

LEADERSHIP AND HEGEMONIC CONTROL IN NIGERIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE *END-BAD-GOVERNANCE* PROTESTS

Martin UGBUDU,

PhD, Department of Political Science, College of Education, Oju, Benue State, Nigeria

ugbudumartins@gmail.com

Abstract

This discourse is an insightful examination of the End-Bad-Governance protests in Nigeria and the strategic use of political language to maintain hegemonic control. Specifically, the study addresses the language of deception, blame-shifting, coercion and manipulation carefully crafted by the ruling class under the Tinubu administration in the wake of the protests to stifle dissent and maintain the status quo. The official rhetoric is analyzed within the framework of a peripheral capitalist economy, its deepening contradictions and the mechanisms worked out by the Tinubu administration to manipulate the masses to accept poverty and starvation in the midst of affluence, perpetuate inequality and maintain the status quo during the End-Bad-Governance protests. Anchored on the Marxist Political Economy perspective, the study which is analytical, made use of content analysis and relied on secondary data sources. The study unveils that rather than embark of transformative change, government was evasive and political language became an alibi to misinform the masses, justify government actions, criminalize opponents and stifle dissent in order to maintain existing power relations in the wake of the protests. The study suggests amongst other things, demand for social accountability and a robust civil society engagement to conscientize the citizens of their socio-economic and political rights.

Keywords: *Leadership, Political Language, Deception, Hegemonic Control.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Protests in the society are a powerful catalyst for societal transformation. They help not only to elicit attention to disturbing social, political and economic issues but they also push for policy reforms in the society. History is replete with incidents in the world where protests have necessitated transformative change in the society. From the Civil Rights Movement in US, Anti-Apartheid Struggles in South Africa, the Arab-Spring and recently the Anti-Tax demonstrations in Kenya (Onwuka, 2024). In Nigeria, the End-SARs protests in 2020 helped

speed reforms within the Police. Also, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) protests in the country have pushed the Tinubu administration to approve 133% increase in minimum wage from N30,000 to 70,000 (Onwuka,2024).

The End-Bad-Governance protests in Nigeria in August, 2024 were largely triggered by the desire for positive change. The public's growing frustration with the government's handling of both the economy and national security challenges that culminated to unprecedented levels of hunger, anger and poverty in the country ignited the protests (Dakuku, 2024). One of the immediate catalyst for the protests was the sudden removal of the fuel subsidy and the foreign exchange reforms which led to astronomical rise in the cost of food stuff, transportation and essential goods. Paradoxically, the fuel subsidy which the government sold to Nigerians as a child of necessity and part of a broader strategy to revive the economy turned up to be a bitter pill. It suddenly pushed fuel price from N400 to over N1000 per litre. Above all, the naira rapidly depreciated against the dollar from the usual N650 to a dollar to N1600 to a dollar which had adverse effects on the cost of living. Statistics from the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (NBS,2024) for instance, indicate that inflation stood at 33.4% in the third quarter of the year and daily living as observed by Dakuku (2024) became a battle for survival.

Simultaneously, as the economic hardship was biting harder, the security challenges were getting worse. Nigerians could hardly go to bed with their two eyes closed. Insecurity became a major problem affecting food security and leading to wanton destruction of life and property. Across the length and breadth of the country, banditry, kidnapping, insurgency, herders' attack became the order of the day. There was no respite and the government's response were rather tepid. This ugly trend made many, especially the youth to become disillusioned that the government has failed on its primary responsibility to maintain law and order and guarantee the safety of lives and property. The attendant deteriorating standard of living, a function of corruption, poor governance and the horrifying security situation in the country culminated to the organized nation-wide protests in the country code named the End-Bad-Governance protests in the country in August 1st -10th 2024. The demands amongst others include, the reversal of fuel pump price, the restoration of affordable electricity tariffs, reduction of import duties to their previous rates; the reversal of hikes in tertiary education school fees, full transparency and accountability in government including public disclosure and reduction of public officials' salaries and allowances.

