



Africa Development, Vol. XXXI, No. 3, 2006, pp. 25–44

© Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2006
(ISSN 0850-3907)

Do Votes Count?¹ **The Travails of Electoral Politics in Nigeria**

Adigun Agbaje*
& Said Adejumobi**

Abstract

This paper examines contemporary dimensions of electoral politics in Nigeria against a backdrop of historical experiences. It details issues, events and developments before, during and after elections. Its central argument is that Nigeria has suffered from both institutional (organizations + values /rules/norms) and experiential deficits in regard of required ramparts for electoral politics conducive to democratic renewal and consolidation. Organisations have been bereft of values required for turning them into effective institutions while dominant values have been toxic to democratic politicking. While years of dictatorship under colonial, military and civil rule partly account for the parlous state of electoral politics in Nigeria, the nature of political leadership, its shortsightedness as well as its lack of commitment to and experience in the democratic management of diversity in the context of restrained governance, have devalued politics and elections in Nigeria, reducing the latter literally to an instrument of warfare by other means. Electoral merchants or better still political barons have hijacked the electoral process marginalizing the people, discountenancing their voices and choices and steadily sliding the fourth republic on the path of systemic collapse. Engendering a functional and transparent electoral system will require revaluing institutional capacity and political ethos by the political elites in Nigeria.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les dimensions contemporaines de la politique électorale au Nigeria, dans un contexte historique. Il procède à un détail de diverses questions, événements et développements survenus avant, pendant et après les

* Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Email: adigunagbaje@yahoo.com, adigun.agbaje@mail.ui.edu.ng

** Department of Political Science, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria. Currently, Political Governance Advisor, Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS), Abuja, Nigeria. Email: adesaid@yahoo.com

élections. L'argument central posé est que le Nigeria a souffert de déficits institutionnels (organisations+valeurs/règles/normes) et empiriques concernant les garde-fous nécessaires à une politique électorale favorable au renouvellement et à la consolidation démocratiques. Les organisations ont été privées de valeurs indispensables leur permettant de devenir des institutions efficaces, tandis que les valeurs dominantes produisaient, elles, un effet nuisible sur la politique démocratique. Si les longues années de dictature sous un régime colonial, militaire et civil expliquent en partie l'instabilité de la politique électorale au Nigeria, la nature de la gouvernance politique, son manque de prévoyance ainsi que son faible engagement et son expérience insuffisante en matière de gestion démocratique de la diversité dans le cadre d'une gouvernance raisonnable, ont contribué à dévaluer la politique et les élections au Nigeria, réduisant ainsi littéralement ce dernier élément à un simple instrument de guerre. Les marchands électoraux ou mieux, les barons de la politique ont détourné le processus électoral en marginalisant les populations, désapprouvant les voix et choix de ces dernières, conduisant ainsi progressivement la quatrième république vers une chute systémique. La mise en place d'un système électoral fonctionnel et transparent nécessitera une réévaluation de la capacité institutionnelle et de l'ethos politique par les élites politiques nigérianes.

It is bad for people to rig elections. But life in Nigeria is a rigged life. The electoral process, the political parties, the governance structure, the entire system, everything is decidedly rigged against the ordinary person. It is, in fact, almost absurd to talk of rigging here when that is what the entire system is all about.

Bolaji Abdullahi (2003).

Rigging is almost synonymous with Nigerian elections just like advance fee fraud or 419 crimes are associated with Nigerians the world over.

Ahmadu Kurfi (2005: 101).

Introduction

In liberal democratic theory, an election is a viable mechanism for consummating representative government. Apart from facilitating leadership succession, it promotes political accountability, citizens' participation and gives voice and power to the people. In other words, elections are an expression of the people's sovereign will. John Stuart Mill, in his treatise on representative government (Mill 1948: 161-74) noted that:

The meaning of representative government is that the whole people or some numerous portions of them, exercise through deputies periodically elected by themselves the ultimate controlling power, which in every constitution,

must reside somewhere. This ultimate power, they must possess in all its completeness.

