

A CULTURE OF FAILED ELECTIONS: REVISITING DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA, 1959-2003

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Recibido: 4 Marzo 2009 / Revisado: 16 Mayo 2009 / Aceptado: 31 Mayo 2009 / Publicación Online: 15 Febrero 2010

Abstract: This paper gives a brief insight into the history of democratic elections in Nigeria since 1959. It proceeds to analyse the factors that have inhibited the growth of a stable democracy and the conduct of credible, free and fair elections in Nigeria. An attempt is also made to explain the meaning, nature and forms of electoral malpractices in Nigeria. The resultant crises and the way forward for the Nigerian polity have also been brought under focus. In all, the paper concludes that the lack of credible, free and fair elections in Nigeria has been responsible for the social, economic, and political stagnation of the country.

Keywords: Democracy, Elections, Electoral Process, Nigeria, Politics.

INTRODUCTION

The conduct of an election of internationally acceptable standard has remained a major challenge to the democratic process in Nigeria as much as it is all over the world. Even in developed countries, the task of ensuring that an election is credible, free and fair is still a daunting one. In Nigeria, the political class is believed to be making it practically impossible to conduct free and fair elections. However, not much thought is given to the fact that the problem possibly had been that of the method of electoral administration and supervision and other machinery of the electoral system. Whereas, other nations across the globe have tried to improve on the credibility of their election process, the experience in Nigeria is to the contrary; ours is a culture of failed elections. By definition, culture is a way of life; the attitudes and behaviour that are characteristic of a particular social group or organisation.¹ Therefore, when a particular development is recurrent and evident at every point in time it

could be safely described as a culture. Nigeria's electoral history since independence is fraught with failed elections, a recurring development that has gradually become a distinctive feature of the electoral system.

Historically, elections in Nigeria have been very violent and bitter. All elections so far conducted in the country were marked by serious problems ranging from vote rigging to electoral violence, voter fraud, intimidation, manipulation by electoral officers, falsification of election results, to mention but a few.² A noticeable consequence of this was that the wrong candidates usually emerge as winners of elections, a phenomenon that explains the nation's record of poor leadership, political stagnation, and economic backwardness. The conduct of a free and fair election is a major feature of democracy because it gives legitimacy to a government, which is indispensable for positive socio-political developments in any given society. It also enhances political mobilisation and participation of the electorate and tends to perpetuate a positive political culture in such a society.

At independence, expectations were very high regarding Nigeria's chances to develop rapidly and become a strong democratic nation in Africa. But this hope proved to have been misplaced as the political class lost bearing of the right direction and charted another course for Nigerian politics, a dangerous course which wrecked the First Republic, six years after independence, and resulted in the abortion of democracy at infancy in 1966 when the military stepped into politics.

The preoccupation of the political class at the eve of independence was to take over power and control the state.³ Consequently, it was not in the consciousness of the political elite to transform

the lopsided political structure inherited from the colonial master;⁴ rather they jostled to grab control of state power which would give them unfettered access to the economy and the wealth of the country. To this end, elections in Nigeria became a means of transferring political power, a political stratagem to remain in government and keep the reins of power. The political elite who have tasted political power are not always willing to relinquish power and lose control of the economy; hence, they believed elections must be won by all means in order to remain in power. This attitude, consequently, impacted on the electoral machinery and the processes of elections.⁵ This situation made Remi Anifowoshe to argue, in his assessment of political developments in Nigeria and Africa generally, that politics in post colonial states was a deadly and serious business and the ruling party will do anything possible to remain in power through the ballot box.⁶

As the political class gradually acquired wrong and dangerous political culture, elections in Nigeria became a “do or die” affair among the politicians. Election periods were usually battle times with an expected outburst of violence in different parts of the country, either due to electoral fraud or as a way to perpetrate electoral fraud.⁷ Unfortunately, all the machinery for the enforcement of law and order and maintenance of peace were all enmeshed in the network of electoral malpractices, thereby making the entire electoral process a fraud. Regrettably, defective electoral process and elections in Nigeria had led to the termination of democratic rule three times by the military. First, in 1966, the ill-fated democratic rule was truncated by a military coup, second, in 1983, by another coup d'état, and third, by a military takeover in 1993. It is worth mentioning at this point that at each point of military intervention, democracy in Nigeria was aborted, and Nigerians felt relieved from the clutches of the greedy politicians and pseudo democracy.

1. DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

It is a known fact that elections have meaning only in a democratic context, because it leads to the choice of decision makers by the majority of citizens. Thus, election can be defined as a decision making process through which a people choose some individuals to hold official offices, or as the mechanism by which modern democracy fills public offices at every level of government,

democracy is defined as a system of government in which the citizens of a state participate in decision making either by voting directly or by electing representatives to make decisions.⁸ It is the system of electing representatives into government through the ballot box; hence it has been described as the best form of government because it enables both the majority and the minority to have their say in governance and their rights and interests protected. Elections and democracy are therefore inextricably linked. A credible, free and fair election gives legitimacy to democracy and ensures a stable polity.

