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NIGERIAN POLITICIANS AND LANGUAGE USE DURING POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS: A STUDY OF SELECT SPEECHES

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ABSTRACT
This essay appraised linguistic features in selected utterances of some prominent and leading Nigerian politicians during political rallies held between October and December, 2022. These utterances, which serve as data for this paper were extracted from some Nigerian tabloids like NaijaNews.com, Opera News, Politic.nigeria.com, RealMedia, Vanguard News, Voice of the People (VoP) and www.thisdaylive.com. In linguistics, utterances are viewed as unit of speech. The significant meaning of speech, therefore, embeds in the utterance which may provide a basis for social positions and further interpretative actions or decisions by the listener. The data for this study were eleven (11) purposively selected excerpts collected from some Nigerian media outfits. The selected data were appraised and analyzed from the linguistic perspective of John Langshaw Austin’s speech act theory, although other linguistic insights are gleaned from other speech act analytic scholars. The speech theory of John Langshaw Austin emphasizes on meaning embedded in an utterance. His speech act is interested in what the speaker’s or the writer’s intention is, and what he or she does with words but not necessarily the meaning of words within the utterance. The essay revealed that political rally utterances are purposeful utterances laced with vituperations, repetitions, and choice codes meant to persuade and manipulate the electorates against their perceived opponents. These social political attributes, negative in the manner of approach, present contemporary Nigerian politicians as desperados whose intentions are to grab political power by all means. Therefore, the essay recommends constructive criticism and politeness in political rally utterances when doing things with words in order to reduce and curb unnecessary political hatred, social battery, democratic mayhem, oppositional killings and anarchy caused by unethical political utterances.

KEYWORDS: Words, Linguistic features, Political utterances, Nigerian political rally, Media outfit

INTRODUCTION
In Nigeria, time for politics and its attendant campaigns and rallies, is always a time held in apprehension, palpable fear, uncertainties, insecurity and on many occasions, outright elimination of political opponents, often regarded as arch enemies. This is
because to an average Nigerian politician, politics is not a means for service, but a means to financial and material ends. Politics is, thus, a do-or-die affair to the Nigerian politician where the winner takes all. Paradoxically, interesting political manifestations, especially within the domain of language take place within this period as well. Nigerian Politicians always have a way with words which are often expressed, rightly or wrongly, positively or negatively.

This dynamic use of words is what the writer has referred to in this essay as “doing things with words”. Words function within the domain of language and the right or wrong choice of words can go a long way in making or marring a people. In order to find out how Nigerian politicians do things with words and their true intentions, this study examine their language use to determine what it conceals and undertakes an analysis of eleven (11) purposively selected excerpts of prominent and leading Nigerian politicians collected from NaijaNews.com, Opera News, Politic.nigeria.com, RealMedia, Vanguard News, Voice of the People (VoP) and www.thisdaylive.com. These excerpts were then appraised and analyzed from the linguistic perspective of John Langshaw Austin’s speech act theory, although other linguistic insights were gleaned from other speech act analytic scholars.

Language, as an instrument of communication, has resources that penetrate into humanistic realities, that is to say, an enlightening force that can promote positive or negative developments. Perhaps this is why Arthur Koestler observes that “wars are not fought for territory, but for words. Man’s deadliest weapon is language. He is susceptible to being hypnotized by slogans as he is to infectious diseases. And where there is an epidemic, the group mind takes over” (https://quotefancy.com). Language use in Nigerian politics has certain characteristics which differentiate it from other varieties of languages.

A language used for political rally is a language in another language. This is due to its peculiarities as it is conditioned for reflex action in the minds of listeners. The language choice of Nigerian political actors is most time persuasive and manipulative so it can influence the opinions of the listeners or electorates just to get their support or change of attitudes. John Wilson identified political actors to be “politicians, political institutions, governments, political media, and political supporters operating in political environments to achieve political goals”(398). These politicians make use of linguistic resources in various ways to either achieve positive or negative political intent. Contemporary politicians make enormous use of linguistic strategies to achieve their aims. Modern politics could be described as a “set of activities designed to regulate human coexistence in a given social context through a prearranged establishment of a certain order. Such an order can only be guaranteed if a social group is able to acquire the power guaranteed by the exclusive use of force” (Fablo de Nardis, 2).