In response to the protests, the government made use of subtle media propaganda to subdue its intensity. Instead of communicating policy changes, Nigerian politicians and government officials used the electronic and print media to recite repeated messages daily to Nigerians urging them not to ‘rock the boat’ by joining the protests. This study analyzes the official rhetoric, that is the political language, particularly the ideologically loaded slogans, phrases, words which were recited with monotonous regularity by the Tinubu administration to dampen the End-Bad-Governance protests and maintain power structures. The intent of this inquiry is not only to provide insight to the issue of class and state power, inequality and exploitation; but fundamentally to provide an analytical framework to understand how political language can be used by the ruling class to mask the true intention of policies, deviate from substantial issues and maintain hegemonic control.

From this prism one can leverage on to understand how the Nigerian ruling class through political language have manipulated public perception to maintain the existing power structures which end up with the masses enduring poverty and starvation in the midst of affluence, scarcity in the midst of riches and hopelessness in the land of opportunity under President Tinubu’s Renewed Hope Agenda. To achieve this, the study relied on secondary data from newspapers, scholarly journals, official broadcast from radio and television stations as well as social media reports. Content analysis was used to systematically analyze and interpret official addresses, media portrayals and speeches to understand their meaning within the context they are used.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Leadership: this refers to the act of inspiring, influencing and guiding individuals or groups towards achieving a common goal. Cook (Cited in Achanya, 2014, P.47) define leadership as ‘the process of providing direction, energizing others and obtaining voluntary commitment to the leader’s vision. While McKinsey (2024) define leadership as a set of mindset and behaviours that align people in a collective direction, enables them to work together and accomplish shared goals and helps them to adjust to changing environment. It is about influencing and guiding others, whether in formal leadership positions or not, to achieve shared goals. These definitions underscore that leadership involves influence and it focuses on accomplishing goals. This therefore makes leadership central in harnessing both human and material resources to achieve goals

Since our concern here is on the exercise of power in the state, the discourse will lay emphasis on political leadership, that is the exercise of political power and authority by an individual or a group to influence and guide the decision-making process of the government to accomplish specific goals, implement policies and solve problems in the polity. Political leaders such as Presidents, Governors, Senators, Ministers wield power and authority and are saddled with the responsibility to set the direction and vision of the government as well as making strategic decisions to achieve their political objectives. Hence, effective political leadership require unique skills such as strong communication skills and cunning maneuvers. Political leadership plays a key role in the functioning of a political system and the society at large. A strong and effective leader can inspire and unite a nation, drive policy changes, promote development and address societal challenges. While poor leadership tends to divide the society and can trigger stagnation, economic crisis and a loss of public trust. In developing countries and in Nigeria in particular, it has been pointed out by Nwekeaku (2015) that visionary and dynamic leadership is a major impediment confronting both the private and public sector. This has aggravated development challenges leading to mass unemployment, mass poverty and hunger. Leadership is therefore central for the development of a nation.

Hegemony: the concept hegemony refers to a situation whereby one social class exerts influence over others outside the context of law or coercion. It is an internalization process by which the majority of society come to believe that societal norms are made to benefit each other equally leading to the acceptance of these norms. This has been adumbrated centuries ago by Machiavelli (2019) that ‘no prince may rule for long by force alone’ which admonished leaders that the persistence of order cannot depend solely on coercion but they should strike a balance using diverse variables such as moral consensus, political skills and value orientations. It is on this basis that Gramsci (1971) developed cultural hegemony to explain the social control structures of society. A hegemonic class he points out is one that is able to attain the consent of other forces and tries to retain the consent. This control he argues is through ideological illusions and not through economic base as emphasized by Marx. Hence, he sees civil society as a key battle ground for hegemony where various groups compete to shape societal norms, values and beliefs. It is within civil society space that consent is manufactured and contested. Hence intellectuals play a vital role in maintaining and challenging hegemony.