It must be stressed here that elections play a crucial role in the consolidation and sustainability of democracy, however, democracy cannot be reduced purely to elections. Various other political processes play an equally important role for democracy to subsist and be sustained. These include respect for human rights, citizen participation, constitutionalism, rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances, and the equitable distribution of national wealth to mention but a few. Taking cognisance of these broader dimensions of democracy, election nevertheless can be the primary inter-linkage between representative democracy and political accountability.⁹

Available records on the political history of Nigeria have shown that the greatest problem of Nigeria's democracy has been the issue of credible elections. Past efforts at sustaining democracy failed because of fraud associated with elections in Nigeria.¹⁰ It thus becomes imperative that for democracy to survive in Nigeria, a lot has to be done by the political class regarding the nation's electoral system which over the years has proved to be defective, weak, inefficient, and unable to guarantee the conduct of credible elections. Some of the challenges that usually confront Nigerians each time they move closer to an election are: first, can the political class which has at its disposal a vast repertoire of electoral fraud techniques, already used to frustrate the fundamental democratic rights of Nigerians to elect their leaders, organise a credible election? Second, is whether the electoral body charged with the responsibility to conduct and supervise the electoral processes in the country and the security agencies who are suppose to enforce law, maintain peace and order, and guarantee the security of voters and electoral officials during elections have the will and capacity to be independent and nonaligned? Although these challenges are not insurmountable, the political

class needs to demonstrate the capacity to organise credible elections and protect the exercise of democracy, because any democratic arrangement founded on fraudulent election does not have legitimacy.

Electoral fraud or malpractices are palpable illegalities committed with a corrupt, fraudulent or sinister intention to influence an election in favour of a candidate(s) by means such as illegal voting, bribery, cheating and undue influence, intimidation and other acts of coercion exerted on voters, falsifications of results, fraudulent announcement of a defeated candidate as winner with or without altering the recorded results. Thus, electoral fraud is an illegal interference with the process of an election to bring about a desired election outcome. The problem posed by this illegality stems more from its insidiousness, because it is perpetrated in utmost secrecy which effectively shields it from the prying eyes of election observers and the voting public.

The conduct of credible, free and fair elections is crucial to the future of democracy in Nigeria as well as to ensuring political stability. This is because the failure of the first three political dispensations in the history of the country can be traced to the inability of the political class to organise credible elections. Regrettably, elections from the first through the fourth republic were characterised by electoral malpractices. The political class exhibited high level of political indiscipline and freely perpetrated wide-ranging electoral illegalities and deep-rooted corruption that eventually led to the collapse of democracy, civilian rule, and the consequent emergence of military rule in Nigeria. The military overthrew both the First and Second Republics after heavily rigged and acrimonious second-consecutive elections took place in 1965 and 1983, respectively. The Third Republic under General Ibrahim Babangida was stillborn, as the 1993 presidential election was annulled. Nigeria, therefore, without mincing words has a history of failed electoral processes, which has engendered a number of socio-political problems in the country. A survey of elections in Nigeria since 1959 and the political situations it generated is subsequently discussed.

2. THE 1959 ELECTION

The history of election in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial period, precisely in 1922, when the Clifford Constitution for the first time introduced the elective principle into the political

system. This was sustained and improved upon by successive colonial regimes. In spite of the fact that the elective principle was sustained by the colonial regimes, it was not until 1959 that the out-going colonial administration inaugurated a special electoral body named the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) to conduct the 1959 elections and the first direct elections in the country.

Thus, Nigeria's political independence was ushered in by the December 12, 1959 general elections. At that time, twenty-six political parties were registered to contest the elections. Yet, a tri-regional party system reflecting the dominant ethnic group in each region had begun to emerge by common consent among the political leaders.¹¹ The three dominant political parties were the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) led by Sir Ahmadu Bello with its base and sphere of influence in Northern Nigeria, the Action Group (AG) led by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was dominant in Western Nigeria, and the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) led by late Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe was the leading political party in Eastern Nigeria. Other popular political parties included Democratic Party of Nigeria and Cameroon (DPNC), Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), Borno Youth Movement (BYM), and United National Independence Party (UNIP).

Beyond the symbols and slogans, ethnicity and religion were to play dominant roles in the outcome of the 1959 general elections. Although the turnout of voters for the election was low, it ushered in a new government at independence in 1960. The NPC and NCNC had to go into a coalition to form the Federal Government on 20th December 1959 in a ratio of 10 NPC ministers to 7 NCNC cabinet members since neither of the two political parties had the majority votes required to form a broad-based government. The AG led by Obafemi Awolowo formed the opposition in the parliamentary (Westminster) system of government.¹² Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the NPC emerged as the Prime Minister while Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe of the NCNC became the Governor-General of the Federation and later the first President of Nigeria¹³.

By 1960, when Nigeria became politically independent of Britain, the Tafawa Balewa administration set up a new electoral body, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC), which managed the immediate post-independence

federal and regional elections of 1964 and 1965 respectively. These elections were flagrantly rigged by the ruling Northern People's Congress (NPC) government headed by Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa. The results of the elections were rejected by the oppositions and consequently resorted to widespread violence including killing, arson, looting and destruction of properties, especially in the Western Region of the country.

3. 1964 AND 1965 ELECTIONS

From a multiparty structure which marked the 1959 pre-independence elections, Nigeria witnessed the emergence of a two-party system in the 1964 and 1965 elections. In their quest to appropriate power at the centre and dominate federal politics, the three dominant political parties in the 1959 elections sought alliances with the minority parties to form the two grand parties that contested the first post-independence elections of 1964 and 1965, namely the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) led by the NPC, and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), led by the NCNC and AG. Thus, the tone was set for the elections that seemed programmed by the political class to plunge the nation into crises.

Convinced that it would win if the elections were held in an atmosphere free from interference by ruling parties in the Northern Region and the Western Region, the UPGA spent most of its efforts denouncing what it regarded as the NNA intentions to rig the election in those regions. The election was postponed for several weeks because of discrepancies between the number of names on voting rolls and on census returns. Even then the UPGA was not satisfied and called on its supporters to boycott the elections. The boycott was effective in the Eastern Region, where polling places did not open in fifty-one constituencies that had more than one candidate running for office. In other constituencies in the region, UPGA candidates ran unopposed.