On the other hand, Claude Ake (2000) argues that elections are a perversion of democracy because they connote popular but not delegated power. The reality however is that the nostalgia of direct democracy which Ake recounts is problematic in a complex and complicated post-modern society. In any case, liberal democracy is in crisis in many countries, developed and developing (Adejumbi 2002). In the developed countries the level of citizen participation in the electoral process is dwindling, largely because real choice is limited and the people feel a sense of powerlessness rather than satisfaction. In developing countries, especially in Africa, elections are riddled with tension, conflicts, crises and fraud such that it is difficult to use them as a barometer of the people's choice. Hence, the euphoria of the second wave of democratisation in Africa is fast receding. Yesterday's icons who led civil society in the struggles for democratic renewal have been transformed into the images of those against whom they fought. They have assumed dictatorial postures; they manipulate elections and tend towards sit-tight regimes. In a nutshell, elections are fast becoming a shadow of democracy (Adejumbi 2000).

In spite of such generally worrying trends in electoral politics and the democratic project in Africa, there are points of encouragement. Countries like South Africa, Ghana and recently Liberia, have conducted very successful elections, generally acclaimed to be free, fair, and transparent. Nigeria is in the league of less successful countries in the area of election management and outcomes: the electoral rules are either unclear, ever changing, or easily subverted; the electoral body is structurally weak and perennially ineffective; the political actors and agencies are like gladiators in their conduct; while the people are often powerless in an environment of political and electoral misdemeanour. To use Claude Ake's words, 'voting does not amount to choosing' in the Nigerian environment, as electoral choices are made by political barons outside the orbit of electoral norm, rules and procedure. In such circumstances, 'winners and losers have often been determined before the contest, and voters merely go through the charade of confirming choices already made' Fawole (2005: 150).

This paper reviews Nigeria's electoral practices. It argues that institutional weaknesses arising from a complex interaction of historical and contemporary forces and structures of the Nigerian state system account largely for the normlessness and lack of civility in electoral politics in Nigeria. The unrestrained conduct of the leadership in governance, and the deployment of cross-cutting but resilient issues of ethnicity, religion, regionalism, violence and corruption which reduce electoral politics to a theatre of war by other

means are all related to the way in which the state and political power in Nigeria have been constructed.

The state, political culture and elections

The state is a central agency in regulating citizens' conduct, setting rules and procedure, and ensuring fairness in social interactions and bargaining amongst the people. Although the state may be embedded in the social structure, it has the capacity not only to influence but also transform the social structure. It is the locus of power, and the determinant of social values. As such, a strong interface exists between the nature and character of the state, the dominant political culture, and the nature of elections.

This is why the African state has been the object of much social theorizing. The African state has earned various epithets ranging from 'dependent', 'neo-patrimonial', 'prebendal', 'entrepot', 'rentier', 'rogue', 'soft', 'expired', 'criminal', 'peripheral', etc. An analysis of two theories on the African state may give some insights into the strengths and biases of those frameworks.

Jean François Bayart's in his theory of the criminal state in Africa draws a parallel between Africa's history and traditional political values and the criminal conduct in the political arena which has implications for the crisis of elections and political legitimacy in Africa. Africa's history of state formation, which is located in the mercantilist era, is one predicated on the illegal exploitation of natural resources and rents, conducts transferred to the post-colonial era. As mercantilist trade declined in importance, its global networks were adapted for criminal activities.

According to Bayart et al., 'the relationship between accumulation and power is henceforth situated in a context of internationalization and growth of organized crime on a probably unprecedented scale' (Bayart 1999: 9). Criminal gangs seize control of political power and the state becomes a machinery for organised crime, especially drug trafficking.

The criminalisation of politics and of the state may be regarded as the routinisation, at the very heart of the political and governmental institutions and circuits, of practices whose criminal nature is patent, whether as defined by the law of the country in question, or as defined by the norms of international law and international organisations or as *so viewed by the international community, and most particularly that constituted by aid donors* (Bayart et al. 1999: 16).

