
DEMOCRATIZATION AND ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

The current instability and socio-economic problems that have afflicted Nigeria so far can be traced to the country's flawed democratization and electoral processes. In it over five decades of independence, Nigeria is yet to witness an orderly and constitutional transition programme totally free from controversy. The country's history of democratization and electoral process since 1923 till date is shrouded in utter controversy. Elections, which ordinarily should guide citizens to choose those who should be their leaders, have most times been abused by overzealous politicians who crave for power at all costs. This study therefore seeks to investigate the contradictions and challenges inherent in the politics of democratization and electoral process in Nigeria. Based on available evidence on Nigerian politics, this paper argues that the implementation of its electoral programme and the win at all syndrome of the politicians have made the enthronement of a virile and an enduring democracy in Nigeria almost impossible.

Keywords: Democratization, Electoral Process, Political Intolerance, Rigging, Electoral Crises, Political Instability.

INTRODUCTION

From the colonial era till date, democratization and electoral process in Nigeria has been associated with numerous problems that are basically ethno-religious, socio-economic and political in nature. Also, the country's democratization process has been hampered several times by poor electoral process that ranges from rigging, thuggery, violence, lack of independence of electoral umpires and the judiciary, to poor political culture cum socialization among others. Elsewhere, it has been argued that Nigeria has never been a democratic country either during the colonial era or after; instead the country strove to be a democracy but was never¹.

This paper examines the problems and challenges inherent in the politics of democratization and electoral process in Nigeria in three segments. The first section situates democratization and electoral process in Nigeria in historical perspective by tracing the origin and growth of Nigerian political parties from 1923 to 2012. The second part discusses the missing links in the politics of democratization in Nigeria while the last stage of the paper examines the consequences of undemocratic electoral procedures and processes for Nigeria and her citizens.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES (1923-2012)

Historically, the process of democratization and elections in Nigeria in particular and Africa in general is linked to the nationalists' enthusiasm to get African countries liberated from the bondage of colonialism. This eventually culminated in the formation of various political parties in the continent. In the case of Nigeria, political parties {which are one of the essential instruments for democratizing any state²} were introduced into the country during the struggle for independence. Beginning in 1923 Nigerian political parties had very limited and self serving objective³; they only responded to the prevailing realities of the colonial administration. The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) that emerged in 1923 as the first political party in Nigeria was restricted to the contest of elections into the Lagos City Council. For almost ten years, the UNDP was able to dominate the electoral process in the country until the arrival of the National Youth Movement formed in 1934 which was able to break its monopoly⁴. It was not long however, before NYM was caught in the ethnic imbroglio⁵ of leadership tussle historically known as ' Akinsanya's crisis.'⁶

The crisis came as a result of struggle over who would occupy the Legislative Council seat that was vacant following the resignation of Dr. Kofo Abayomi, the president of the movement who was appointed to the Governor's Executive Council. The post was contested by Ernest Ikoli (an Ijaw man) and Samuel Akinsanya (an Ijebu Yoruba man), the duo were one of the key founding member of the organization. Ikoli was supported by Chief Awolowo while Akinsanya was backed by Dr. Azikiwe. Eventually, Ikoli was selected as Abayomi's successor. His "... selection...was interpreted by Akinsanya and the Ijebu Yorubas, and by Azikiwe and the Ibos who supported Akinsanya a manifestation of tribal prejudice against Ijebus and Ibos."⁷ Consequently, Dr. Azikiwe and his Ibos supporters as well as Akinsanya and some Ijebu left the party. This crisis "...became... the first manifestation of tribal tension that affected all subsequent efforts to achieve national unity and political integration in Nigeria."⁸

The crisis equally led to the formation of other political parties prior to Nigerian independence. All the parties formed during this period represented the interest of their ethnic regions. For instance, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) under the leadership of Dr. Nnamid Azikwe was dominated by the Igbos of south east, the Action Group (AG) formed by Chief Awolowo had majority of its members among Yoruba of south west, the Northern People Congress (NPC) had its strong hold in the north among the Hausa/Fulani while the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) that broke away from NPC had its base in Kano. From 1944 till the end of the First Republic in 1966, these parties dominated the political landscape of the country particularly in their respective regions⁹.