Nationwide, only 4 million voters cast their ballots out of 15 million who were eligible. The NNA had 198 elected candidates of whom 162 represented the NPC from the 261 constituencies returning results. After an embarrassing delay, President Nnamdi Azikwe agreed to ask Alhaji Tafawa Balewa to form a government with the NNA majority. The boycott had failed to stop the election, and in March 1965 supplementary elections were held in those areas in the Eastern Region and in Lagos where the boycott had been honoured. UPGA candidates were elected in all

these constituencies, bringing the NCNC/AG-led coalition a total of 108 seats in the House of Representatives. Thus, the UPGA became the official opposition.¹⁴

On the whole, the abuse of the electoral process and the intensity of the electoral violence which characterised the elections created constitutional crisis and undermined the legitimacy of the new civilian government. The socio-political crisis that emanated from this situation was exacerbated by the high rate of inflation and mass poverty, labour's demand for higher wages, and the Tiv tribe uprising in Northern Nigeria inevitably provided the pretext for the first coup d'état that aborted democracy on 15th January 1966 and brought the military into the political administration of the country. The constitution was suspended and all existing political institutions including the Federal Electoral Commission were dissolved to mark the end of the first republic.

4. THE 1979 ELECTION

The First Republic (1960 – 1966) collapsed like a pack of cards due to several factors which made it unworkable. First, politicians lacked the discipline required to make democracy work. Second, they failed to imbibe the political ethos that would have brought about a difference in the political struggle. Third, the Federal Electoral Commission was not seen as an impartial body and this caused the entire process to break down faster. In fact, it was for the above reasons that the coup of January 15, 1966 was welcomed by the larger public.

However, after the failed attempt at democracy in the first republic, the military, who had taken over power, thought it expedient to relinquish power to a civilian government in 1979. After having stayed thirteen years in government, the military lifted the ban on political activities on 21st September 1978. The then military Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, inaugurated a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) headed by a Lagos-based legal practitioner, Chief Rotimi Williams, to draw up guidelines for a Constituent Assembly. The final draft of the Constitution by the Assembly was adopted as the 1979 Constitution.¹⁵

The Constitution provided for an executive president, a Federal Senate and House of Representatives, state governors and state legislators. The government also established a Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) to

manage the electoral process and conduct elections. Some of the guidelines set out for political parties were intended to overcome the shortcomings of the first republic, hence to qualify for registration, a political party must demonstrate an effective nation-wide presence by having functional offices in 13 of the then existing 19 states. This was to ensure that the support base of the political parties cut across ethnic and regional lines, and to prevent the emergence of regionally, or ethnically-based parties. A second major electoral reform was that the person to be elected president must have the highest number of votes cast in addition to receiving at least, 25 percent of the votes cast in two-thirds of the 19 states.¹⁶ The 1979 Constitution introduced a system that was a clear departure from the parliamentary system of government operated after independence.

In this respect, based on the laid-down guidelines, FEDECO registered five political parties which satisfied registration requirements out of about fifty political associations that emerged for the purpose of the elections.¹⁷ The registered parties included Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP), People's Redemption Party (PRP) and Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP). However, apart from the symbols and slogans, it soon became obvious that the new parties were a reincarnation of the tri-regional parties of the First Republic. The same actors, manifesting tendencies that threw up deep-rooted ethnic sentiments, were back on the political arena in a fierce struggle for the control of the reins of power in the Federal Republic; even though a nineteen-state structure had emerged in Nigeria.

Manifestly, the formation of political parties, campaign activities, political participation, and voting during the 1979 elections were, by and large, designed along ethnic affiliation. Although the rules compelled political parties to make their interest and representation national, essentially most Nigerians queued behind political parties which identified with their ethnic regions. Thus, the Yoruba of the southwest lined up behind Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria, the Igbo of the southeast did same for Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the Nigeria Peoples Party, the Hausa-Fulani of Kano and Kaduna voted for Mallam Aminu Kano of the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), while the Kanuri of Bornu and other minorities of the Borno-Gongola axis massed behind Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim's Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP). The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) dominated Sokoto, Niger, Bauchi

and Kaduna states with strong affiliation in Kwara, Plateau, Benue and Gongola.¹⁸

However, the 1979 election has a reputation as free, fair and peaceful. It surprised many watchers of the Nigerian polity, particularly those who were cynical about the ability of Nigeria to organise a successful election for various stages of political governance in spite of the fact that the country was at its infancy in computer literacy. The 1979 election was unique because it was the first in a series of elections held successfully on the basis of mass participation and direct balloting since the 1964 and 1965 federal and regional elections both of which ended in controversy. Though, there was a local government election in 1976, it did not evoke mass participation and interest because the Nigerian electorate then did not attach much importance to the new local government structures. Also the Constituent Assembly of 1977 was conducted through local government representatives who constituted the electoral colleges. This election did not carry the people along as it did not involve mass participation in contest and voting.¹⁹

Although large-scale fraud was not noticeable in the 1979 elections possibly due to its suppression by the military government, the election was not crisis free. The Federal Electoral Commission released the list of registered voters on Wednesday, March 29, 1978 which indicated that a total of 47,433,757 voters were registered. However, the turnout of voters for the election was low; it ranged between 25 and 35 percent of the registered voters. Consequently, the large number indicated by the result of the elections is possibly an indication that the voters register must have been inflated.²⁰

Due to the crammed nature of the 1979 elections,²¹ some legislators scaled through successfully riding on their party leaders without the electorates knowing very well whom they voted for or what the aspirant stood for.²² Indeed, most voters only voted once or twice in the five elections that were slated to elect leaders. In the Presidential election, 16,846,633 votes were cast representing 34.64 percent votes. The NPN won 2/3 of the votes cast in 19 states of the federation. It also won 203 seats in the Federal Legislature and seven governorship seats, while the UPN led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo came second with 138 seats in the Federal Legislature and five state governors. Awolowo went to court to challenge the results of the elections. He alleged that the presidential election was rigged; besides the NPN

did not satisfy the two-third of all the states of the federation required by the constitution. However, after the Supreme Court had interpreted the knotty provisions of the constitution on what constitutes two-thirds of 19 states, Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the NPN was declared the overall winner of the presidential election having been adjudged to have satisfied the constitutional and geographical requirements. He assumed office on October 1, 1979 as President.²³