They further argue that 'the rise in Africa of activities officially classed as criminal is aided by the existence of moral and political codes of behaviour, especially those of ethnicity, kinship, and even religion, and of cultural representations, notably of the invisible, of trickery as a social value, and of cer-

tain prestigious styles of life, even of an aesthetic, whose capacity to legitimize certain types of behaviour is considerable' (Bayart et al. 1999: 15). In essence, elections become a criminal activity in which 'bandits' and 'criminal gangs' hold sway because such modes of political practice are reified by popular culture and social values. Ake explains the same problem from a materialist perspective. He argues that the underdevelopment of the productive forces in a developing country like Nigeria creates limited autonomy for the state and hampers its capacity to mediate class and political struggles. He notes (1989: 45):

What needs to be kept in view is that limited autonomization means that the African state is extremely weak to perform adequately the essential functions of the state. The African state hampers the realization of the law of value and the development of the productive forces... The state in post-colonial Africa is unable to mediate the struggle between classes and even within classes particularly the hegemonic class. The net effect of this is that politics, essentially the struggle for control and use of state power becomes warfare. Power is overvalued and security lies only in getting more and more power. There is hardly any restraint on the means of acquiring power, holding it or using it. Might is coextensive with right.

We examine Nigeria's electoral politics, which seem to have been hijacked by forces of wealth and power for purposes that are entirely predatory and subversive of democracy, from a theoretical prism of the latter.

Political culture refers to the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to the political process and further provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system (Yaqub 2001; Pye 1972: 218). It is the aggregated experience of a people over a period of time, particularly in its recent history, which shapes their psychological and subjective disposition in politics. It is both a cumulative and contemporaneous engagement of the people, especially the elite, with the political process – their values, orientations, perceptions, understanding and meaning of the political power and processes in the country. A national political culture, as Pye argues, comprises elite and mass subcultures; the relationship between both is crucial in determining the performance of the political system (Pye 1972: 220).

The nature of Nigeria's federal system and the legacy of military rule, are enduring factors that influence the extant political culture and electoral practices, especially as constructed by the political elite. The state is a centralised federal system in which power and resources are concentrated at the centre; there is a disconnect of power from responsibility, and between citizens' material obligation to the state and state responsibility for sound institutional conduct and ethical behaviour.⁵ The base of national accumula-

tion, which is oil rather than taxation, imposes little restraint on state conduct, performance and accountability. Within the context of political centralism the tendency is for the struggle over state power especially at the centre to be fierce, lawless, and extremely consuming. The logic of political and economic centralism peculates from the national to sub-national political units where state authorities also form critical centres of power, control and accumulation. Years of military rule have accelerated this drift toward hegemonic politics at the expense of democracy. As noted by Atiku Abubakar, a prominent member of the post-military political class and the Vice President of Nigeria,

Nigeria has experienced decades of military and authoritarian rule which has left deep imprints in our political culture. Consequently, our political elite have become used to centralization, concentration and personalization of political power the central defining elements of modern despotism. The consolidation of democracy, however, requires the institutionalization of political power in which due process and rules and regulations replace the exercise of personal power (Abubakar 2005: 8).

For the mass political sub-culture, there is a contradiction in attitudes, beliefs and political conduct. In the midst of excruciating poverty and illiteracy, which exposes large sections of them to material vulnerability, ethnic and religious manipulations, the masses nevertheless value democratic norms and practices. In its summary report on the 2003 general elections the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) noted: 'There can be no doubt that Nigerian citizens value a voice in their own government in and of itself, and that they still see the ballot box as the way to address the huge variety of problems which face them, is a tribute to their patience with a system so loaded against the interests of the powerless' (CDD 2003: 3). However, the masses have also been victims of long years of military rule. Their capacity to demand accountability has been drastically reduced, leaving them transformed into passive actors in governance even under civil rule; the object of manipulation and elite mobilisation for the pursuit of their class project of domination. Consequently, mass political subculture is converging with that of the political class.

Structures, processes and electoral trepidation

The interplay of power structures and processes is central to electoral outcomes. Public confidence in electoral outcomes is determined by the extent to which structures and processes are institutionalised and non-partisan. An examination of these structures and processes will expose the nuances of electoral politics in Nigeria.