From this perspective, modern language use in politics could better be analyzed in its complexity. Judith Butler makes reference to a negative social intent of language from the point of view of its potential for complexity as “material interests …of the social system”(114). This analysis of language to reveal specific social intents and meanings created through situated use of evolving language and communication styles contrasts with dominant linguistic analysis postulated by Ferdinand de Saussure. The French critic decomposed langage (language) into a system of langue (language) and parole (speech), and accepts langue only as the concern of linguistics because parole was too multifarious, multi-dimensional, and multi-causal to lead itself readily to scientific analysis. Valentin Voloshinov, however, criticized Saussure’s approach by stating that such a concept of langue does not correspond to the actual appearances of language in the world, which is a constantly evolving set of uses within particular situations. The only place such an abstract construction of a langue could actually exist would be in the
consciousness of an individual, but that individual when confronted with an actual communicative situation adapts and improvised to convey a meaning directed toward the addressee (see Voloshinov, 85).

To further buttress his point of argument on purposeful use of language he said that, “what is important for the speaker about a linguistic sign is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign”(Voloshinov, 68). Thus, the listener’s task to comprehend the linguistic sign does not basically amount to recognizing the form used but the contextual meaning in the speaker’s utterance. Modern Nigerian politicians make use of coded and unethical violent language through force just to achieve their material interest of winning more votes so as to emerge overall winners in every electioneering year.

**Language and Discourse**

For a fruitful appraisal of political rally utterances, it is important to understand the meaning of utterance as it relates to the notions of language and discourse. What really would one consider to be a discourse? In very simple and concise explanations, a discourse is simply a conversation; either among people, an address to a group of people even when there is no immediate verbal interactions, a self-dialogue, or a written representational text without any oral speech. In linguistics, discourse is a unit of language longer than a single sentence, referring to spoken or written language in social contexts. Norman Fairclough explains that discourse could be “used for different types of language used in different sorts of social situation”(3).

John Wilson notes that discourse “takes a look especially at word choice (connotation, euphemism, and loaded words), utilizing of functional systems in different ideologies, use of pronouns and how they are used to describe the responsibility of political actors, and some other discursive elements such as metaphors and speech acts”(410). Valentin Voloshinov, in his assertion on language and verbal discourse, maintains that “we do not need overt words to work in language, and that an extra-verbal situation plays an important role in communication” (86).

To Mikhail Bakhtin, language and culture are to be understood as living discourse, and not as formal systems, hence “the living unit of discourse is the utterance, …an unrepeatable event of interaction of different voices …that responds to other utterances …that implies an evaluative stand towards the voices involved in the interaction”(90). He further explains that, “each utterance (which) refutes, affirms, supplements and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account” (91). In this regard, Voloshinov opines that, “the word is oriented toward an addressee. …a two sided act… the product of reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee” (85-86).

This view on utterances between the speaker and the listener, depending on the discursive situation, may bring about a transformation in the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the listeners. To this end, Bakhtin ties his addressivity’s determination of utterance structure to genre, which enacts recognizable and familiar roles, relationships and interactions: “each speech genre in each speech area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre” (95). It is pertinent to state here that utterances express needs, character, purposes, thoughts and social presence of an individual as well as discourse which is applicable to both spoken and written language used for any series of speech events wherein successive utterances hang together.
Theoretical Clarification

In utterances, whether oral or written representations, meanings are deciphered contextually and deduced logically by the listeners or readers as they construe intent in each other’s uttered words. There are many features in utterances, and these include paralinguistic features like facial expressions, gestures and posture, prosodic features like tone of the voice, stress and intonation, and ellipsis that give room for the listener or reader to insert the missing words to fill in the gaps through their logical deductions in spoken or written language. These features are forms of communication that do not involve words but are added around an utterance to give meaning.

John Searle, in his book, *Speech Acts*, attempts to domesticate the social and historical unruliness of speech acts into a rational order. From his speech acts approach, these illocutionary points can be achieved in an utterance of speaker’s propositions; assertive, commissive, directive, declaratory and expressive illocutionary points. In his approach to the study of language and speech acts, Searle sees the integrity of locutionary act as a place where logic holds sway in the representation of things. He introduces a concept which he calls “the background”(33). This concept of ‘the background’ opens up the possibilities of variation of human experience of the formal representation in language.