Although the NPN won the presidential elections with a two-third of votes cast in the existing 19 states at that time, it had only 38 legislative seats which made control of the central legislature difficult for the NPN led federal government. One month after its inauguration, the Presidency only had 20 of the 38 nominated Ministers confirmed by the National Assembly. The fear of the Presidency was confirmed when it had to go on a coalition with the NPP in order to receive majority support in the legislature. Similar situation existed in some states where governors were unable to secure the required majority for their party in the State Houses of Assembly, in such cases the state legislatures gave the governors tough times in confirming appointments and passing other bills.

From 1979 to 1983, Nigerians were subjected to a state of socioeconomic trauma by the misrule of the NPN led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Chief Obafemi Awolowo gave a vivid picture of the scenario when he said thus: The federal government is the source from which our material blessings are ordained by the Constitution to flow to the states and the people. But instead, it is the source from which our sufferings flow since independence in 1960. NPN bad governance led to over-dependence on foreign imports, decline in GDP, reliance on petroleum as the only source of foreign exchange earning. The consequence of an import dependent economy is unemployment and poverty, armed robbery and violence, lack of regard for ethical norms and the lack of fear of God.²⁴

The Nigerian people were not happy about the gross mismanagement of the economy by the ruling party. They thus became disenchanted with the regime and desired a change, and this came when the military struck again in December 1983 three months after the general elections.

5. THE 1983 ELECTIONS

All the political parties re-nominated their presidential candidates during the 1983 elections.

FEDECO registered one more political party, the Nigerian Advanced Party (NAP) with Barrister Tunji Braithwaith (the founder) as the presidential candidate. The 1983 elections was one of, if not, the most fraudulent elections in the history of elections in Nigeria in terms of the scale of electoral malpractices. The elections were bastardised by the misuse of the power of incumbency, money, and the politics of bitterness and intolerance inherited from the First Republic. The rigging was well pronounced and open; all the political parties rigged the election in their various spheres of influence.²⁵

The electoral body charged with the responsibility of managing the 1983 elections, FEDECO, proved to be highly incompetent and incapable of handling the elections. Officials of the commission played an active part in the irregularities and malpractices that characterised the elections. It was obvious from all indications that conducting the 1983 elections in a free and fair atmosphere was actually beyond the capacity of FEDECO, because less than two weeks to the compilation of the voters register nothing was done to show that the commission was serious with carrying out the exercise.²⁶

On many occasions, politicians made utterances that made it look certain that the elections were going to be another futile exercise. For instance, the leader of the NPN boasted before the elections that NPN would not only record a landslide victory, but a “moonslide victory,” meaning a total sweep of the polls. Umaru Dikko and Chief Adisa Akinloye, also openly declared that as far as they know, there were only two political parties in Nigeria: The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the Army. What this meant in effect was that only the NPN should win elections and if it loses, then it would bring in the military to take over the reins of government.²⁷

Before the election ballot boxes stuffed with ballot papers were discovered in people’s houses, while some were stolen from some polling booths. Judges, the police and other security operatives were not left out of the malpractice. A number of fraudulent elections were upheld by the Courts purely on technical grounds, however in a few cases the courts were able to reverse the election results as in the case of the Ondo State gubernatorial and some other local government elections of 1983. The 1983 gubernatorial election in Ondo State was hotly contested by Alani Omoboriowo and Chief Michael Ajasin. The votes of Alani

Omoboriowo representing NPN were inflated from 703, 792 to 1,228,981 while that of Chief Michael Ajasin of the UPN was deflated from 1,563,377 to 1,015,385. Expectedly, the illegality resulted in serious violence; houses were burnt and properties destroyed, supporters of the two political parties continued to clash until victory was returned to Ajasin.²⁸

The Police Force and other security operatives who were detailed to protect the citizens and ensure that everybody operated within the bounds of the law were themselves the law breakers. They became prejudiced and aided the massive rigging that characterised the elections of 1983. This prompted Oyediran, a renowned political scientist, to argue that “with such a partisan police force, it was practically impossible to hold free and fair elections in 1983.”²⁹ The various support given to the police by the government prior to the elections ensured that the police was on the side of the NPN. This was why the Police Force was cynically branded as “NPN Police Force.”³⁰ Against the background of the disputed electoral outcome, President Shehu Shagari began his second term in office. The violence that subsequently characterised the political landscape of the country, the economic mismanagement and a high foreign debt profile by the NPN controlled government, led to a military intervention in the country’s polity on 31st December, 1983. Traumatized Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief when General Muhammadu Buhari and the late Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon took over the reins of government promising Nigerians greater accountability.³¹ This singular event brought the Second Republic to an abrupt end.

6. ELECTIONS OF THE THIRD REPUBLIC

Between 1989 and 1993, Nigerians went through another rounds of election, however, it was obvious that the politicians have learnt no lesson from history. Although the elections of this period were adjudged free and fair, the process was indeed not credible. General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida through a palace coup d’état took over power from the regime of General Buhari in August 1985 and began a highly regimented transition programme to civil rule in 1986. He established a Political Bureau to recommend the basic philosophy that would guide the action of government in an envisaged Third Republic in July 1987. It is on record that the transition programme towards the establishment of the Third Republic was more elaborate and

deliberate. The goal was to prevent a recurrence of past mistakes.

The Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) under the leadership of General Babangida prevented most ex-politicians from participating in politics. The conditions set out for each party included a base in the “grassroots,” avoid ethnic politics, have sufficient personnel manning offices at all levels and have a clear and detailed positions on specific national issues. Finally, each political party was to pay a non-refundable fee of ₦50,000. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) established by the regime was to monitor the political associations which applied for registration, vet their applications and make recommendations to the Armed Forces Ruling Council, which in turn, was to approve only two parties.³²

On October 7, 1989, the AFRC rejected all the six political associations presented by the National Electoral Commission, charging them with bankruptcy of ideas, elitism, debilitating infighting, factionalism, ethnic and regional polarisation. It further accused them of being led by leaders who were surrogates of banned politicians. In their place, Babangida decreed into existence two government funded parties, namely the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which he directed to be “a little to the left” in ideological orientation and the National Republican Convention (NRC) which was directed to be “a little to the right.” Nigerians were directed to join either of the two political parties as equals since they had no “founders” and all members were “joiners”. Although this appeared to have solved the problem of money bags hijacking the political parties as it was the experience during the First and Second Republics; some politicians however refused to join as they derided the parties as “government parastatals.”³³

Late in 1990, local government elections were held across the country and elected council officials assumed office in January 1991. Also, at the state level, elections were conducted in 1991 and elected officials began functioning in January 1992, while the National Assembly elections took place in July 1992 but when the elected members assumed office they never had nor exercised full legislative powers. Everything went smoothly and the presidential election took place on 12th June, 1993 under a peaceful atmosphere,³⁴ and the results were collated and announced by National Electoral Commission. The election was generally considered to be free and fair, partly

because of the open ballot system adopted for the election. Chief Moshood Kashimawo Abiola of the Social Democratic Party had 57% of the votes cast and announced from 16 states.³⁵ Results from the remaining states were still being collated when the Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida, in a special broadcast on June 24, 1993 annulled the June 12, 1993 election, suspended the National Electoral Commission and discontinued the transition programme.

Providing justification for annulling the election, President Babangida argued thus: In view of the series of litigation pending in various courts, the federal military government is compelled to take appropriate steps in order to rescue the judiciary from intra-wrangling. These steps are taken so as to protect our legal system and the judiciary from being ridiculed and politicised both nationally and internationally. It is common knowledge and an indisputable fact that the last hope of all law-abiding citizens is a resort to the courts. Government would not fold its arms or despair in the face of this unfortunate and unwarranted situation which is fast eroding the esteem, honour and confidence with which the public holds the nation's judiciary....³⁶

General Babangida went ahead to state that he had ordered a stop to the various court litigations on the elections, particularly those concerning the June 12, 1993 presidential election. He also repealed Decree Nos 3, 52 and 13 of 1992 and 1993 which provided for the transition to civil rule programme.³⁷

Before the elections, there had been calls from individuals and unknown associations for an extension of military rule. On June 10, 1993, the Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) represented by one Abimbola Davies filed a case before an Abuja High Court that the presidential election be suspended on grounds of corruption going on in party politics. Justice Bassey Ikpeme granted the order that the National Electoral Commission be restrained from conducting the presidential election. It was revealed later that Justice Ikpeme's order was written by the then Justice Minister, Mr. Clement Akpangbo.³⁸ The court judgement received a wide-condemnation from both the Nigerian public and international observers.³⁹

The annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections led to series of protests organised and executed by the Campaign for Democracy (CD) led by the late Dr. Beko Ransome-Kuti and Olisa Agbakoba of the

Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO). As a result of the intensive protests mounted against the Babangida regime, he was forced to hastily hand over power to an unelected Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. In the third month of the ING, it was declared an illegal government by Justice Dolapo Akinsanya of the Lagos High Court when the late Chief M.K.O. Abiola filed a suit challenging the legality of the ING.

However, on November 17, 1993, like the swaying hyena and the restless fox, the late General Sani Abacha who was left in office as Minister of Defence by General Ibrahim Babangida did not surprise many as he shoved aside the interim government and dismantled the two political parties, the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention, thus beginning a new transition programme. But because of the strong opposition against the annulment of the June 12 presidential election, General Abacha quickly put in place a Constitutional Conference. General Abacha was able to manipulate decisions of the Conference as one third of the members were appointed by him. The Conference's attempt to fix an exit date for the military was aborted while the late Major-General Musa Yar' Adua was arrested on March 9, 1998 for charges of plotting a coup against the government because he suggested January 1, 1998 as a date for the termination of military rule in the country.

It was clear that the Abacha transition programme was only a strategy to succeed himself in power. Hence, in the bid to shed the army uniform for the civilian regalia, General Sani Abacha left no stone unturned including annihilating every opposition on his way. All the five 'Abacha parties,' namely, the United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), the Committee for National Consensus (CNC), the National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), the Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), and the Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM), all of which were described by the late Chief Bola Ige as five fingers of a leprous hand, and the National Electoral Commission Of Nigeria (NECON), were only acting out a written script by the military because the whole process was masterminded by the Abacha regime.