Electoral institutions

The primary responsibility for election management in Nigeria resides in an electoral body. This body has the responsibility for constituency delimitation, registration of voters, registration of political parties, organisation of elections, and the declaration of election results. Over the years, the autonomy and capacity of this body has been suspect. This is reflected in its endless renaming and restructuring by successive governments. In the Murtala/Obasanjo political transition programme, a Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was constituted, while under the Babangida regime it was renamed the National Electoral Commission (NEC). Sanni Abacha replaced NEC with the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), while General Abdusallami Abukakar, Abacha's successor, rechristened it the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The problems of legitimacy and credibility are embedded in this institutional history. INEC was established by Decree No.17, 1998 (Independent National Electoral Commission Establishment Decree) and the amendment Decree No. 33, 1998. Like its predecessors INEC has not been able to engender public confidence in the electoral process or organise transparent and credible elections (see Anifowoshe and Babawale 2003; Lewis 2004; Kurfi 2005). As Ogunsanwo (2003: 15) remarked on the conduct of the 2003 elections, 'one thing was unique in the 2003 elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission was genuinely not in control of activities on election days'. Extra-INEC forces (often working in tandem with INEC officials) used unconstitutional methods to determine the outcome of many of the elections conducted by INEC.

There are several issues that impinge on the autonomy of the electoral commission and its efficacy. First is the composition and mode of appointment of the electoral body. How are its members selected, what should be its numerical strength, the tenure of members, and under what circumstances can they be removed from office and how? (Jinadu 1997: 6). Second is the legal framework of its powers. How is its autonomy guaranteed concretely in the constitution? In other words, what institutional autonomy does it have from the executive and the legislature? How is the electoral commission funded? To whom is the commission answerable? And with what freedom does it conduct its activities like voter registration, and the actual voting processes?

The composition of Nigeria's electoral body is at the behest of the president. The commission is just one of the executive organs of the state albeit recognised by the constitution as independent. INEC is composed of a chairman, twelve national commissioners, and thirty seven resident electoral commissioners, all of whom are appointed by the federal government, and thereby rendered vulnerable to the manipulations of the president and the federal authorities (Kurfi 2005). Although members of the electoral

commission are to be screened by the National Assembly, this has become a mere formality as the ruling party has an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly. Hence, the recent practice by the president has been to appoint people without credible professional or intellectual competence in electoral matters to chair the electoral commission.⁶

The federal electoral commissioners have tenure of office, but they do not have security of tenure. They can be removed by the president without any prime facie case of misconduct made against them. For instance, under the Babangida regime, two successive electoral commission chairmen (Professors Eme Awa and Humphrey Nwosu) were removed from office in 1989 and 1993 respectively in questionable circumstances – the former for his uncompromising stance in the management of the electoral commission, and the latter following the military government's decision to annul the 12 June 1993 presidential elections contrary to the position of the electoral commission. Up to date Nwosu has maintained a stoic silence on the annulment issue, ostensibly for fear of his personal safety. The implication is that electoral commissioners would easily succumb to the whims and caprices of the political leaders in order to protect their positions. This often makes them compliant and soft accomplices in election rigging.

The funding of the electoral commission is the prerogative of the executive, which determines how much it is provided for it in the national budget. Finance is a major means through which the autonomy of the electoral commission is compromised. The funding of the electoral commission assumes a seasonal affair in which shortly before the election period that the ruling party needs the commission, the government appropriates a large chunk of resources for it, and when election is over, the commission is de-prioritised, and its budget allocation shrinks. Planning for elections is therefore not a systematic and continuous process. The exigencies of electoral politics determine its funding needs.

The electoral process

The electoral process includes voter registration, political campaigns, voting, the declaration of election results, and post-election petitions and complaints. It also includes the electoral law itself. Many of these processes have been very controversial. Two major examples are instructive. In 2001, the INEC proposed an Electoral Bill to the National Assembly for consideration and passage into law. The bill was very controversial and elicited diverse negative reactions from civil society. On 21 July 2001, thirty-five civil society organisations formed the Electoral Reform Network (ERN) to 'coordinate their legislative advocacy on the draft Electoral Bill 2001 and to ensure that a level playing ground for the 2002 and 2003 elections is created' (ERN

2001). In a Memorandum to the National Assembly on the Electoral Bill, the ERN (ERN, 2001: 1) noted:

INEC draft Electoral Bill in its present form will definitely stultify the electoral process, instead of opening up the democratic space. Apart from the excessive powers conferred on INEC, there are many provisions which will not engender popular participation. It is with a view to liberalizing the process that the following memorandum was arrived at.

Apparently, INEC did not undertake any consultations with civil society organisations and other stakeholders before proposing the Electoral Bill.

