Obidient Movement and Political Change in Nigeria: The Journey So Far.

1Mokuye S. Onyekachukwu, 2Onwunyi U. Mmaduabuchi, & 3Okonkwo A. Emmanuel

1 & 2Department of Political Science, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria. 3Department of Political Science, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Akwa, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Corresponding Author’s Email: stephen.mokuye@dou.edu.ng

Abstract
The failure of successive governments to bring about inclusive governance through credible elections has always been the bane of youth restiveness in most part of the country. This accounted for the reasons why all and sundry especially the youths have taken the bull by the horn in an attempt to change the status quo in the political landscape of Nigeria. This paper focuses on the emergence of the Obidient Movement to mobilize support for the presidential candidate of Labour Party, Mr. Peter Obi in the 2023 general elections and how it has altered the political trajectory in the Country. The paper relied on secondary data sources and adopted the Resource Mobilization Theory as a framework of analysis. This study found out that the emergence of Mr. Peter Obi reawakened the political interest of majority of Nigerians, especially the millennial, lead to massive mobilization of support from Nigerians at home and abroad, and that the Peter Obi effect lead to the political fortunes of many candidates that contested in the general elections on the platform of the Labour Party. Importantly, this study discovered that a mass movement with little history behind its existence could alter the political trajectory of the Country as result of the general disenchantment by the citizens towards the present crop of leaders. It was recommended amongst other things that the Obidient Movement should sustain the tempo of its activities across the country even after the general elections to keep the elected office holders on their toes, establish strong presence in every part of Nigeria to ensure a holistic restructuring of the Country leading to the emergence of new crop of leaders committed to the provision of the dividends of good governance.

Keywords: Mass Movement; Millennial; Nigeria; Obidients; Political Change.


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Introduction

Since the beginning of the last decade, there has been a growing awareness and new level of consciousness among the Nigerian populace on the crucial role they play in the decision-making process of governance and in the sustenance of democratic rule. The fall of long standing autocratic and despotic regimes in parts of Africa laid credence to this assertion. Thus, supporting the popular truism that ultimate power in the State resides with the people (Onwunyi, Nwokoye & Udegbonam, 2021).

The world watched in total disbelief as the people, resolved and united in their quest to end long seating despots, removed Tunisian President, Ben Ali as he fled from office to Saudi Arabia, Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, Sudanese President, Omar el-Bashir, who was prosecuted and imprisoned, among other despots that were swept away by the power of the people. The sweeping changes across the Continent did not pass without Nigerian citizens taking note. This they enacted in October, 2020 when they demanded a disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police. The government adopted and implemented the five-point demands of the protesting members of the society, who were mostly youths. Prior to the #ENDSARS Movement of 2020, the youths were divided mostly along ethno-religious lines, which were masterfully deployed by the political elites over the years to their political advantage and to the loss of the people. But the #ENDSARS protest galvanized the Nigerian youth, particularly from the southern part of the Country (Onwunyi & Udegbonam, 2021).

The laudable achievements recorded during that protest was an eye opener to the youths on the enormous power at their disposal to effect lasting change in the polity. This was amply reenacted in the most nonviolent way during the 2023 general elections. The Nigerian youths, who were regarded as lazy and insignificant in the scheme of things hitherto, became a strong and potent force for change in the elections. Since Nigeria’s return to participatory democracy in 1999, the people have continually suffered neglect in the hands of elected public officers. Each election year, they go to the polls to elect candidates of their choice but are shortchanged in the end owing to the manipulation of the election results. Most, if not all, times, unpopular candidates with no political significance and not voted for, emerges winner. Late President Umaru Musa Yar’Adua
alluded to this fact when he disclosed that he came into office through a flawed election (Chime, 2009).

Following recourse to unethical means to secure electoral victory, the voting public became apolitical. The waning interest of the people in the electoral process was accentuated by the active connivance of the electoral umpire and the courts of law, which in most cases, give favourable judgment to the highest bidder. The Supreme Court declaration of Hope Uzodimma of the All Progressives Congress, who came a distant fourth as governor of Imo State and the disqualification of the sitting governor, Emeka Ihedioha of the Peoples Democratic Party, still defy logical reasoning (Radio Nigeria, 2020). Two key events that reawakened the interest of the voting Nigerian masses in the buildup to the 2023 general elections were first, the disclosure by the electoral management body (INEC) that it will deploy a high tech electronic voting device, Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BIVAS) which will make electoral fraud, malpractice and rigging very impossible. The officials of the Commission repeatedly assured Nigerians that the election results would be uploaded real time from the polling units to INEC’s central server (Kwen, 2022). These assurances of conducting credible elections struck the right place in the people.