The elections conducted under the Abacha's transition programme suffered the same fate as earlier elections. As a matter of fact, because the late General Sani Abacha wanted to succeed

himself in office he manipulated the entire process to reflect his interest. Voter registration, which was a crucial phase of the transitional programme, ended in mid-February 1997, but the compilation of voters' lists was marred by irregularities. In the local government election conducted in 1997, the UNCP was the big winner, while the DPN came second. The National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), an opposition party that had been ruled ineligible to take part in the election, contested the validity of the election. According to NADECO, the parties that took part had no platform and were motivated only by a desire for power, with all of them supporting the military junta's programme.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, General Sani Abacha and his collaborators had identified all opposition to military rule and were bent on crushing opposition elements before transforming himself to a civilian president via a self-succession bid.⁴¹ Consequently, Chief M. K. O. Abiola was arrested in June 1994 by security operatives on the charge that he declared himself the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Subsequently, he was held in solitary confinement and prevented from communicating with the outside world, including his immediate family, as a means of forcing him to renounce the mandate given to him by the Nigerian people.⁴² Chief M. K. O. Abiola spent four years in detention and refused to renounce his June 12, 1993 presidential election mandate. General Abacha died on June 8, 1998 while Chief M. K. O. Abiola died in detention on July 7, 1998.

7. THE 1999 ELECTIONS

General Abdulsalam Abubakar succeeded General Sani Abacha as Head of State and chose to commence another transition programme. He announced May 29, 1999 as the terminal date for the military to hand over to a democratically elected government. He also announced the cancellation of the flawed transition programme put in place by the late General Sani Abacha. The G34, a group of politicians which included ex-civilian governors and top politicians called for the scrapping of all the previous political parties. General Abdulsalam Abubakar constituted an Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which set guidelines for political parties to participate in the new electoral process. Part of the guidelines indicated that parties must accept the principle of power sharing and rotation of key offices and must exist in functional terms in at

least 24 states of the federation.⁴³ Furthermore, parties were required to pay a non-refundable deposit of ₦100,000 and maintain fully staffed and well equipped offices. The net effect of these conditions was that out of the 25 parties which applied for registration only three met INEC's registration criteria. These were the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All People's Party (APP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Others not registered by INEC include Agenda'99 – Masses Democratic Party of Nigeria, All Nigeria Party, Community Party of Nigeria, Democratic Alternative, Democratic Advance Party, Movement for Democracy and Justice, Minority Rights Party, Nigeria Renaissance Movement, National Unity Party of Nigeria, National Democratic Congress, National Development Party of Nigeria, Nigeria Millennium Party, Nigeria Labour Party, National Solidarity Party, National Coalition Party of Nigeria, Nigeria Liberation Party, National Restoration Democratic Party, Peoples Redemption Party, Peoples Liberation Party, Peoples Democratic Congress, United Peoples Party and the United Democratic Party.⁴⁴

Between January and May 1999, elections were conducted into various political offices. On May 29, 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP became the Second Executive President after an election generally considered to be violence free but not credible. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) also won majority seats in the national legislature and two thirds of the thirty-six states of the federation.⁴⁵ The Alliance for Democracy candidate, Chief Olu Falae, challenged the results of the election at the Court of Appeal presided over by Justice Dahiru Mustapha, but he eventually lost the case.

However, the election observers in 1999 were unanimous in their reports: massive irregularities existed in all the elections. For example, while the international monitoring groups put the voter turnout to be in the order of 20%, the election results indicated one of about 30 – 40%. Jimmy Carter refused to put his stamp of approval on the presidential vote that elected his friend Olusegun Obasanjo, writing that "There was a wide disparity between the number of voters observed at the polling stations and the final result that has been reported from several states. Regrettably, therefore, it is not possible for us to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election."⁴⁶ The Transition Monitoring Group spread the blame around quite

democratically stressing that fraud was committed by both sides and it was difficult to say the extent to which the efforts of the parties that contested the elections cancelled each other. Yet the election results of the 1999 elections were all upheld.

8. THE 2003 ELECTIONS

The April 2003 elections represented a crucial test for a country that has had a long and tortured experience with consolidating democratic governments. Political alternation in Nigeria has historically occurred between civilian and military regimes, rather than between elected civilian administrations. Thus, the April 2003 presidential election was the first held under the auspices of an elected civilian government in over 20 years. Prior to the election, INEC registered twenty-seven political parties more in addition to the existing three bringing to a total of thirty political parties that contested the elections. Most of these parties were those earlier denied registration by INEC before the 1999 elections.

However, before the April 2003 elections, there were public outcries over the manner in which politicians and corporate entities donated to politicians and political parties. For example, President Obasanjo and his erstwhile deputy, Alhaji Abubakar Atiku, realised over ₦5.5 billion in their fund-raising campaign. Governor of Delta State, Chief James Ibori, raised ₦2 billion. Governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Lagos State raised ₦1.3 billion. The Nigerian public described these fund-raising as regressive events. With these donations, political parties and corporate entities violated the Company and Allied Matters Act of 1990 and Section 225 of the 1999 Constitution which prohibited companies from contributing fund to political parties and receiving funds from outside Nigeria.⁴⁷

There was an unquantifiable public outcry after the April 2003 elections which saw the PDP retaining the presidency, winning more seats at the national legislature and the governorship positions of more states. The announcement of election results generated serious disputes, claims and counter-claims of the circumstances surrounding the elections. Some sections of the Nigerian public believed that the elections were massively rigged, especially that of the gubernatorial and presidential elections. For instance, an association called the Patriots led by the late Chief F. R. A. Williams called for an interim government as a way out of the

widespread protest against the results of the elections. Similarly, the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) called for a cancellation of the election results and the hosting of a national conference.⁴⁸

After the presidential and gubernatorial elections, some political parties seeing their woeful performance decided to withdraw their participation from subsequent elections alleging that the earlier elections were marred by fraud.⁴⁹ Twelve political parties held a meeting on Tuesday, April 15, 2003, and unanimously agreed to reject the result of the National Assembly polls. The parties were National Democratic Party (NDP), United Nigeria People's Party (UNPP), All Progressive Liberation Party (APLP), New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP), Justice Party (JP), Progressive Action Congress (PAC), All People's Grand Alliance (APGA), All Republican Party (ARP) and Community Party of Nigeria (CPN)⁵⁰