It is on this basis that Abercrombie, Hill & Turner (1980) have provided a critical perspective of hegemony. They view it beyond dominant groups imposing their ideology on

subordinate groups, but see it as a mix of coercion, consent and negotiation. Meanwhile, Marx & Engels (1846) on the other hand have provide a diametrical view of hegemony. They view it within the context of class struggle in which the ruling class control the economic base in the society and create the superstructure to control the proletariat. In his analysis of the capitalist society, he argues that the ruling class maintain its power by controlling the means of production and shaping ideology to serve its interest. That is, they shape the culture of that society, the beliefs, expectations, values and mores to suit their interest. Under such situations, the worldview of the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm. The capitalist society therefore maintains and reproduces itself through the permeation of bourgeois values on all organs of the society which becomes the dominant ideology. Hegemony to Marx represents false consciousness created by the ruling class to obscure the exploitation of the oppressed class and maintain the status quo.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

The theoretical underpinning of this study is rooted in Marxist political economy. It is an approach to the study of phenomena that gives primacy to material conditions particularly economic factors in the explanation of social life. The central thesis of this theoretical construct is that the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes generally. Marx (1971) in his analysis of the capitalist society conceived society as a social formation with three independent parts, the economic foundation, a legal and political superstructure and definite forms of social consciousness. He maintained that it is the economic base of the society that determines the superstructure of the society. However neo-Marxists have contended that the superstructure could also determine the base.

Marx (1971) was particularly concerned with how changes take place in the society. To understand this, he argued that one must understand changes in material life. That is changes in relations of production particularly the relationship between owners and producers; which Marx revealed through history and noted that apart from the communal stages of human development all history has been the struggle between social classes. At each stage of historical development, the society is divided into two antagonistic classes. The owners of the means of production rise to the position of a dominant class while those living solely on their labour on the terms dictated by the former constitute the dependent class. As long as the major means of production continue to be privately owned, the class division of society cannot be eliminated nor class conflict resolved.

Marx argued that the state arose to resolve the contradictions between social classes. However, 'as the state arose from the need to keep class antagonism in check in the midst of conflict of those classes; it is as a rule the state of the most powerful economically dominant class, and thus which through the medium of the state becomes also the politically dominant class, and thus acquire new means of holding down and exploiting the oppressed class' (Engels, 1977:45). Marx regarded the state as an evil, a product of class struggle and an instrument of class exploitation and it oppressed the economically weaker class. Invariably, political power becomes more of the organized power of one class for oppressing another; and politics becomes the process through which antagonistic classes struggle to obtain, retain or influence state power. Thus, in a capitalist society, those who own the means of production do not only dominate and subjugate the working class but are also able to control the polity and this gives them added advantage to shape the culture of the society- that is the beliefs and expectations, perceptions, values and mores. Consequently, the world view of the ruling class becomes the accepted cultural norm. Inevitably, the social, political and economic status quo as presented by the ruling class becomes accepted and seen as natural conditions that benefit every social class rather than unnatural social constructs that benefit a privileged few.

Nigeria, it should be noted is a peripheral capitalist state and the ruling class as noted by Jega (cited in Okolie & Nnamani, 2017, p.98) derive both its origin and wealth from the state around which it gravitates using every available means to secure power and access. Being a ruling class that lacks economic base, the state becomes a major instrument of class formation, wealth accumulation, exploitation and domination. This invariably makes the state to be dominated by a privileged few whose prime concern is primitive accumulation of wealth, that ends up isolating the state from its social base thus resulting to deep-rooted legitimacy crisis (Falola, 1998; Okolie & Nnamani, 2017). What is extant, in times of economic crisis manifested by protest such as the End-Bad-Governance where subordinate classes seek/ demand pragmatic changes in the society is that, the ruling class often tend to not only rely on the use of force but adopt foxy schemes to create false consciousness among the masses and obscure their exploitation in order to maintain the existing power relations.

4. POLITICAL LANGUAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HEGEMONIC CONTROL DURING END- BAD- GOVERNANCE PROTESTS IN NIGERIA

Political language no doubt plays a significant role in shaping public perception and policy outcomes in the polity. This has been adumbrated by Edelman (1977) that, the way political

language is crafted and used can significantly influence the effectiveness of policies and the success of political agenda through *Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail*. He argues persuasively that through communications between political authority and mass public, the ruling class do not only significantly structure the expectations people have of them but also manipulate and influence the mass public to accept existing power structures (Nzekwe, 1989). According to Edelman, political language tends to place premium on maintaining power and influence above genuine policy effectiveness. This accounts for why there is a wide disconnect between rhetoric and reality in government policies. To buttress this, Edelman (1980) analyzed the public pronouncements and actions of authorities in terms of their symbolic content and their psychological impact on a dependent population seeking reassurance and virtually demanding leadership in his discourse and came to the conclusion that public policies often do not result in actions consistent with stated intention of the framers (Nzekwe, 1989, Lipsky, 1967). Conversely, he pointed out that the material impact of policy is likely to favour dominant groups while the symbolic aspects of the policy falsely reassure mass publics that their interests are protected against the rapaciousness of powerful groups.