The second event was the emergence of Mr. Peter Obi as the presidential candidate of the Labour Party, a political party registered since 2002 that has very little or no political relevance except for the time Dr. Olusegun Mimiko was elected on its platform. The groundswell of support for Mr. Peter Obi lead to the birth of a people-centred and grassroots driven movement as a veritable vehicle aimed at dislodging corrupt and incompetent politicians and installing a leader with capacity, character, competence and credibility- qualities that have been lacking in most politicians in the country, a reference to Achebe’s submission that leadership is the problem with Nigeria (Achebe, 1983).

**Conceptual Clarifications**
Obidients

This is the name that refers to the supporters of the Presidential candidate of Labour Party, Mr. Peter Obi in the 2023 presidential elections. Initially existing on social media and made up of youths across the Country, it gained a groundswell of support offline as witnessed by the numerous rallies organized across Nigeria with thousands in attendance. These followers of Mr. Obi cut across every strata of the Nigerian society- voting and nonvoting. The primary object of their emergence was to support the candidacy of Mr. Obi to become the next president of Nigeria.

Obidient Movement

The Obidient Movement is a social and a political mass movement that evolved to ensure the electoral victory of Mr. Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of Labour Party in the 2023 general elections. The groups cut across every strata of the Nigerian society and exist in all the geopolitical zones of the Country. Members of the Group also exist abroad among the Nigerians in the Diaspora. They see in Obi the most qualified and credible and best contender for the office of the president of Nigeria. An attempt to categorize membership of this group would lead to five subgroups. Among the Obidients there are

a. The professionals/intellectuals who are tired of the recycled politicians that continued to lead the country to the brink of collapse.

b. The influential celebrities who have a lot of followers on different social media platforms, and whose endorsement of Mr. Obi encouraged their followers to develop interest in Nigerian politics, one more time.

c. The ethnic bigots who see in Mr. Obi the fulfillment of the Igbo presidency. To them, Peter Obi is running for the presidency to represent the Igbo nation.

d. The activists who have not forgiven the political class for their role in the botched #ENDSARS Movement particularly, the killing at Lekki Toll Gate. The Obi candidacy was their opportunity to get back at those politicians who unleashed the military on unarmed Nigerians and massacred them across the country.

e. The Diasporan Nigerians who wanted a credible leader to reproduce the kind of, or near to the kind of political environment they live in abroad in their home country.

Political Change
In some political system, citizens place demand of elected officials to embark on reforms or a complete transformation of the leadership architecture. For the purpose of this study, we define political change as the sweeping or incremental transformation in power relations in political systems leading to the loss of power by one political class and the ascendance to political power by another. This changes could be “positive or negative; violent or nonviolent” (Obi, 1999,p. 127).

**Inclusive Governance**

According to Pattenden (2021.np), inclusive governance “is when national or regional governments enable the input of citizens in decision making process”. A logical outcome of these relations is trust building between the government and the citizens. The government enjoys popular support, and the citizens have a sense of belonging. One of the evidence of inclusive governance is the conduct of transparent, credible and generally acceptable elections. In an inclusive democracy, any candidate declared winner in an election struggle with “crisis of legitimacy” (Abada & Elijah, 2009.p. 40).

For this study, however, inclusive governance means the existence of an enabling political environment for every eligible members of the society to have their voice and views respected and accommodated either directly or through elected representatives.

**Youth Restiveness**

So much has been written on youth restiveness in Nigeria, but Elegbeleye (2005) believes that youth restiveness is “the sustained protestation embarked upon to enforce desired outcome from a constituted authority by an organized body of youths”. We posit that youth restiveness is the
sustained drive or struggle and agitation by the youths for better leadership, conditions of living and access to the opportunities of the commonwealth.