In any case, some provisions of the Electoral Bill and the politics that surrounded its passage exposed the plans of the power elite to limit democratic space, and pursue a narrow political agenda at the expense of the Nigerian people. Three controversial issues based on the recommendations of the Senate Committee on INEC emerged. First is the order of elections. The recommendation was that presidential elections should be held first, followed by the National Assembly, Governorship and Local Government elections. The politics behind this was that both the President and the National Assembly wanted to secure their re-election before the turn of the governors; because the state governors have become very powerful and if elected first might use their local political machines to thwart the political ambitions of the National Assembly members and the President for re-election. The second controversial issue was the attempt to extend the life of local government assemblies from three years to four by amending Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution which gave the states exclusive power to legislate on local government matters. The essence of it was to remove the control exercised by the states over local governments, and thereby open the local political arenas to political contestation and control by national level political actors (for example, members of the National Executive and National Assembly) given the crucial importance of local government structures as instruments for mobilising grassroots support for the electoral success of all politicians.

The third issue centred on Clause 80(1) of the Electoral Bill. This clause was meant to limit the space for party registration. The draft provision reads 'at the close of nomination for the general elections, any political party which fails to sponsor at least fifteen percent of the candidates for the councillorship, council chairmen, and state Houses of Assembly respectively throughout the federation spread among two-thirds of the states of the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, shall not participate in general elections'. This provision was bad enough; however, before signing the bill into law the President unilaterally amended it to read as follows: 'A registered political party must win at least fifteen percent of the chairmanship and councillorship

positions in the federation, spread among two thirds of the states and federal capital territory to participate in general elections'. This provision set new rigid conditions that virtually disqualified new political parties; because local government elections were to be held last; therefore setting performance criteria as condition for participation in higher level elections (Presidential, National Assembly, Governorship, and State House of Assembly) automatically disqualified most new parties from contesting the elections in 2003. It took a Supreme Court judgment in October 2002 to free the political space for new political party registration which immediately saw twenty-seven new parties register. Evidently, parochial political interests dictated the passage of the Electoral Act 2001, (and its subsequent amendment in the form of the Electoral Act 2002) rather than genuine political commitment to enhance the electoral process and the growth of democracy in Nigeria.

Voter registration, as Jinadu (1997: 9) has observed, is a crucial phase in the electoral process which political parties in countries like Nigeria view as a first step in positioning themselves to win elections. Consequently, they go all out to mobilise their cadres for the exercise. Indeed, the manipulation of the voter registration process either through multiple registrations, registration of underage persons, and denial of registration to opposition supporters or inflating the voters' register constitute a major step in election rigging. In Nigeria voter registration exercises have often been utterly flawed. In September 2002, and January 2003, INEC conducted a computerised voter registration exercise which was riddled with poor organisation and serious malpractices. According to LeVan, Pitso and Adebo (2004: 33), 'voter registration suffered several setbacks that affected overall enfranchisement and therefore confidence in the electoral process. Problems included logistical delays, insufficient staff training, the lack of security at registration centres, poor voter education campaigns and other flaws'. Malpractices were rampant, including cases of hoarding of registration forms and cards with the aim of selling them to politicians, and creating artificial scarcity of registration materials. This situation was admitted by then Information Minister, Jerry Gana, who remarked that the exercise was plagued by 'serious malpractices' (ibid). After the registration exercise the voters' list was not published as required by the Electoral Law, thus denying many Nigerians the opportunity of verifying their names. It was therefore strange, according to Peter Lewis (2003: 141) that 'The commission finally claimed to have registered 61 million voters, thereby crowning a glaringly troubled and tangled process with a success rate of 100 percent – improbable, to say the least'. It became obvious later that the voter registration exercise was a prelude to the grand electoral fraud that characterised the 2003 general elections.

Political parties

Political parties constitute another important institution in the electoral process. Historically, Nigeria's political parties have been ethnicised, with the major parties having strong ethnic support. The Action Group (AG), Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) which had emerged in the first republic, metamorphosed in the second republic as the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), National Party of Nigeria (NPN), and the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) respectively. However, in 1989 the Babangida regime dissolved all the political parties that had applied for registration under his transition programme, and imposed a two party regime – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) on the country. When that political transition programme collapsed with the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential elections, the cloned political parties followed suit.

