

Nigeria's Nascent Democracy and Credible Electoral Process

Nwori benjamin, chukwuma¹

Ndaba, Martin O.²

Department Of Political Science,

Ebonyi State College Of Education, Ikwo

Abstract

Election and all the procedures for selecting people into positions of authority are integral part of every political system. The essence of the institutionalized process of election is to determine popular choice of representative democracies. Participation or voting in elections is the most obvious means through which the populace can exert impact on government leadership composition and influence public policies, But unfortunately, the electoral system in the third world nations, particularly in Nigeria is engulfed with a lot of irregularities which seemingly are perpetrated by the political actors, the electorates or the electoral bodies. Against the backdrop of unstable electoral process in Nigeria, this paper is designed to take historical overview of the electoral processes in Nigeria. Besides, the paper critically identified major problems confronting Nigeria's electoral system and at the same time discussed the effects of electoral failures on nascent democracy in Nigeria. Lastly; the paper came up with recommendations on how to sustain a virile and viable electoral process needed for overall socio-political and eco~ cultural development in Nigeria.

Introduction

In developing countries of Africa and other emerging states of the world, participation in all manners of political activities is shrouded with a lot of ordeals and uncertainties, especially in Nigeria where electoral malpractices are almost being institutionalized. Quite a number of our contemporary political thinkers and analysts have continued to express their concern relatively on the quality and degree of people's involvement in electoral arrangements. Similarly, foreign and local election observers have been unanimous in their worry over election conduct in developing countries such as Nigeria.

It is an obvious fact that competitive and fairly conducted elections give the electorates the regular opportunity to select the right leaders of their choice without fear or sentiments. The regular opportunities to participate freely in all election conduct which uniquely translate to what is known as participatory democracy. Ideally, democratic principles are established, and embedded in the constitution of all societies that claim to be practising democracy. Yet it is disheartening to note that the growing democracy in Nigeria is highly characterized by a lot of electoral frauds such as thuggery, god-fatherism, ethnicism/sectionalism, manipulations of

voters' registration, physical intimidations, corrupt electoral officials, monetary and material enticement and falsification of election results. To a great extent, these unwholesome situations have in most times resulted to series of political crisis and social unrest with a serious threat on the socio-economic development and corporate existence of this country.

Without doubts, successive administrations seem to have made frantic efforts to institutionalize democratic principles in Nigerian body polity, but the pertinent questions have been, why have such good efforts failed to stabilize democracy in the country? What are the causes and effects of electoral problems on the development and growth of Nigerian polity and what measure should be taken to address electoral problems in Nigeria? The paper is structured to-reflect on certain sub-issues as stated thus: overview of the electoral history in Nigeria, the associated problems of electoral process in Nigeria, consequences of electoral failures on Nigerian emerging democracy, conclusion of the analytical findings and the way forward for better Nigeria.

Historical Overview of Electoral Process in Nigeria

The nature of election and electoral processes by design and legislation are the same worldwide. But the implementation procedures and the statutory bodies designated to handle such functions vary from one society to another, probably as a result of the institutionalized political culture. Historically, Nigeria has had many electoral arrangements and implementing bodies with various nomenclatures and personnel. By and large, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria was made at the verge of turbulent era of the annulled June 12 elections. Okorie (2005) said that the annulment by Gen Babangida ushered in Interim National Government (ING) headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan. As "a child of circumstance", the interim arrangement suffered constitutional backing and was unable to absorb the over-heated political pressures which culminated to bloodless coup and subsequent takeover by the Gen Sanni Abacha led military junta on 13th November, 1993. Nwali (1997) observed that the Abacha led military government faced some glaring national issues, such as; plight of ethnic minorities, inequitable allocation of national resources, injustices within the system, problem of power structure and the legitimacy of military rule in Nigeria.

In all attempt to diffuse the looming tensions and efforts to reassure Nigerians of government commitment for national unity, Gen Abacha announced another transition to civil rule programme and arranged for Constitution Conference which was conducted at all levels from 23rd and 28th of May, 1994. According to Okorie (2005), the conference among other things recommended for rotational presidency, new revenue sharing formula, equitable power political geographical zonal arrangements and provision for government of national unity.

Consequent upon this, the report of the conference was reviewed by the Constituent Assembly and submitted to the Provisional Ruling Council (PRC) for censure and ratification.

