidayo Akinsuyi

There is no denying the fact that President Bola Tinubu has the highest number of media aides in the history of Nigeria, in the same manner his government boasts of the highest number of ministers. However, this cacophony of voices appears to be singing disjointed music, with the songs sounding fragmented, uneven or more like a 'broken record', like former Special Adviser to former President Muhammadu Buhari on Media and Publicity, Femi Adesina, is wont to say.

In June 2023, the president appointed Dele Alake, his former Commissioner of Information during his tenure as Lagos State Governor, as Special Adviser, Special Duties, Communications and Strategy, making him the first media aide to the president.

Soon after, he was named the Minister of Solid Minerals Development, a development sources claimed was orchestrated by a powerful cabal in the villa who do not want Alake to have direct access to the president as his chief spokesperson. Many Nigerians criticized Alake's appointment as Solid Minerals minister because he has no expertise in the sector. However, he later clarified that the president decided to shock Nigerians by not appointing him to the information ministry, which he has a background in, but drafted him to the Solid Minerals ministry because of his sense of responsibility, expertise, and track record. Hear him: "My portfolio has been the upset of the entire cabinet because given my antecedents, exposure, and experience in the area of perception, information management, and the likes so most people have pigeonholed me for information, and so we decided to shock everybody. Now if you all can sit down to analyze the global trend of economic development, you would note that the hydrocarbon – that is, the oil is fading out and the world is moving towards alternatives like gas, electric cars, and the rest. So what is the next economic growth factor? It is solid mineral. Given the nature of this sector to our economic growth and vitality of this country which is dear to the heart of Mr President, it's

just very apt and proper for him to send me here because he knows and trusts that I have a demonstrable sense of responsibility and courage to drive the agenda; that is why I am here. We are going to drive that agenda with the full cooperation of everyone."

Two years down the line, whether Alake's impact has been felt in the Solid Affairs Ministry is left for Nigerians to decide. In July 2023, the president appointed Ajuri Ngelale as his special adviser on media and publicity. In October of the same year, he also



appointed Bayo Onanuga, a veteran journalist and one of his close allies, as Special Adviser on Information and Strategy. As sources in the villa have confirmed, the young but cocky Ngelale, who added the prefix 'Chief' to his name, saw Onanuga as a 'rival wife who had come to share the same husband with him' while forgetting that while he was working as a media aide to former President Buhari, it was the likes of Onanuga who were receiving social media bullets for the president and following him everywhere during the electioneering campaign. Ngelale, who went into oblivion after he was technically eased out, crawled out of the hole last week to wish the president, whom he described as 'his father', a happy 73rd birthday. Like the Yorubas will say, 'Baba egbe mo oye omo to bi (The father knows the number of his children).

In August, the president also named Muhammed Idris as Minister of Information and National Orientation. Despite occupying such a visible portfolio, the highly

reticent Idris, unfortunately, is one of the unknown ministers in the president's cabinet. Unlike his predecessor, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, ask many Nigerians who Nigeria's current Minister of Information is, and I can bet a lot of people won't know. Aside Onanuga, other members of the president's media team are Daniel Bwala (Special Adviser, Policy Communication); Sunday Dare (Special Adviser, Media and Public Communications); Tunde Rahman (Senior Special Assistant to the President, Media); Abdulaziz Abdulaziz (Senior Special Assistant to the President — Print Media); O'tega Ogra — (Senior Special Assistant (Digital/New Media); Tope Ajayi — Senior Special Assistant (Media & Public Affairs); Segun Dada (Special Assistant — Social Media); Nosa Asemota — Special Assistant (Visual Communication); Mr Fredrick Nwabuo (Senior Special Assistant to the President — Public Engagement); Mrs Linda Nwabuwu Akhigbe (Senior Special Assistant to the President — Strategic Communications) and Mr Aliyu Audu (Special Assistant to the President — Public Affairs).

With all these people managing the public image and media affairs of the president, one then begins to wonder why there is still a huge disconnect between the government and Nigerians. Aside from Onanuga, the head of the Media and Publicity Directorate who has been doing a yeoman's job so far, who else can one pinpoint as speaking for the president? I can't remember Tunde Rahman granting any interview as a presidential spokesperson; the last time I read about him, he represented the president at the Service of Songs organised for the late Doyin Okupe in Lagos. When Daniel Bwala was appointed as special adviser on media and public communications to the president, he claimed he was the official spokesperson to President Tinubu; the presidency issued a statement that the president has no individual spokesperson but all three special advisers — Bayo Onanuga, Sunday Dare and Daniel Bwala — will “collectively serve as spokespersons for the government”. How can you have three special advisers jointly speaking for one president who claims he has implemented the Oronsaye report aimed at cutting the cost of governance? What will Sunday Dare or Bwala say that Onanuga alone can't say? Since his re-designation, Bwala, an erudite lawyer, has been trying his best to communicate the policies and reforms of the president to Nigerians. However, many Nigerians hardly take what he says with a pinch of salt, given his antecedents and previous negative remarks about the personality of the president. While he claimed he joined the administration to support President Tinubu in delivering his Renewed Hope promises, many Nigerians see Bwala as a two-faced Janus and sycophant who did a 360-degree turn from his former principal, Atiku Abubakar, after he lost the presidential election. Of course, you can't blame Nigerians for not believing anything 'Dannyboy' Bwala says. How can you successfully market a president whom you accused

of electoral fraud and certificate forgery? How can you sell the policies of the same president whom you said will fail like his predecessor, Muhammadu Buhari? Or didn't Bwala even say if you give President Tinubu 30 years in office, he will achieve nothing? Only an irredeemable irredentist who is completely bereft of intellect will believe any positive thing such a man now comes back to say about the president. While President Tinubu has a track record of making less enemies and winning even his staunchest critics to his side, not all of them should be appointed as media aides if they agreed to serve in his government. There should be other media units away from the presidency where they can contribute their quota to the development of the nation. The president's current media team is too unwieldy. Too many cooks spoil the broth. On a final note, there should be synergy on how the president's media team will communicate his agenda and policies to the people. As done in the United Kingdom, there should be a chain of command and if possible, approval need to be sought before will comment on sensitive issues. In this era, people don't wait for official statements anymore.

A social media comments or reply on a post by a media aide can be misconstrued as the official position of the government. This was evident in the case involving Temitope Ajayi on the NYSC saga and Ridwan Ajetunmobi, Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu's Senior Special Assistant on Print Media who faced backlash and was suspended for a reply he made to a post on social media.

In driving change, communications specialists, especially media aides to the president need to be diplomatic and sensitive to the people's needs.

A communications professional should understand the mood of the people and what they need before making comments, while also bearing in mind that you can't please everyone as some people will always find fault no matter how hard you try. A media aide to the president cannot just jump on social media and begin to attack Nigerians, especially the outspoken Gen-Z youths who are feeling the hardship associated with the reforms, even if they describe him in unsavory terms. You can't expect a person who was buying fuel at N187 per litre two years ago but is now buying it at N950 per litre to keep mute; neither can you browbeat a woman who now buys a crate of eggs for N6,500, an item that was N600 less than two years ago? Be empathetic and let the people know that fundamental and sustainable reforms are not easy the world over, but with the right policies and patience, there will be light at the end of the tunnel.

**Akinsuyi, former Group Politics Editor of Daily Independent, currently studies communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science.*