John Langshaw Austin’s Speech Act Theory emphasizes on meaning embedded in an utterance. His speech acts is interested in what the speaker’s or the writer’s intention is, and what he or she does with words and not necessarily the meaning of words within the utterance. His speech theory identifies three acts performed by the speakers during discourse. And these are locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. He distinguishes between locutionary meanings and illocutionary that border on the action aspect of the utterance and the representation of affairs, which is the semantic meaning of the utterance. He views representation as a speech act which is dependent on the local construal of conditions, social positions and interactive trust. Hence, he declares, “the total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaging in elucidating”(148). One can therefore, assert that, the actual intention of a speech embeds in an utterance. This is in tandem with his doctrine of ‘performatives’ and ‘constative utterances’ which is also regarded as ‘conventional consequence’. His perlocutionary speech act captures the speech action of the speaker, which is the pragmatic content of the utterance. This speech act highlights on psychological consequences of persuasion, conviction, enlightenment, and inspiration in utterances.

Evaluating from the two speech acts theories and analyses, John Langshaw Austin’s postulations better suit the human social systems and its actual representation of affairs where people communicate, interact and make sense out of one another’s words emanating from histories, and situations for purposes at hand without rigorous calculations and logical evaluations but relying on their experiences and situated construal of meaning. This study adopts John Langshaw Austin’s Speech Act theory in the linguistic appraisal of selected political utterances in the course of Nigerian political rallies in the year 2022. The selected data will be appraised from the following perspectives; vituperative utterances, repetition, and choice code.

Vituperative Utterances

Vituperation is an abusive critical language, a laceration of some sort used to express bitter resentment towards another. It is seen in both oral utterances and written representation of utterances. It contains a defaming and inciting intent which is directed to a person or a group of people, in the case of our study, political opponents or other
political parties. Verbal abuse has become a common speech characteristic of many Nigerian politicians aspiring for positions in the nation’s politics. During political rallies, politicians make use of intemperate, abusive, unguarded and violent statements that are full of hate or insults. Their utterances, most times, are full of agonistic name-calling and harsh criticism: while some of these utterances are mild, others are out-rightly devastating. An example of a mild vituperation is seen in the excerpt below from a political analyst, Rufai Oseni of Arise TV’s Morning Show who felt insulted by the speeches of APC’s Presidential Aspirant, Ahmed Tinubu:

(i) A political surrogate used a TV platform to abuse me. They forgot I was their regular unpaid business guest for so many years and I did it with joy to deepen conversations in the media space. *(Opera News, December, 13th, 2022)*

The term, ‘political surrogate’, from the extract above is a highly provocative metaphor with a negative connotation. This agonistic name-calling is with a well calculated intention of the speaker to defame his opponent’s character. This unguarded utterance, made due to political rivalry just to demean an opponent, may incite social violence and democratic mayhem among political parties as this is a clear evidence of character defamation. Other examples of statements considered under vituperations are:

(ii) It will be a disgrace to mention the name of Labour Party presidential candidate, Peter Obi. The wrong statistics from Obi are not what Nigeria currently needs,… *(NaijaNews.com, Friday November 26th, 2022)*

(iii) Nobody wants to associate with a drug baron, terrorist, or thief because it is truly a disgrace. Obi is an anointed candidate and Tinubu’s mouth is not holy enough to call him. *(NaijaNews.com, Saturday November 27th, 2022)*