The mysterious death of Gen Sanni Abacha in 1998 paved the way for a short transition to civil rule by Gen Abdulsalami Abubakar who succeeded the late head of state. Okibe (2000) noted that the draft constitution under Abacha was transmitted into the 1999 constitution with minor alterations. The constitution retained a Federal Structure of 36 States, 774 Local Government

Councils; bicameral legislature of 109 for Senate and 360 for house of representatives. The Constitution provided for age limits as follows: presidency 40 years, Governors and Senators 35 years while House of Representatives members age limit to contestable position was 30 years. FRN (1999), the third schedule under section 153 provided for establishment of Independent National Electoral commission (INEC) to organize, undertake and supervise all elections to the offices of president, governors, national and state assemblies. INEC under the chairmanship of Justice Ephraim Akpata conducted the 1999 general elections in Nigeria while Dr. Abel Guobadia took over the leadership of INEC in 2000 and conducted 2003 general election. At present, Prof. Maurice Iwu is the INEC boss. He has conducted the 2007 general elections in Nigeria. Under president Umar Yaradua's administration, the 1999 constitution is being reviewed to accommodate certain matters changes, including the new electoral reform. The reform without any doubt will go a long way in addressing series of electoral problems in Nigeria body polity. **Consequences of Electoral Failures on Nigeria Nascent Democracy Since 1999**

Generally, elections are held as primary index of every democratic process. The integrity of the electoral process has serious impact on the socio-economic and cultural development of the society. A political culture characterized by violence and mistrust is destructive and considered to be one of the major reasons for military interventions in Nigeria body polity.

By antecedent, several elections conducted in Nigeria since the colonial period and post independent era were grossly marred by a lot of irregularities at the federal, regional/state and local council levels. Nwosu (1991) said that the results of such elections were greeted with violence and other acts which posed serious threats to the continued existence of this country. The failure of democratic structures and the subsequent collapse of the first, second and" the third republics were mainly due to electoral malpractices and lack of credence on the elections. There were clear manifestations of open threat and intimidations, empty promises, maiming and kidnappings, harassment, arson, looting, slander and arrest of opponents. These ugly incidence have generated serious stalemates, social, tensions, coup det'ats and thirty months civil war.

Another serious impact of the electoral failures in Nigeria, is that it has resulted to huge financial losses during elections, especially as money meant for developmental projects are diverted to execute electoral malpractices, hence Ake (1992) submitted elections in Nigeria assume an all consuming business. The general elections conducted in Nigeria between 1999 and 2007 were not conducted without the usual problems associated with the previous elections. Joseph (1991) summed it that the electoral process in Nigeria is reduced to a Hobbesian state of war. Concerned Nigerians and international agencies had continued to raise questions about the nature of Nigerian democracy and the reality of her corporate existence. Though, successive government have at various times had policy designs and used state apparatus to check electoral malpractices, but in the words of sklar (1983), it is democracy with tears and many reservations. These scholarly submissions affirm the obvious fact that Nigeria elections are marred with a lot of problems contrary to the tenets of nascent democracy.

(i) Absence of Party Culture: Ideally, political parties are established with the expectations to strengthen the political system through interest aggregation, checking the excesses of one another and providing competitive ground for free and fair elections. In Nigeria, the contrary is the case. Political parties lack the traditional culture and ideological stand, especially as party activities are regarded as weapons to fight political opponents. Political parties build around themselves stakeholders who are more or less war lords within the party hierarchy. The political heavy weights cling to power by hook or crook and use state apparatus to crush all forms of challenges and criticisms from within and outside the party. While the party loyalists are compensated with juicy appointments, board membership, ambassadorial positions, inflated contracts, distributorships etc. Nwosu (1991) opined that party members and even non-members are kept in line with deft application of carrot and stick style. These ugly trends in party politics result to electoral failures, violence and frauds during elections in Nigeria.

(ii) Tribal Politics: From the inception of political parties in Nigeria, our political system had been characterized by ethnic sentiments. The fact remained that parties were registered to reflect tribal bases; especially as the major and minor political parties became instruments for representation, protection and aggregation of ethnic interests. Nwosu (1991) asserted that the situation was highly exploited to promote their selfish interests and to consolidate themselves in their regional and ethnic enclaves. The phobia of ethnic based party activities have promoted the irrational fear of “domination” and “marginalization” to the forefront of our political

consciousness.

(iii) Greediness of the Political Elites: Politics in Nigeria is seen by power seekers as a very quick means of making money, amassing wealth and gaining affluence and influence. The elites by all means apply the zero-sum approach and winner-takes all syndrome to political activities and ensure total control of state resources and their distribution for their selfish aggrandizement, while those who lost elections are denied access to state-owned resources and other opportunities. Nzekwe (1998) opined that behind the lust for unlimited wealth and power is greed and avarice. Therefore, the quest for quick wealth and inability to accommodate political opponents culminate to politicians engaging in legal and extra-legal means to secure victory for the party of interest.