The resultant effect of the sectional or ethnic politics that ravaged Nigeria was that at independence in 1960 the country was effectively three nations, politically and economically.¹⁰ It should be noted the Sir Richard constitution of 1947 regionalized virtually everything in the country. Among other things the civil service, the judiciary, and the marketing boards which were the main earners of foreign exchange were regionalized.¹¹ It is little wonder therefore that regionalism played a very significant role in the fall of the first republic in 1966.¹² The First Republic had no choice than collapse as it did on January 15 1966 because the politicians were tribal, narrow-minded, reckless, corrupt and oppressors of minorities and political opponents.¹³

The political parties that dominated the political scene of Nigeria in the Second Republic (1979- 1983) were a reincarnation of those of the First Republic albeit dressed in different garbs. These parties included the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), the Unity Party of Nigeria and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP).¹⁴ The rest are the Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP), the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) and the Nigerian Advance Party (NAP). These reincarnated major political parties of Second Republic"... were rooted in chains of undemocratic values; ethnicity, corruption, greediness, narrow political participation among others"¹⁵ Instead of adhering strictly to the stipulation of the 1979 constitution that stated that membership of any political party shall be open to every citizen irrespective of his place of origin, sex or ethnic group,¹⁶ the major political parties preoccupied themselves with intense struggle for power that did not give room for political mobilization of the citizens.¹⁷ The Second Republic failed because the Nigerian political class refused to learn from the mistakes of First Republic. Series of political blunders committed under the parliamentary system in the First Republic were also repeated in the Second Republic. Generally, Nigerian effort at democratizing in this era failed "... because of the general political illiteracy of the political class as well as their propensity for greed, tribalism, regionalism, ethnocentrism and political intolerance."¹⁸

Nevertheless there was a fundamental change in the mode of party formation in the aborted Third Republic. For the first time in the history of party politics in Nigeria, the Military Government of President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida created and imposed two political parties namely the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) on the Nigerian political class. The two political parties were meant to change the orientation of political participation in the country.¹⁹ This experiment unarguably produced the first free, fair and credible election in the history of voting in Nigeria. There was a paradigm shift in the voting pattern of June 12, Presidential Election. For the first time, Nigerian electorates voted across regional, ethnic and religious lines. Unfortunately, the election that was believed to have been won by late Moshood K. Abiola (a southerner) was annulled by the IBB Military Government for alleged but unverifiable rigging and other electoral abuses allegedly associated with the June 12 1993 presidential election.²⁰ Following the cancellation of the election, however, Nigeria and Nigerians were back along the "... part of ethnic chauvinism, regional jingoism and religion bigotry".²¹

In May, 1999, Nigeria returned to civil rule and once again embraced multi-party democracy. Initially, three political parties- Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP) later known as All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD) were registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)²² for the 1999 election. Between December 2005 and February 2006, the number of registered political parties in the country increased to 33. As at February 2012, the number of registered political parties in Nigeria was 57. However, the dominant and most popular ones out of these numerous parties presently were the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Political Change (CPC), the All Peoples Grand Alliance (APGA) and the Labour Party. Naturally, one would think the increase in the number of political parties in Nigeria would open up political space and offer Nigerians the freedom to choose which of the parties to align with. But it was not to be; the politicians of that era still behaved like their counterparts in the immediate post independent era. Vote rigging, ballot box snatching, carpet crossing among others marred all the elections in 1999 for democratic opportunities and development of the country. This trend is, “...not unconnected with the poverty of ideology that characterized Nigerian parties...”²³ Lack of strong political ideology and party discipline on the part of Nigerian political parties and their operators is responsible for the many cases of carpet crossing in the country. Nigerian political parties are ideologically barren or blinded and that accounts for the series of ‘political prostitutions’ as manifest in the many defections that were witnessed and continue to be seen in Nigeria’s political horizon. Also, politicians have also demonstrated the zeal to register more political parties not necessarily because they have alternative programmes that can improve the lot of the Nigerian masses but because of the annual grant they receive from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC. This is another device the Nigerian politicians use to get their share of ‘national cake’.

THE MISSING LINKS IN THE POLITICS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN NIGERIA

The root of the decadence in the democratization dates back to the colonial period. The nationalists, either in Nigeria or elsewhere in Africa made one fundamental error in their struggle to decolonize and democratize their respective countries. They did not allow mass participation in the political emancipation of their countries. In the words of Frantz Fanon

“the overwhelming majority of nationalist parties showed a deep distrust toward people of rural areas...”²⁴ The nationalists with intents and purposes to monopolize political power did not associate with the peripheral areas in the scheme of political participation.²⁵ Power was much concentrated at the centre to the detriment of rural dwellers.²⁶

This seeming unpatriotic action of the early nationalists (in Nigeria’s case) laid the faulty foundation on which the subsequent efforts at democratizing the country were built upon. Their action also marked the beginning of over concentration of power at the centre and the elitist type of democracy Nigeria is having today. In the process of democratization, there should be genuine efforts to allow the people the right to participate in politics. Sadly, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. From pre-independence till date, Nigerian politicians had done nothing concrete to mobilize the masses with a view to bringing political awareness to the grassroots. Politics and its attendant benefits were regarded as hereditary by Nigerian politicians. Bringing political activities to the periphery was hated and discouraged during the nationalists’ era.²⁷ The absence of popular participation in the political process is one of the greatest problems of democratization in Nigeria.²⁸