The above excerpts from the APC’s Presidential Aspirant, Ahmed Tinubu tagged (ii), and that of the LP supporter, Kenneth Okonkwo tagged (iii) are, no doubt, outright insults and fall within the realm of harsh vituperations. In the first excerpt, tagged (ii) the expressions ‘a disgrace’ and ‘wrong statistics’ are violent statements full of insults. The Labour Party’s (LP) Presidential Aspirant’s candidature is seen as ‘a disgrace’ and his ideas as ‘wrong statistics’ that will cause great damage to Nigeria if he is voted for. The speaker’s use of this highly uncouth, unethical and violent language deliberately employed to pull his opponent down has an illocutionary intention which is to make the electorates reconsider the choice of their candidate. The statement in line two of the same excerpt, that is, ‘the wrong statistics from Obi are not what Nigeria currently needs’ is a purposeful attempt to discredit the aspirant and to influence the social positions and interactive trust of Nigerians on Peter Obi. The central meaning that embeds in this utterance is that the LP presidential candidate is unsuitable and unfit for his aspired position. By the speaker’s perception and interpretation of the LP presidential candidate’s construal of conditions, the opposition presents him to his audience as someone who has no capacity to bring about the much needed improvement in the politics and economy of Nigeria and by this implication he should not be voted for. This is in line with Valentin Voloshinov’s assertion that, “the word is oriented toward an addressee… a two sided act… the product of reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee” (85-86).
However, these utterances can be perceived as icons of desperation by the speaker.

The second excerpt, tagged (iii) above is full of unguarded verbal abuse and harsh criticism of the opponent’s character—‘nobody wants to associate with a drug baron, terrorist, or thief’. This kind of abusive utterance could be appraised as libelous and very unconstructive with the social intent to discredit the opponent even though such an utterance may carry some elements of truth. Gary Morson explains that “each utterance (which) refutes, affirms, supplements and relies on others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into an account” (91). This utterance may bring about a transformation in the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of the listeners towards the political aspirant based on the unconstructive social account uttered. Name-calling and any other inflammatory statements may lead to a lack of trust or closeness to political opponents as well as cause depression or traumatization if not checked. Also, this may birth factions and even lead to killings of political opponents. Criticism puts every unit of social system in order but this must be done constructively to avoid mayhem and casualty. The statement in line two of the second excerpt, ‘Obi is an anointed candidate and Tinubu’s mouth is not holy enough to call him’ is based on exaggeration and sarcasm. The speaker’s pragmatic intention is to hurt the feelings of their opponent as well as ridicule and undermine him. The extract below from an aggrieved APC’s supporter, who felt Adams Oshiomole, also an APC member should not have consented to coming to commission anything in a PDP State, has similar social intent to discredit the opponent:

(iv) Sir, it is disheartening to note, that anytime these disgruntled leaders of the party, with anti-party activities running in their veins, which is their stock in trade, visit Rivers State, they will openly make condemnation and scurrilous remarks, thereby demoralizing the spirited and concerted efforts of APC members in Rivers State, all in an attempt to please Governor Nyesom Wike, their pay-master… They must stop talking trash and campaigning against APC candidates in Rivers State because they want to over-rich themselves…

(NaijaNews.com, Tuesday November 16, 2022)

The excerpt tagged (iv) above shows immensely a purposeful and politically-based utterance with the sole objective to incite hatred and provoke social violence. The name-calling- ‘disgruntled leaders’ and ‘their pay-master’- all have negative political connotation and intent. The rhetorical image, ‘these disgruntled leaders of the party” and “anti-party activities running in their veins … must stop talking trash and campaigning against APC’ is a metaphor used as a warning to prevent possible crisis that might affect the stability of the All Progressive Congress (APC) as a political party. Another clear evidence of verbal abuse and name-calling is seen in the excerpt (v) below;

(v) …politics is now a deliberation of lies and stupidity…

(Voice of the People (VoP) FM, December 27, 2022, in Opera News

The utterance above is a clear verbal abuse and attack on the political class for their conducts and the general perception of the masses on contemporary Nigerian politics.

Repetition

Repetition is a natural phenomenon employed to perform diverse functions in interactional discourse. It involves intentional or purposeful use of equivalent syntactic constructions to create rhetorical effect. This rhetorical strategy employed by politicians
during political rallies manifests in some repeated words, phrases or sentence forms like parallelisms and meaning (semantic repetition) as strategies for emphasis and reinforcement. The use of repetition also adds clarity to utterances, as well as highlights the obvious and expresses annoyance in utterances. Political utterances are also distinguished by a definite cluster of linguistic features. The extract below demonstrates the employment of repetition and simplicity in utterances:

(vi) I am an Igbo man and we train people to trade.
    When we complete the training of apprentices,
    we settle them to join us in the same trade.
    That’s where I am. He (Atiku) settled me and
    I am doing the same ‘trade’ with him. We are
    not quarrelling (Politic.nigeria.com., Dec 6th, 2022).