Following threats by former military Head of State and presidential candidate of the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP), General Mohammed Buhari (Rtd.), to make the country ungovernable if the results of the general elections of April and May 2003 were not cancelled and another election conducted, some Nigerian citizens including former Heads of State intervened on the outcome of the general elections by inviting General Muhammadu Buhari to a parley and asking him to challenge the results of the polls at the Presidential Election Tribunal and to drop his threat of making the country ungovernable.⁵¹ Earlier, a group of Northern leaders led by the Etsu Nupe, Alhaji Umaru Sada Ndayako presented President Olusegun Obasanjo with a list of conditions for saving the country from a clear state of emergency arising from the rejection of the April general elections by over sixteen opposition parties led by the ANPP. Among the conditions given by these Northern leaders was that President Olusegun Obasanjo should dissolve the Independent National Electoral Commission, reconstitute another electoral body, cancel the April election results wherever rigging was alleged, and initiate a new election.⁵²

However, there was another group of people that believed that the results of the elections should be allowed to prevail for the sake of moving the country forward. They argued that peace must be allowed to reign.⁵³ Even within opposition parties, there were opposing views which believed that the results of the election should be accepted as they were. For instance, majority of the members

of the ANPP in Rivers State decamped to the PDP immediately after the election.⁵⁴

At the end of the April 2003 elections into various political offices in Nigeria, Election Appeal Tribunals were set up to look into petitions filed by aggrieved parties on the election in accordance with Section 285(1)(a) and (2) of the 1999 Constitution.⁵⁵ The INEC advised that aggrieved parties should resort to only legal remedies through the judiciary. However, the European Union Election Observer Mission (EUEOM) in Nigeria disagreed with the conduct and outcome of the elections. It asserted that it had confirmed the allegations of serious irregularities by “new information received.”⁵⁶

The European Union Election Observer Mission noted that elections in Cross River, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Imo, Kaduna, and Rivers States were marred by serious irregularities.⁵⁷ The Head of the observer team, Mr. Max Van dem Berg said that the EUEOM was concerned about reported cases of arrest of opposition candidates shortly before the May 3 elections as a case in Edo State showed. On the whole, though the election results stood, a common trend that has been evident since the elections of the first republic was still very visible. Evidently, the politicians have learnt no lesson from history; they have only succeeded in creating and sustaining in the country a culture of failed elections that has not been able to produce the desired political culture needed to consolidate democracy.

9. THE WAY FORWARD

It will not be an exaggeration to state here that the biggest problem confronting Nigeria’s democracy has been how to conduct elections that will be credible, free and fair. Past attempts at sustainable democracy have failed because of fraud associated with elections. Needless to say, electoral success is a vital ingredient to a democratic process and Nigeria’s case may not be an exception. As a way forward, it has become evident that there is need for a comprehensive reform of the Electoral Act. Evidently, the electoral system in Nigeria up to 2003 is defective and this has hampered the conduct of credible elections, which had denied the country access to enjoying positive developments that comes with a legitimate and credible electoral process.

Consequently, the electoral process must be purged of the structural flaws that have prevented it from achieving credibility. The executive and

the legislature must initiate comprehensive electoral reforms aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of electoral disorder and produce an electoral framework that will result in elections that are free of violence, bigotry, rigging, corruption and all other vices that are stultifying the growth of democracy in Nigeria. Also, there is a need to initiate a better and more profound legislation that will fast-track electoral best practices. This will strengthen institutional capacity for conducting transparent elections in order to restore integrity to the process.

One of the fundamental defects in the existing electoral legislations that must be addressed is the prosecution of electoral offenders. Electoral offenders must be brought to justice, because transgressions thrive whenever or wherever offenders are allowed to go unpunished. Thus, electoral reforms should accommodate the establishment of an Electoral Offences Tribunal and, if necessary, the establishment of an Electoral Offences Commission independent of the electoral body with powers to monitor, investigate and to prosecute electoral offenders. It is also recommended that sections that hamstring the procedure for prosecuting offenders as well as those sections that reward offenders with statutory protection and unearned immunity in the existing Electoral Act should be expunged.

The independence and credibility of the electoral body must be guaranteed. This can only be achieved by modifying the mode of appointing and composing its members; the current practice is that the president appoints the members with the approval of the Senate. By this method, the president has the power to appoint members of his party to serve on the Commission thereby eroding the desired non-partisanship character of the body. Again, the impartiality of the electoral body can be guaranteed by providing adequate funding for the body through sources independent of the presidency. It cannot be disputed that poor funding undermines the independence, autonomy and capacity of the electoral body to administer the electoral process efficiently. The surest guarantee to fund the Commission properly and at the same time retaining its independence and impartiality is to allow the electoral body draws its funds directly from the Consolidated Federated Revenue Account. This implies that the Federated Accounts Sharing Commission will post funds directly to its accounts from source without passing through the presidency.

Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that guidelines for political party’s formation and

operations must include stringent measures that would de-emphasize ethnic or tribal affiliations and religious undertone. What is more, candidates aspiring to hold political offices should be screened in such a way that those who have embezzled public funds, exhibited bad character, and those whose means of income are questionable should be barred from participation. Of equal importance is the fact that the judicial arm of government must be made totally independent so that incumbents will not use the courts to install a wrong candidate.

It is well known that the vast majority of Nigerians live below poverty line. If elections are to be instituted as a credible way of electing the leadership of the Nigerian state, poverty must be reduced from among the populace. Government at all levels should confront mass poverty and unemployment. As long as people remain poor and lack access to basic means of livelihood, they will remain susceptible to all kinds of manipulations, including but not limited to fomenting violence during elections. In other words, increasing political awareness without addressing the problem of poverty will not change the situation. Most Nigerians become docile to political money-bags because of the tips they get from these money bags at election times. Poverty has reduced many to slavery and unthinking beings.