The synopsis of Edelman's (1977) argument is that political language is a deceptive tool used to manipulate public opinion; mask the true intentions of policy makers; create a political spectacle that deviate from substantial issues to maintain existing power relations in the polity. Albeit, people in authority through rhetorical evocations, ideologically loaded phrases and words evoke emotional responses, create mythic cognitive structures in people's minds, shape public opinion and mobilize support regardless of the actual substance of the policies being discussed. These words when carefully framed are consciously used with monotonous regularity to divert attention from the wasteful and irrational policies. And apart from this, they serve as a double edge sword to contain revolutionary pressures and resonate the policies and programmes that fail.

In Nigeria for instance, the End -Bad-Governance protests were a response to economic hardship and long- standing systemic issues such as corruption and insecurity. The protesters demanded amongst other things, the reversal of the fuel pump price; the restoration of affordable electricity tariffs and the reduction of import duties to their previous rates as well as the reversal of hikes in tertiary education fees; full transparency and accountability in governance including the public disclosure and reduction of public official's salaries and allowances. Instead of confronting these demands head-on with policy changes, the President,

government officials, prominent Nigerians appeared daily on media platforms reciting the endless virtues of the Tinubu administration and urging Nigerians to refrain from protests using these phrases and words with monotonous regularity

- create room for dialogue
- we must stop further bloodshed, violence and destruction
- protests as a wake- up call to do more
- let us work together to build a brighter future for ourselves and generations to come
- let us chose hope over fear, unity over division, progress over stagnation
- the government is focused on delivering good governance
- let nobody misinform and misdirect you about your country your government does not care about you
- I understand the pain and frustration that drive these protests
- my vision for our country is one of just and prosperous nation where each person may enjoy peace and freedom
- we are working hard for you and the results will soon visible for everyone to see, feel and enjoy
- we are in a new era of renewed hope
- there will be light at the end of the tunnel

These words and phrases embedded in the President's address to the nation on the 4th August, 2024, it should be noted, while conveying symbolic aspects of genuine concern and protection for all Nigerians, seek at the same time to stifle dissent and perpetuate inequality and exploitation under the Tinubu administration. They were daily recited in the print and electronic media with the aim to halt the protests promising that the economy will soon recover and there is no need to 'shut out its oxygen'. Thus, there is hope that better times are ahead.

The President also cunningly depicted the current economic hardship as national crises that has been reoccurring over time. In his words, 'For decades, our economy has remained anemic because of mismanagement that has stunted growth and development and the use of temporary measures'(President Tinubu's Address to the Nation) The words and phrase in the President's address do not only portray that the crises have been lingering long ago and came out for reasons outside the control of the present political leadership, but show that the present leadership has taken proactive measures that in the long-run will flourish the masses. Hence, Nigerians were called upon to make sacrifices to surmount the crises and 'stop further

bloodshed, violence and destruction' that the protests portend. It should be noted that these words and phrase while consciously masking the material conditions that led to the tempestuous reaction in the Nigerian polity, were meant to justify the efforts the leaders have made (are making) and at the same time imbue the masses to accept the present economic hardship as part of the sacrifices they will have to contend with thereby accepting poverty in the midst of plenty.

The illusion of crises though not in doubt, but what is germane is that the economic crises emanate from inequalities in political and economic power aggravated by the burden of subsidy removal that falls disproportionately on the poor, while the affluent and influential members of the society are benefiting from aspects of subsidy removal in varying degrees. Additionally, the words, repeatedly recited on the print and electronic media daily during the End-Bad-Governance protests succeeded in presenting two conflicting beliefs in the nation's political culture, a situation whereby some justify the government's adequate handling of the crises and others holding the leaders responsible for the burdens they impose. This in the long-run helped to divide the citizens, dissipate the revolutionary gravitation and hoodwink the masses to accept the policies of the present leadership of President Bola Tinubu thus perpetuating inequality.