**Mass Movement**

This does not denote the entirety of the people in a particular society. It refers to an organized, sometimes, sporadic group of people pursuing a particular agenda aimed at furthering the wellbeing of their members. It falls within the groups called civil society. The members of the group achieve their goals for existence by lobbying state officials. The 2020 #ENDSARS Movement comes to mind here. This Movement was the precursor to the Obidient Movement as many people who partook in this protest moved their structures to the new movement. Most of the actors during the 2020 protest queued behind Peter Obi, whom they hope will meet their aspirations of a meaningful economic and political transformation of the Country when he becomes president.

**Good Governance**

This is an approach to government that is committed to creating a system founded on justice, peace and protects individual’s rights and civil liberties. There are principles of good governance namely transparency, accountability, consensus oriented, rule of law, equity and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, responsiveness and participation (UNESCAP, 2009). These eight principles are the yardsticks for measuring contemporary state actors in the discharge of their programmes and policies.

**Theoretical Orientation**

The relevance of theory in the analysis of social phenomena cannot be overemphasized. To this end, the Resource Mobilization Theory, one of the many variants of social movement theory, formed the basis of the theoretical analysis of this study. McCarthy and Zaid (1977) adopted this theory to study social movements and how their effective utilization of resources enabled them achieve their objectives. They argued in their seminal work on social movements, *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory* that the success of any social movement would be anchored of the availability and effective use of human, financial and material resources, political opportunities, and building of networks and alliances. This gave credence to
Tarrow’s work on Social Movement. He argued that Social Movements rise “when shifting political conditions open opportunities for disruptions and the activities of social movements in turn can alter political policies and structures” (Tarrow, 1998). The authors identified actors the movers of social change, which they referred to as social movement organizations. These are individuals or groups that drive social change. Essentially, the theory emphasizes the role of collective action, resource mobilization, social change and common purpose. They held a different views about social movements as made up of rational individuals who are propelled by their desire for change through the political process rather than deviants who are irrational and anomic in the pursuit of their grievances.

The Obidients are mostly the millennials, and are disenchanted with the leadership class and their retrogressive and anti-people programmes of successive governments in the Country. The major argument of this theory is that there is always the possibility of a wholesome change where there is a collective action. The collective action can be likened to the efforts of the mass movement majorly comprising of the teeming youth in the bid to bring about a radical change not necessarily through violence or revolutionary movements. This is so because of the political opportunities presented to them by the 2023 general election with major contenders all trying their best through the platforms of political parties to enthrone either continuity or total change of government.

Political parties in a bid to achieve their aim tried the utilization of several strategies through the framing and design of policies to achieve their predetermined goals. Resource mobilization is one of the basic features of the theory as there can be no success in an attempt to enthrone or achieve any political change without the necessary human and material resources that must be assembled and utilized adequately in the bid to achieve their bidding.

From the foregoing analysis, one can deduce the imperativeness of the resource mobilization theory in order to juxtapose the very efforts of the Obidient Movement in the bid to ensure a political change in Nigeria in the 2023 general election. This theory is appropriate to this study as it helped to analyze among other things, how Obidients framed their messages and communicated with the public, deployed the social media to build strong coalition and alliances with civil society groups with similar interests, and mobilized men and other resources.
Methodology

Qualitative method was considered appropriate for this study because the method is well-suited for contextual analysis particularly when the task is to glean, illuminate, interpret and extract valuable information to draw inference from the available evidence so as to reach a conclusion.

This research is a qualitative research and therefore qualitative research is generally characterized by the simultaneous collection and analysis of data whereby both mutually shape each other. Qualitative descriptive analysis moves farther into the domain of interpretation to understand not only the manifest, but also the latent content of data. It is a descriptive verbal analysis, which involves interpretation and explanation of both qualitative and quantitative information. The adoption of the foregoing analytical method became inevitable because the study principally relied on secondary data.