Also, the interplay of power and forces in Nigeria’s effort at democratization raises a fundamental question about popular political participation. How free, fair and credible were all the elections conducted in Nigeria in the past? It is widely believed that if election must sustain the development of democracy it should be seen to be free, fair and credible.²⁹ As far as Nigeria is concerned, virtually all the past elections conducted in the country were marred by irregularities. Few exceptions to this generalization however, are the June 12, Presidential Election and the 2011 General Election that were adjudged to be free and fair to some extent by both local and foreign election observers. In terms of aiding the process of democratization, the general elections of the First and Second Republics as well as the elections of 2003 and 2007 left much to be desired. The events of these elections are still fresh in our memory. “In each case, the entire electoral process, starting from the passage of the electoral law ...the registration of voters, to the conduct of the election itself were all geared towards denying the people the right to participate in politics.”³⁰

What then can we say about the state institutions that were saddled with the responsibility of conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria? Did the electoral umpire and others security

agents like police and army live up to expectations? The answers to these questions are in the affirmative. They were all found wanting in one way or the other and seen as. "...tools in the hands of the ruling party in preventing the majority of Nigerians from participating in the electoral process."³¹ Omodia also corroborated this claim in his work entitled "Elections and Democratic Survival in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria". According to him, "...the electoral body is not independent. This has been defined in relation to the manner in which the electoral body had conducted elections in a way that advantaged the party in power through poor planning, the devices of excluding electorates from voting in the places considered to be the stronghold of oppositions, through inadequate supply of voting materials, or late arrival of electoral officers to polling stations."³² In addition to this, the security agents are veritable tools in the hands of incumbent powers in intimidating their political opponents or perceived enemies.

The roles played by the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) during the Second Republic and the Independent National Electoral Commission INEC under Maurice Iwu attest to these facts. For instance, the general elections of 1983 were marred by widespread irregularities. In the said election, the electoral officers under the leadership of Victor Ovie Whisky were accused of rigging the results in favour of the National Party of Nigeria, the ruling party. Similarly, the results of 2007 general elections conducted by Maurice Iwu were roundly discredited due to his open fraternity with the leadership of the federal government that appointed him. Indeed, Nigerian electoral body under the two electoral umpires suffered credibility crises; they were accused of partisanship and of hobnobbing with the people that appointed them. The consequential effects of lack of free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria are enormous. First, it threatens the democratic process and democratic survival of the country. Second, it raises the question of legitimacy and its attendant crisis in Nigeria's democratic experiments of the Second Republic under Shagari's regime and the Fourth Republic under Obasanjo and Yar'Adua administrations. Consequently, "...peoples' vote seems not count in determining who governs as elections are rigged or its outcome determined before the poll."³³

Another disturbing factor in the democratic process in Nigeria is the way and manner people are organized in the different political parties that have existed in the country. Observers of

Nigerian political parties have noticed that the process of democratization in the country is eroded by the level of participation of people.. Logically, “political parties should be the foundation and building block of the process of democratization, (however), the nature and character of dominant political parties in Nigeria threatens the whole process.”³⁴ At the expense of the principle of freedom of participation, the Nigerian political parties have been hi-jacked by a few cabals.

The absence of popular participation in the democratic process of Nigeria has been caused largely by highly placed Nigerians including retired top military officers, policemen, paramilitary agencies and government contractors who operate as political godfathers.³⁵ This group of individuals buy political space where people are supposed to participate in the decision making process. In Nigerian political parlance, these cabals are called ‘political godfathers’. Because of their enormous wealth and influence, they personalize political power which ordinarily should belong to the people and ought to be institutionalized. With the assistance of state institutions like the police, army and the electoral body, they turn their different parties or states into personal estates. They determine nearly everything that happens in the parties or states. They are the ‘king’s makers’. These godfathers arrogate to themselves powers to decide for the people thereby threatening the democratic process in the country and equally denying the people the right to participate in politics.³⁶

The political drama between late Lamidi Adedibu and Raseed Ladoja’s regime in Oyo State, the abduction saga between Chris Uba and Chris Ngige in Anambra State and the imposition of Bukola Saraki and his sister, Gbemisola Saraki on the people of Kwara State by their father, Senator Olusola Saraki attest to the hi-jack of Nigerian politics by the political godfathers. These moneybag politicians end up producing for Nigeria and Nigerians mafia governments and leaders that are ‘... infested with power drunk, self-seeking, ideological-barren,...scarcely ever elected by the people...(and) those to rule are clearly predetermined and chosen even before elections takes place.’³⁷