A number of words from the above excerpts like ‘train, settle, trade, remain’ have been repeated to create emphasis. This strategic employment of repetition to emphasize an idea is known as ‘commoratio’. This is a rhetorical device in which the speaker deliberately dwells on the same point by repeating it using different words just for emphasis. Gleaned from another perspective, the emphasis on the word, ‘trade’, may also be intentional to give special significance to trading. In a way, the speaker may also be introducing or proposing another way of creating jobs to fight unemployment in Nigeria. The effect of the emotional content on the pragmatic aspect of discourse production is well employed in the usage of the intimate expression, ‘he (Atiku) settled me…. We are not quarrelling’. The intended message is to show decency and close relationship. Another extract that demonstrates the employment of emphatic strategy is:

(vii) Can I say that about the government of APC in Nigeria?
    I will be describing myself as a white man knowing fully
    well that I’m dark in complexion in saying that. There
    was the promise that insecurity will be a thing of the past,
    that corruption will be gone forever, that the economy, it
    was going to be $1 to #1. At the last count, it was
    #50 to $1. So assess that government, assess the inflation,
    assess what they have done in the area of insecurity, assess
    the quantum leap of corruption in this country.
    (RealMedia (via 50minds News), by Dr. Enikuomehin, December 27, 2022)

From the above extract, the word ‘assess’ has been repeated severally. The speaker dwells on the word ‘assess’ to emphasize his point and perhaps draw the attention of the electorates to the unfulfilled promises from APC led government, hence they should not be supported in 2023 elections. Repetition was used as a rhetoric device here to reinforce key points. Thus, the speaker leaves the listener/electorates to ponder on the right choice to make come 2023. Its usage here undermines APC party’s intention of returning as a ruling party in 2023.

**Choice Code**

Politicians select specific linguistic strategies during political rallies in order to achieve their target goal which is to solicit votes from the electorates. They often times purposefully and deliberately select words that will misinform the electorates about their political rivals or opponents and their parties. Their choice of linguistic codes most times
is highly inciting and emotive so they can stir up feelings of listeners against oppositional parties and gain their support. Another important feature in political utterances is promises. Candidates of many political parties who desire elective offices also select linguistic codes that will make their promises convincing enough to their listeners in order to win votes. A typical example is seen in this manifesto:

(viii) We are here today to restate our five-point agenda, which includes to re-unite Nigeria, restore security, establish compulsory primary education and ensure our institutions of higher learning don’t go on strike, revive the Nigerian economy, develop our infrastructure, especially our roads, and build an effective and efficient rail system to ensure effective transportation. We will ensure our industries resume production and ensure jobs for youths…. Vote massively for PDP candidates in February and March elections in 2023 as this will change Nigeria’s situation for better (Vanguard News, October 23, 2022).

Politicians use terms and words in particular ways to attract support from the electorates. They make promises that border on the welfare of the electorates’ cardinal needs. In the excerpt above, for instance, there is the deliberate use of choice lexicons like ‘restate, re-unite, restore, establish, ensure, revive, develop, build, resume, change’. Each of these words has a specialized meaning, and it emphasizes political attitudes and opinions. Another instance where there is the employment of choice words deliberately fashioned to misinform the electorates is seen below:

(ix) I have been able to read the document, and I think I have to sound this: I don’t know what to call it but I think it is a general Nigerian problem, I think manifestos are just filled with statements of intent but not how (Voice of the People (VoP) FM, Newspaper Review, October 20, 2022, in Opera News)

The above utterance, apart from misinforming and misleading the electorates, is also meant to undermine and question the capability of the talked-about political party to function and the suitability of its presidential candidate for the exulted position. Also, there is a farcical underlying pragmatism which is meant to amuse and hurt the opponent and the oppositional party. The phrase, ‘it is a general Nigerian problem’ from the same excerpt is a blanket utterance that is demeaning and misinforming about Nigerians before other social circles who may have listened to this utterance. There is also the enormous employment of the first personal deictic, ‘I’ to convey its traditional singular notion and somehow as an emphatic strategy.