Emergence of the Obidient Movement in Nigeria’s Political Landscape

The need to bring about lasting solution to the varieties of political, social, economic and cultural problems confronting Nigeria, lead to the emergence of a group of Nigerian youths under the auspices of the “Obidient Movement”. This movement is an organic group made up mostly of Nigerian youths, who want to break free with the old political order which they have not benefitted from in any meaningful way. Their rallying point is to create a new Nigeria where competence, character and capability are the criterion aspirants to public office must possess instead of other primordial considerations. They found these qualities in the presidential candidate of Labour Party, Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State. He won the presidential ticket of the Labour Party after he withdrew his membership from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) upon realizing that he stood no chance of winning the PDP presidential ticket on a level playing ground after the Party abandoned its initial plan to zone the presidential position to southern Nigeria.

The Labour Party presidential candidate is by far the youngest amongst the three major contenders for the office of the President. He is 61 years old. The other two candidates, Atiku Abubakar of the PDP is 75 years while the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the President,
Bola Ahmed Tinubu, is 71 years. The Obidients easily identified with Mr. Obi because of his relatively young age in comparison with the other two, competence and his shrewd management of Anambra State resources as Governor, his thorough understanding of what modern governance entails, his focus on issue-based campaigns unlike the other two (involved in character assassination and inanities) and the many corruption cases against the other two frontline contenders and their age, which many believe is above what they claim. Some analysts (Amnesty International, 2020) believe that the Obidient Movement is the new face of the #ENDSARS mainly because of the persons that identified with it. Many of those that participated in the #ENDSARS Protest or supported it and were distraught with the government of the day and its officials on how they handled the killings, especially at the Lekki Toll Gate, swell up its membership. It has been said, even Mr. Obi himself acknowledged, that the Obidient Movement is not the same as the Labour Party.

In its formative stage, the Movement was regarded as a social media frenzy with no physical presence. Many old time politicians mocked Obi and wondered how he would win election in Nigeria with a social media group. They were terrified when the “social media mob” (Soludo, 2022. P. 54) began to mobilize and organize awareness marches and rallies across the Country with mammoth crowd in attendance. Obaseki (2022) and Fani-Kayode (2022) were the first set of politicians that had a glimpse of the growing influence and popularity of the Movement and its capacity to sweep the old brigade away from politics. While still sustaining their online activities, local chapters of the group were established across the Country and even in the Diaspora. They embarked on well-planned mobilization of members and encouraged Nigerians who have not registered for or collected their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) before the continuous Voter Registration (CVR) ended to do so with the extension of the registration exercise following agitation and pressure from Nigerians who would have been disenfranchised, to enable them install their candidate, Mr. Obi during the presidential election.

The Labour Party, which had no political relevance since its formation, except a brief period of Mimiko’s administration in Ondo State, suddenly became a formidable opposition party and a serious contender for the office of the president of Nigeria because of Mr. Obi and the Obidient
Movement. Polls conducted by various local and international bodies showed Mr. Obi in the lead. The youths, who constitute over 70% of the voting population were mostly Obidient.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducted the Presidential and National Assembly elections on February 25th, 2023 and the Houses of Assembly and governorship elections on the 18th of March, 2023. There were major political upsets from the results declared by the INEC. The old time politicians, including the president, lost their strongholds to Peter Obi’s Labour Party and the army of Obidient Nigerians.

**Mass Movements and Political Changes in Africa**

The relationship between the effects of mass movements on political changes in Africa particular and the world at large, need not be over looked at this point as it will help ascertain or give direction to the effect of same in Nigeria presently. Scholars like Nnoli (2003.p.103) agree that a new dominant class emerges in society and institute “fast-moving fundamental changes in the various aspect of life of the society” and that when this happens, there is a new political order and power relations. In the pursuit of this radical transformation of the society, elections constitute one of the nonviolent means to this end. Likewise, nonviolent protests and demonstrations have far reaching effects in the installation of a new government. At the extreme, there is the violent approach like revolution, revolts, etc. to achieve the same change (Nnoli, 2003; Obi, 1999). Mass movements in Nigeria and some parts of Africa have made demands on the political class (the ruling elites) in recent past with mixed results. A few instances will suffice in this study.