CONSEQUENCES OF UNDEMOCRATIC ELECTORAL PROCEDURES AND PROCESSES IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

So far it is clear that the democratization process in Nigeria is sloppy and haphazard and produces a government that hardly attends to the yearnings of millions of Nigerians. The kind of democracy so far produced by these faulty democratic processes tends to promote inequality rather than equality in the Nigerian society. How then can we have genuine democracy that will engender development “...in a country where citizens are grossly unequal in wealth and the poor who invariably the majority, are dependent on the wealthy (?).”³⁸ The country’s democratic project is yet to produce a responsible and accountable leadership that would ensure good governance in Nigeria. Nigerian political elite without exception, have insatiable urge to steal from the commonwealth and leave the people more impoverished.³⁹ Nigeria is a nation where corruption thrives. The records of Transparency International and Human Rights Watch (2007) are replete with cases of public treasury looting by Nigerian political office holders. Transparency International in particular listed Nigeria as one of the most corrupt countries in the world in 2007.⁴⁰

Surprisingly, the Nigerian legislatures that should check the abuse of power by the executive and corrupt politician have failed abysmally. The lawmakers are inefficient and ineffective. This should not be surprising since members of the States and National Houses of Assembly in Nigeria are products of corrupt and undemocratic procedures and processes. Rather than enhance good governance through enactment of good laws, the Nigerian legislatures have been pre-occupied with how to amass personal wealth at the expense of millions of Nigerians. Indeed the activities of Nigerian legislatures over the years have been to subvert rather than promote democracy and good governance.⁴¹ Also the Nigerian judiciary has also demonstrated transparent lethargy in stemming the rising wave of corruption in the country due largely to the fact that it is not financially independent of the executive. The role of judiciary as the last hope of common man is being undermined by different Nigerian governments either through inducement, cajoling and intimidation. In essence, “the judiciary in Nigeria to a large extent is subject to the whims and caprices of the executive arm.”⁴²

The persistent and endemic nature of corruption in Nigeria has crippled the provision of social infrastructures like basic health and educational services as well as good road networks, portable water and stable power supply etc. The high level of corruption in Nigeria has also engendered unprecedented level of poverty in the country. Because of the corrupt

nature of self serving politicians, Nigeria has the largest number of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa. A recent report by the World Bank showed that about 70.8 % of Nigerians live below the poverty line of \$1 per day.⁴³ The unimaginable level of poverty in Nigeria has made the vast majority of the Nigerian populace vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by the political class.⁴⁴

The wave of corruption in Nigeria also accounts for the country's high youth unemployment resulting in youth restiveness and its concomitant general insecurity and high crime rate in the country. Militant activities in the Niger Delta area, kidnapping cases in the south east, the activities of 'area boys' and robbery cases in the southwest and Boko Haram menace in the north are clear reactions of unemployed Nigerian youths to bad governance in the country. Worse still, nearly all the poverty alleviation programmes introduced by the various administrations in the country have collapsed in the process of doing so. These poverty reduction programmes include Olusegun Obasanjo's Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), the Green Revolution (GR) by Alhaji Shehu Shagari and Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida's Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), the Peoples Bank and Better Life for Rural Women (BLP). Similarly there was Sanni Abacha's Family Support Programme and more recently the ongoing National Poverty Eradication Programme which was created by the Olusegun Obasanjo's civilian administration in 1999.. All these programmes have "failed to achieve their founder's vision because of gross mismanagement and rampant corruption."⁴⁵

Other effects of bad governance include "incessant religious crisis, the persistent ethnic and sectional conflicts, separatist movements and gross social, economic and political instabilities and deepened legitimacy crisis."⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

The numerous ethno-religious, social-economic and political crises that have been the bane of the Nigeria state, largely emanate from poor democratic and electoral processes. The controversy and crisis generated by poor conduct of elections in Nigeria calls for sober reflection. However, making the electoral process transparent should be the starting point of the struggle against bad leadership in Nigeria. To achieve this, we suggest that the power to

appoint the chairman of the electoral body should be vested in a body other than the president. We also recommend the following institutions namely the Nigerian Judiciary, the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), representatives of each political party and members of civil society organizations to be represented on the body. This measure in our view will guarantee the independence of electoral umpire in the country. We equally support Omodia's suggestion for an Electoral Crimes Commission⁴⁷ to serve as watchdog on the electoral commission, the political parties and the politicians. Such a body should have the power to prosecute electoral offenders. Similarly we wish to agree with the recommendation of Alumona⁴⁸ for the exclusion of certain categories of people (i.e. the cabals identified earlier in this paper) from participating in the democratic process and governance in Nigeria. The ignoble role played by these cabals in Nigerian politics is a threat to the sovereign existence of Nigeria. Finally, we advocate for the introduction of civic and political education in Nigeria's School Curriculum from primary to the tertiary level. This will improve the political awareness of Nigerian masses to demand for their rights as well as demand accountability from their representatives whenever necessary.

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