The above analysis, demonstrate how political language can be an effective instrument of hegemonic control. Against this backdrop, we will in the preceding section, proceed to illustrate how government officials employed political language tactics to assuage the masses and exercise hegemonic control during the End-Bad-Governance protests in Nigeria in, August, 2024.

Emotional conscientization: towards the build-up and during the End-Bad-Governance protests in Nigeria, the mass of the citizenry was consciously and systematically deceived by the present leadership through emotional appeals. Sentimental language was used to evoke patriotism, enthrone national unity and promote fear in the citizens. Official rhetoric kept on sermonizing on the need to choose 'hope over fear' unity over division' drawing analogies from the Nigerian civil war. Some proactive steps were also taken by the Tinubu administration to stem the protests. Enormous time and resources were spent weeks and days prior to the start of the 1st August protest mobilizing governors, traditional institutions and influential figures to dissuade citizens from joining the protest. Governors across the-political divide held town hall meetings in their states to preach against the protest (Odah, 2024). The views of elder statesmen

like former presidents Yakubu Gowon and Ibrahim Babangida were aired on the electronic media platforms daily admonishing Nigerians to dialogue and eschew protest that may degenerate to violence and horror akin to the civil war experience.

In the President's broadcast to the nation during the protest, he solicited for dialogue. In his words, "create room for dialogue" informing Nigerians that he recognized the right to peaceful protests but the administration is wary of the dangers associated with demonstrations and there is likelihood that the protests will be hijacked by hoodlums and miscreants who will capitalize on the opportunity to vandalize certain critical infrastructure and public facilities. People will capitalize on the protests and loot private businesses, super-markets and shops; molestation of individuals and in the end make the country ungovernable resulting in a state of anarchy. He ended up appealing to Nigerians that 'he is speaking to Nigerians with a heavy heart and a sense of responsibility' and 'government is committed to listening to and addressing the concerns of the citizens' (President Tinubu: Address to the Nation, August,4, 2024). While these words evoke symbolic aspects of genuine concern, they seek at the same time to polarize Nigerians, some to support the protests and others to kick against the protests thus diminishing the intensity of the protests and exercising hegemonic control.

Scape-goats/ Coercion: another deceptive strategy unleashed through official rhetoric by the Tinubu administration during these protests was blame-shifting using opposition politicians as scape-goats and coercion. During the protests, the crises in the economy and politics was blamed on political opposition groups and radical elements in the society. The presidency instead of policy reforms decided to blame opposition politicians that they are working in concert with others to cause upheavals that will lead to regime change. A Special Adviser to the President accused the protesters of being supporters of the Labour Party Presidential candidate in the 2023 general elections, Peter Obi that are plotting to take over the government after their failure at the poll (Odah, 2024). President Tinubu himself maintained that the protests are unwarranted and politically motivated. Consequently, at the heels of the protest, the President warned Nigerians in his words 'do not let the enemies of democracy use you to promote an unconstitutional agenda that will set us back on our democratic journey, forward ever backward never' (President Tinubu- Address to the nation,2024). Aside, from blame-shifting, coercion was employed to deter people from protesting. The President for instance benignly threatened Nigerians that, 'I must ensure public order and our government will not stand idly by and allow a few with political agenda to tear this nation apart'. Hence, the State

Security Service (SSS) speculated that the hunger protests were planned to subvert the administration of President Tinubu and thrust the nation into disarray (Odah, 2024). This was backed up by the arrest of journalists covering the protest by the security operatives. Sponsored thugs and miscreants were deployed by the government to counter the protest. While many persons were profiled as sponsors of the protest (Abdul, 2024). At the end, most individuals that hold alternative view point different from those of the hegemony were intimidated or blackmailed into the disciplined ranks of the administration.

The Inspector General of Police at the heels of the nation-wide protests also issued a statement to the nation that in as much as the right to protest over perceived social wrongs or detrimental government policies is fundamental in a democracy, it is the duty of the government to balance this right with the imperative of maintaining law and order. Consequently, the security agencies will not fold their arms and allow anything that will bring mayhem within communities. In fact, reports by G4S, an independent security firm alleged that the death toll on day one of the protest was 21, with 175 injured. Over 1,154 arrests were made across the country. Curfews were declared in the North East states of Yobe, Borno and Kano (Odah, 2024). So instead of seeking solutions, the government instilled fear in the citizenry through threats and arrests and indulged in scape- goat hunting.