**The Nigerian Revolution**

Who knows how Nigeria would have been in terms of development if the January 15th, 1966 Revolution conceived, planned and executed by young crop of army officers had succeeded. Dubbed Igbo Coup (Ezeani, 2014) because the leaders of the coup were mainly Igbos and the fact that no Igbo political elite was killed, the altruistic disposition of these young military officers, who struck to save Nigeria from imminent collapse occasioned by the violence in Western Region
cannot be denied going through their reasons for embarking on the dangerous plot (Ademoyega, 2004; Madiebo, 1980; Ifeajuna, 1966). The revolution, according to the planners was against the backdrop of incompetence, inefficiency and corruption of the government. They struck to avert the planned brutal attack to be unleashed on Western Region and consequent subjugation of the region, which was supposed to begin on January 17th, 1966 to be lead by Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari on the approval of the Tafawa Balewa’s government (Oyeweso, 1992).

The Arab Spring
Arab Spring is a series of citizen-led protests that swept across the Arab world. It began in Tunisia in December, 2010 when a Tunisian Police Officer threatened to shut down the business of Mohammad Bouaziz over tax payment. His response of self-imolation sparked off indignation against the authorities. The ensuing protest escalated to the point of calling for the President, Ben Ali, to step down as president after being on the saddle for over 20 years, having come to power in 1987. The protest spread to Egypt, where another long time dictator held on to the levers of power. Egyptians mobilized and convened on Tahrir Square, demanding for the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. The crack down on the protesters by security forces did not deter them.

Mubarak’s almost 30 years grip on power came to an end when the military overthrew him. He was prosecuted and imprisoned by the succeeding military junta of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. As it was in Tunisia and Egypt, so it was in Yemen, Libya, etc (Edeh, Mokuye & Okechukwu, 2012). Many analysts recognized the effective deployment of social media, particularly, Twitter and Facebook by the technology-savvy youthful population in all the protests and mass movements for mobilization of support, sustained awareness creation. The protesters were able to dismantle long sitting dictators and called for their prosecutions, e.g. Omar el-Bashir, former President of Sudan who was sentenced to prison.

#ENDSARS Movement
The #ENDSARRS Movement was an anti-government protest ignited by the illegal activities of SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad), a Unit of the Nigeria Police. The special squad was established in 1992 as a plain-cloth, non-gun carrying detective unit, but started bearing arms in 2002. Nigerians, especially the youth lodged bitter complaints against SARS Operatives. They
were accused of extortion, kidnapping, rape, murder, amongst others. The Government promised to reform the Unit, but nothing seemed to be done as the Operatives waxed stronger in extra-judicial killings and other forms of illegalities.

#ENDSARS hashtag was used on social media to document cases of brutalities suffered by Nigerians in the hands of SARS Operatives. This was in 2017. By 2020, the social media group has galvanized into a strong social movement.

October 20th 2020 marked a watershed in the activities of this Group. It was the day security forces- a detachment of the Army and the Police opened fire on unarmed young Nigerians at the Lekki Tool Gate otherwise known as the Lekki Massacre. Over 50 lives were lost and hundreds displaced (amnesty.org), many important international personalities, like the organizer of the Black Lives Matter, lent support to organizers of the Movement. Government crackdown on organizers of the Movement through arrest, freezing of their bank accounts by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), among others did not deter the Group (PLAC, 2020). They went as far as establishing an online radio, Soro Soko to widen their reach. The five demands of the Group were met by the Government amongst which was the disbandment of SARS, establishment of Panel of Enquiry in the States across the Country to look into the grievances of citizens against Operatives of SARS and prosecuting the officers of the Unit found guilty of extra-judicial killings, kidnapping, maiming, etc. like the notorious CP James Nwafor, OC, SARS, Awkuzu, Anambra State.

The Sudanese Protest

What started as a protest against worsening economic conditions in Sudan in 2018 later assumed a political character with the involvement of the Sudanese professionals coordinated by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). The Khartoum Government did not take the protesters serious. Omar el-Bashir, the long time dictator of this central African country, mocked the Group wondering how a Whatsapp and Facebook movement could effect changes in the polity (france24.com).

The Sudanese people were among citizens across the world to experience government repression, violation of rights and rule under the Islamic legal code, Shariah. Rise in the cost of living owing
to poor economic management that lasted over 30 years were among the grounds for the 39 months old protest. President Omar al-Bashir’s 30 years hold on power ended with his overthrow, arrest, prosecution and imprisonment. Many of the anti people laws like the flogging of women on trousers, the release of protesters imprisoned by Bashir’s government and a return to democratic rule were among the changes and achievements of the over two years protest. Unlike the Arab spring uprising, the Sudanese protest were non violent and non confrontational even in the face of state violent response. This speaks of the level of coordination and organization of the protest movement by professionals whose demands were clear and precise.