(iii) God-fatherism: The emergence of political god-fathers into the mainstream of Nigerian politics have many implications on the nascent democracy. God fathers in politics have been identified as those who install and sponsor candidates into political positions. The candidates on winning election rules on the dictates of the god-fathers and any attempt to disobey orders attracts serious threat to political office or position. Thugs are hired and paid as private security and for election activities. Nzekwe and Idoko (2000), observed that elections in Nigeria could be rigged through physical intimidation of hired thugs who storm polling booths with dangerous weapons to chase away opponents and manipulate election results.

(v) Nature of Electoral Bodies: Electoral bodies in Nigeria are not exonerated from the problem of electoral failures in the country. Nwori and Eje (2007) it is not still in doubt that officials of Nigerian electoral commissions collect money and other material enticement to influence

election outcomes. Not only that, the electoral bodies have structural and credibility problems; since they depend on the executive arm of government for funding. Again, their performances as the election umpires are affected since the chairman and members of the commission are appointed by the president which negates the principles of impartiality and transparency.

(vi) Weak Judiciary: Nigeria judicial system poses serious setbacks to the growth and development of democracy in Nigeria. The judiciary suffer from executive influences as far as electoral matters referred to it are concerned. Judicial officials collect bribes of all sorts to pass justice in favour of the highest bidder which negate the popular aphorism that judiciary is the last hope of common man.

(vii) Inadequate and Corrupt Security Agencies: The nature of Nigerian elections is such that voters are not adequately protected. Enough security agents are usually provided, while the rural voting centers suffer neglect which make the areas prone to electoral vices. Again, law enforcement agencies are weak and ill-equipped to check violent incidents and malpractices during elections Nwori and Eje (2007). Security agents are known to have collected money from politicians and government officials to work in favour of a particular political interest.

(viii) Thuggery: Thuggery in the recent times is gradually becoming part of Nigerian political culture. Unemployment creates opportunity for the youths to be used for unwholesome acts during elections. Idle mind they say is a devil's workshop.

(ix) Poor Funding: In Nigeria, the electoral bodies are poorly funded with the adverse implications of hiring experts and provision of electoral materials and other logistics during elections. Nwori and Eje (2007), the electoral commissions are poorly funded in Nigeria which adversely affect the body in terms of recruitment of experts and provision of materials and other logistics need in the election conduct.

(x) Lack of Accountability: During elections in Nigeria, government officials use public money and equipment to sponsor elections of their party. Nzekwe (1998) said that it is self evident that Nigerian leaders not only mismanage public funds, but go a step ahead to display such loots on the television screens, during parties, naming ceremonies, marriages and burials.

Conclusion/Recommendations

In every democracy, the electoral system is one of the basic features of good governance. The aim of electoral process is to enhance free and fair elections and if the system is not credible enough, the citizen will lose confidence and trust on the leadership. The paper has painstakingly analyzed the electoral processes in Nigeria from the colonial era through the first and second republics to the present time. But discoveries revealed that Nigerian democracy has serious setbacks resulting from ill-fated electoral system. Against the backdrop of ailing political process, this paper makes the following recommendations.

Our electoral system should be made to be corruption free. Corruption is a danger sign and corrosive virus pervading the sociopolitical and economic structure of this country. All manifestations of corruption must be fought at their bases.

The electoral process should be dignified and made more credible by allowing the electorates choose for themselves the leaders of their choice.

There should be a re-think by some politicians who conceive politics as the only means of amassing wealth and influence. In the words of Francis MacDonald, “so long as power is valued as the means to wealth, the helm of the ship will be grasped by man of business whose bible is her profit and loss account.” Plat in his Republic asserted that “the human race will never see the end of troubles until political power is entrusted to the love of wisdom.”

The paper also recommends that transparent leadership should be a panacea to the trouble of electoral process in Nigeria. Government and its agencies should equally be accountable, honest and responsible to the people as sure ways to check corruption and reduce electoral frauds.

The independence of our electoral commission should be guaranteed through funding from the consolidated account, not from the presidency. The appointment and screening of the chairman and the members of the commission should be the responsibility of the National Assembly as practiced in the United States of America and Britain. On the reverse, the commission should be responsible and accountable to the National Assembly.

Considering the high level of unemployment in the country, government should create job opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths so as to reduce the syndrome of thuggery and armed-robbery in our society.

Finally, ethical orientation should form the hallmark of our social and political existence. Both the leaders and the led should cultivate the good virtues of honesty, transparency, accountability, tolerance, integrity and good name, it is believed that if these recommendations are adopted by the people and government of Nigeria, our state will be transformed into a great democracy worthy of envy by many African countries and the world at large.

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