Statistical amplification: manipulation of statistics via official rhetoric by presenting selective data to create a false narrative of progress was consciously deployed to dampen the protests. Rather than address the issue of fuel pump price increase and naira depreciation against the dollar, the government defended the subsidy removal that it is a necessary evil and manipulated statistics to show Nigerians the gains thereof. In the president's address to the nation, he pointed out in his words that "in the past fourteen months, our government made significant strides in re-building the foundations of our economy, aggregate revenues have doubled hitting over N9.1 trillion in the first quarter of 2024". Above all, the government has embarked on massive infrastructural development by embarking on the on-going Lagos-Calabar coastal highway and the Sokoto-Badagry highway. There is also the reduction of debt service to revenue ratio from 97% to 68% in thirteen months, clearance of foreign exchange obligation and boost in oil production to 1.61 million barrels per day. It should be noted that these quantum leap in growth indices have not flourish the citizens but have impoverish Nigerians and there is poverty in the midst of plenty. These statistical manipulation through official rhetoric only succeeded in obscuring the socio-economic realities from the masses,

hence consciously manipulating them to believe that the government is trying to improve their socio-economic life and not question the existing power structures (President Tinubu- Address to the nation, 2004).

Symbolic concessions: the government instead of addressing the core demands canvassed by the protesters such as reversal of the pump price of petroleum products, halt the fall of the Naira, the speedy provision of foodstuff and stimulate employment, instead the government through official pronouncement offered minor, superficial changes to placate the protesters. The president in his address to the nation, promised to curtail the cost of transportation through the Compressed Gas Initiative (CGI) which he plans to distribute a million conversion kits. He also promised to build 100,000 housing units over the next three years and the removal of tariffs on certain food items to boost food production. These minimal concessions have come to buttress what Edelman (1980) has re-iterated that when dominant groups are in conflict with subordinate groups, the dominant groups tend to oblige only minor concessions consequent upon vigorous popular protests. And they ensure they manage the terms of the concessions to their material advantage.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This discourse has analyzed official rhetoric in the wake of the End-Bad- Governance protests in Nigeria. The protests were a spontaneous reaction to the removal of fuel subsidy and the attendant hunger and poverty experienced by Nigerians. Key amongst the demands of the protesters was the reversal of the pump price of petrol, reduction of electricity tariffs and import duty. Instead of addressing this core demands to make essential necessities of life affordable to Nigerians through policy reforms, the government cunningly through official rhetoric bamboozle the mass of the citizenry by criminalizing the protests as a grand plan by political opponents, hoodlums and miscreants to cause mayhem, destabilize and trigger regime change. The government also employed official rhetoric to divide Nigerians, divert attention from the socio-economic hardship and wane the momentum of the protests. Through political language the Tinubu administration was able to dampen the momentum of the crisis, assuage Nigerians to accept the current economic hardship for a brighter future awaits them ahead. Through official rhetoric, words have succeeded in halting revolutionary gravitation and rationalizing a failed 'subsidy removal' policy and at the end the gravy corruption and bad governance has continued. What the country needs is visionary leadership, prudence and tenacity to address its crisis of development.

Political language has succeeded in psychologically reassuring the masses to have hope in the leadership that there is light at the end of tunnel and they need not revolt. This underscores Marx's (1846) assertion that in a capitalist state, the ruling class shape the beliefs, expectations, perceptions and values so that their world view becomes the accepted norm. However, for the mass of the citizenry to wrestle away from the grip of the exploitative ruling class, Civil Society Organizations (CSO) should be actively engaged in conscientizing the citizenry of their socio-economic and political rights by leveraging on social media to raise awareness and mobilize support. Civil Society Organizations should also take advantage of its membership in bodies like the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Legal Aid Council and National Committee Against Torture to educate citizens on their rights and the importance of civic engagement. Also, social accountability should be enthroned in governance; this entails CSO, s demanding access to information and pushing for accountability in governance through petitions and even lawsuits. CSO's should collaborate with other Non-Governmental Organizations to amplify voices and impact. They should also try to influence policy decisions to benefit the interest of the public.

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