The Obidients Movement and the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: The Nexus

When Peter Obi decided to test his popularity by joining and becoming the presidential candidate of a little known political party, LP, hardly would he have known that he will enjoy the massive support that greeted his declaration for the 2023 elections. Both analysts and political actors are still surprised how a movement with only 8 months of existence could create the kind of political upsets witnessed in the 2023 general elections. Those that claimed that Obi was just an entertainer and a nonentity in the presidential contest (Soludo, 2022) were forced to commend Peter Obi for the change he brought to the general elections.

Obi’s supporters argued that the result of the presidential elections as declared by the INEC is not the true state of things. They believed that the Labour Party candidate won the elections. The case has since been brought before the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal in Abuja for determination of who the true winner is.

The Obidient Movement helped the Labour Party to emerge 3rd in the presidential election (inecnigeria.org). Of particular interest was the party’s victory in Lagos, Katsina, Nasarrawa, Plateau, Federal Capital Territory (FCT) which were the strongholds of the ruling APC leaders (Tinubu, Buhari, Adamu, Lalong, etc). The Labour Party, with no prior elected members of the National Assembly, now has six senators, 34 House of Representative members, a governor (Abia State) and several House of Assembly members (inecnigeria.org). After the January 15 Revolution, the Obidient Movement is the next most well coordinated youth-led action against the status quo that has far reaching effects on the body polity.
Conclusion

As aptly captured by Augustine and Obasesam (2023) “the Obidient movement will shape Nigerian politics beyond the 2023 presidential elections” (blogs.lse.ac.uk). The outcome of the elections has proved their submission. The Movement has unnerved those who waved them off with the wave of the hand. At this point, it is pertinent to point out that the introduction and deployment of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BIVAS) machine contributed to breaking the hold of the political class, whose political relevance is tied to wanton manipulation of election results in the past election years. Had BIVAS been used as specified in the new electoral law 2022 and not resorting to manual counting of votes by the INEC, there was the possibility that the ruling APC would have been sacked from power.

The Obedient Movement should prepare for post election activities as the new government comes out with its programmes and policies. It is expected that the Movement will sustain its tempo and support for their candidate, Peter Obi as he battles to reclaim his mandate through the court of law. Second, the Movement should extend its presence to every part of the country by engaging every Nigerian, particularly, the youths on their ideology of a new Nigeria where power really belongs to the people and they can enjoy the benefits of governance. Third, they should begin to mobilize early for 2027 in case their candidate loses in court. If in less than 12 months in existence they were able to give the two major political parties a good run for their money, early preparations for the next round of elections would certainly enable them emerge victorious. Fourth, they should lobby the electoral management body to introduce a more manipulation-proof electronic voting machine to put an end to manipulation of votes. Smartmatic is an electronic voting machine that is manipulation proof. For many years now, Brazil has deployed this machine in her elections and it has lead to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections in that country (Smartmatic, 2012). A new Nigeria is possible.

Recommendations

The Obidient Movement has brought in fresh air to the political landscape in Nigeria. Some old time politicians have been sent into retirement with the emergence of this Movement. Based on the foregoing, we make the following recommendations
1. That the Movement should build on the enormous goodwill of the Nigerian masses to become a formidable force in the 2027 general elections

2. That the Obidient Movement should sustain the tempo of its activities across the country even after the general elections to keep the elected office holders on their toes

3. That the Group should establish strong presence in every part of Nigeria to ensure a holistic restructuring of the Country leading to the emergence of new crop of leaders committed to the provision of the dividends of good governance.

4. That the Movement should go into alliance with other likeminded groups to wrest power from the present crop of elected public office holders

5. That the Group should propagate the ideologies that would become their operational guide in their engagement with Nigerians

6. That they should establish diasporan branches to mobilize human and material resources from members residing outside the Country

7. That they should form a formidable opposition to any government that retains power until 2027.

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