Another excerpt where there is the incorporation of choice codes to gain support from the voters is seen below:

(x) Don’t allow those who don’t know the way to victory and don’t understand the success of a nation to lie to you about Buhari or anybody…. Throw it back at them. Take your broom firmly and sweep Nigeria clean…. This party will sing victory. This country will experience progress. This office will be filled with joy come February 2023. We are confident and we don’t
The employment of figurative language technique is prominent in the above political rally utterance. The first line of the excerpt persuades the electorates not to listen to failures. The connotation of this utterance is that the listener should not give in to, or be swayed by oppositional political propaganda. The pragmatic aspect of discourse production is also well employed by the APC’s presidential aspirant, particularly when he said, ‘take your broom firmly and sweep Nigeria clean’. This manipulative choice of code portrays an act to be taken in order to accomplish an intentional purpose of the APC in the next line that ‘this party will sing victory’. The expression, ‘this party will sing victory’ is a metaphor. The speaker makes use of this metaphor to demonstrate his confidence of APC party winning the 2023 general election in Nigeria as he confidently maintained in the subsequent lines: ‘this country will experience progress. This office will be filled with joy come February 2023’. The word, ‘filled’, is also used metaphorically and the date, ‘February 2023’, is to remind electorates (Nigerians) of what their choice for 2023 will bring. This same strategy is also prominent in the excerpt below:

(xi) Nobody should take us for granted, I cannot understand how people who left APC a few days ago, few weeks ago are talking about PDP that we stayed to build. Even if anybody will talk about us, it cannot be these miscreants, it cannot be them. At the right time, I will talk about how Dogara and Babachir visited me and what we agreed on. What I don’t like in life is people without character, I can’t stand it

(Opera News, December 2, 2022)

The first part of the utterance, ‘nobody should take us for granted’, bears a certain level of legitimacy of being in control. There are elements of exaggeration and ridicule in the utterance, ‘I cannot understand how people who left APC a few days ago, few weeks ago are talking about PDP that we stayed to build’. This utterance is also sarcastically worded to point to the public certain intentional human actions undertaken by some anti-party members to damage the reputation of resolute and faithful party members. The modal strategies, ‘can, will’ and the antagonistic nominal referents, ‘these miscreants’ and ‘people without character’ and assertive verbs ‘take, talk’ bring out and strengthen the speaker’s pragmatic intentions to his listeners. It is also noted that the speaker frequently made use of the first person pronoun, ‘I’ and select other forms of it ‘we, me’ and objective ‘us’ in his utterances. The objective forms are largely influential in drawing attention to joint ownership of the party, an indication of functional democracy. By using the first person plural ‘we’ and ‘us’ the politician aligns himself with his listeners /audiences. This creates a binding force and a sense of unity.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This essay shows that language is employed in diverse ways to suit specific contexts and environment. Language use in political environment has specific features which are quite different from other domains. Nigerian politicians purposefully condition the language they use to serve their specific purpose.

From the political utterances selected for appraisal, the study has uncovered the use of the following linguistic features; vituperations which are frequently used by many
of the politicians during political rallies as utterances to demean and damage the image of opponents and oppositional parties in order to gain more votes. This linguistic feature appeared in the form of antagonistic abuse, insults, ridicule, sarcasm, unconstructive and provoking criticism, inciting disagreement and social protest. Another strategy employed by the speakers was repetition. This feature was used to emphasize political point, attitudes and opinion for contextual effect and to convince the listeners to do their ultimate bidding which is to massively vote for their party. Another important feature was the use of choice codes. Politicians’ choice of linguistic codes in Nigeria appeared to be informed of choice terms and words, manipulative and persuasive choice codes, misinforming and misleading codes as well as emotive codes so that they can stir up feelings in the minds of listeners in order to gain their support. Some of the speakers also made use of simple explanatory terms and words still to enforce their political intentions and solidify their political base.

This study recommends constructive criticism and politeness in political rally utterances when doing things with words in order to reduce and curb unnecessary political hatred, social and mouth battery, democratic mayhem, oppositional killings and anarchy caused by unethical political utterances. Politics is a game, not warfare.

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