The relatively low level of political consciousness of the electorate makes it prone to electoral fraud. The electorate, apart from regarding elections as a means of choosing its representatives into public offices, also regards it as a process of making money. Consequently, the electorate was continuously fooled by politicians and political parties' bogus manifestos and unrealistic promises. Thus, civic education should be accorded a high priority because the task of enlightening the citizenry of their rights and duties and defending the integrity of their votes is crucial to entrenching democratic culture. Before the 2003 elections, groups that carried out civic education did so too close to the elections such that its full benefits could not be realised. Considering the fact that politicians use religion and ethnicity as tools of political manipulation, the content of civic education should provide effective responses to such tendencies. Similarly, people should be educated about how to demand accountability from their leaders through town hall meetings and by making effective use of the constitution's recall provisions.

Government's partisan meddling in the electoral process and its unwillingness to tackle political violence threatens to undermine democratic elections. Federal authorities need to take concrete and dramatic steps to ensure a free and fair election. They must end their complacent attitude towards election-related violence and obey any court rulings that reverse government efforts to bar opposition candidates from elections. The need to encourage opposition politics is of crucial importance to the future of Nigerian democracy. It is widely known that Nigerian politicians always want to be on the winning side and therefore prefer to strike deals with the winning party. This is a defeatist attitude. It will serve the cause of democracy better if opposition parties remain steadfast, build strength and capacity into their programs and manifestoes, and provide the electorate with credible alternatives in future elections.

Last but not the least, an increasing role for external election observers is solicited and should be encouraged and, in addition, the civil society groups should be allowed to monitor elections more closely as this would give the electoral process some modicum of transparency and credibility.

CONCLUSION

Following the truism that democracy is the best form of government that can guarantee the development in all its ramifications, it becomes imperative to ensure its sustainability. This is possible only when all the elements of the system are allowed to chart the right course. It has been emphasised in this piece that an election is one of such elements and the quality of an election constitutes one of the determinants for deepening democratic governance and, consequently, socio-economic development. However, taking into cognisance the broader dimensions of democracy, elections nonetheless has been the primary inter-linkage between representative democracy and political accountability.

The history of the country is replete with failed elections and the abortion of democracy occasioned by electoral fraud, among other factors. The phenomenon of electoral fraud has since the independence of the country engendered a political culture that has made the management of a credible electoral process that will lead to smooth change of government almost, if not totally, impossible. Also, available facts, as discussed in this paper, have alluded to the fact

that in Nigeria as in other growing democracies in the world elections breeds violence and ethnic tensions. Consequently, for Nigeria to move forward and institutionalise democratic culture through credible elections, electoral fraud must be effectively checked by correcting all the lapses apparent in the electoral system, institutions and machinery. Although a successful election is not in itself an all-encompassing route to political development, but for democracy to thrive in Nigeria, it is one of the most important processes to be achieved. Elections can be successful in Nigeria if the electoral machinery is strengthened to be more effective and efficient. On the whole, a stable and virile democracy will, undoubtedly, enthrone an unimpeded socio-economic development in the Nigerian state.

NOTES

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- ³ Browne Onuoha, "The Electoral Machine: The Bureaucracy and the Electoral Process in the making of Nigeria's Fourth Republic," in Lai Olurode and Remi Anifowoshe (eds.), *Issues in Nigeria's 1999 General Elections* (Lagos, 2004), 36 – 37.
- ⁴ David Aworawo, "Nigeria from Independence to the Year 2000," in Akinjide Osuntokun, David Aworawo and Florence Masajuwa (eds.), *History and Cultures of Nigeria up to AD 2000* (Lagos, 2002), 195 – 200.
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- ⁶ Remi Anifowoshe, *Violence and Politics in Nigeria: The Tiv and Yoruba Experience* (Enugu, 1902), 20.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 4 – 5.
- ¹⁷ The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) was the first political party to be registered by the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) when the ban on political activities was lifted by the military government
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- ²⁰ Oyeleye Oyediran, "The Nigerian 1983 Elections," paper presented at the panel on Nigeria since Independence, 1985.
- ²¹ Ofonagoro, *The Story of the Nigerian General Elections, 1979*, 250
- ²² Between July 7 and August 11, 1979, series of elections were held to various stages of political governance
- ²³ Ofonagoro, *The Story of the Nigerian General Elections, 1979*, xiii.
- ²⁴ Obafemi Awolowo, "Awo Says Yes," Being his 1983 presidential nomination acceptance (Lagos, 1983), 3 – 5
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- ²⁶ *Ibid*.
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- ³⁰ *Ibid*
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- ³² Transition Monitoring Group, *Final Report on the 1998 – 1999 Transition to Civil Rule Elections in Nigeria*, (Lagos, 2002), 7 – 8.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 8 – 9
- ³⁴ Olurode, L., *M. K. O. Abiola on June 12 Mandate* (Lagos, 1983), 6 – 7.
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- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 2
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 8
- ³⁹ The public saw a sinister conduct in the judgement considering that the ABN was an unknown organisation, the judgement was delivered at late hours (9.30 p.m.) and just about 24 hours before the election on June 10th, 1993.
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⁵⁰ CDHR, *Annual Report 2000*, 123.

⁵¹ *Daily Times*, Wednesday May 28, 2003, 16

⁵² *ThisDay* Newspaper, Wednesday June 18, 2003, 18

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⁵⁵ *Sunday Times*, June 1, 2003, 1

⁵⁶ The EUEOM deployed 108 observers to monitor the elections

⁵⁷ These factors have been used in the past by candidates particularly at the presidential elections to canvas for votes.