Subsequently, three political parties emerged from the General Abdusalam Abubakar political transition programme launched in 1999: the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP), which was later renamed All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD). Significantly, these three parties reproduced the political tendencies of the two defunct parties that preceded them. The PDP turned out to be a party for retired military and police officers, buccaneer capitalists, old politicians of the conservative NPN stock and former technocrats. The AD is led by remnants of the UPN, who are mostly ethnic ideologues and erstwhile pro-democracy activists, all of whom make claims to the Obafemi Awolowo political dynasty. The ANPP on the other hand, has its origins and support base in the north; it relies on ethnic and religious symbols for political support, and has in its leadership apologists of the Abacha regime, retired soldiers and religious irredentists. The nature of all three main political parties is captured by Lewis (Lewis 2003: 134):

The nebulous party system has little to do with any distinct ideologies, strategies, or sectional appeals. The major parties are relatively diverse in their leadership and constituencies, but remain focused on elite contention and patronage. Ethnicity is still a crucial vehicle for political mobilization. Personalities and clientelist networks predominate; internal discipline is weak; internecine battles are common. Politics is 'winner-takes-all' because public office is still a high road to personal enrichment by dubious means.

The lack of internal democracy in these parties is most subversive of democracy in Nigeria, especially elections. Atiku Abubakar, a prominent member of the political class and the nation's Vice President, apparently suffering from the torrents of 'war' and marginalisation in his own party, lamented the

lack of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties generally, and within his own party in particular. He noted (Abubakar 2005: 4):

An essential element in promoting free and fair elections in the country is the free and fair conduct of party nominations. *Most elections are 'rigged' before they occur because candidates are eliminated through various methods.* These include subverting party constitution and rules, the use of thugs, corrupting party officials to disqualify, or annul the nomination of some candidates and other illegal methods of distorting the wishes of the electorate (Emphasis ours).

Above all, Nigeria's political parties are riddled with internal strife and multiple crises. The situation in the PDP exemplifies a general tendency. A manifestation of the crisis within the PDP is the high turnover of the party chairmanship. In six years, the party produced four party chairmen. The president is apparently the sole power in the party, and is referred to as the 'party leader', a position not provided for in the party's constitution. With his position as the president of the nation and party leader, he could remove party chairmen at will. The October 2005 congress of the PDP amply demonstrated the perfidy that characterises the internal organisation of the party. In an unprecedented but questionable manner, a non-elective national executive committee of the party dissolved the membership of the party and directed all members to re-apply. Evidently, the re-registration exercise was a power game by the president and the national executive committee to seize control of the party. Some members of the PDM (Peoples Democratic Movement – a caucus of the PDP), including the Vice President, were denied registration in the party. With a dubious party membership list, the party proceeded to organise a party congress which was characterised by rancour and violence in virtually all the states of the federation (see *Guardian*, 21 October 2005; Madunagu 2005). Obi summarises the picture that emerges of the PDP from its national congress (Obi 2005: 56):

In the PDP of today, all known rules of democracy have been thwarted. The party does not care a hoot about the processes of election or selection. It violates them at will. In the party, it is not the people that make choice; it is the few who have seized the instruments of power that impose their will on the people. If democracy is to throw open the polity for mass participation in political affairs, the PDP has shrunk the political space, thus making democracy look like a closed shop. The sins of PDP against democracy are legion.

The *Guardian* newspaper, Nigeria's most authoritative national daily, summed it all up in an editorial when it noted that 'if the PDP cannot submit itself to the rule of law and due process, then it cannot be entrusted with the country's constitution' (*Guardian*, 21 October 2005).

Flawed elections

In the context of a weak electoral body, a perverted electoral process and undemocratic political parties, the stage is set for flawed elections. Thus, the 1999 and 2003 elections, like virtually all the preceding elections in Nigeria's post-colonial history, were classic cases of electoral fraud. In broad terms, there have been two kinds of elections in Nigeria's post-colonial history. These are the 'transition' and 'consolidation' elections (see Onuoha 2003: 49). The transition elections are those organised by a departing political authority, which include those organised by the departing colonial authorities in 1959, and those organised by military regimes in 1979, 1993 (aborted) and 1999. Consolidation elections are those organised by a civilian regime and are intended to consolidate civil rule. These include the 1964/65, 1983 and 2003 elections. While virtually all these elections have been contested, the elections of 1983 and 2003 stand out as the most corrupt and fraudulent. The shared characteristics of all elections in Nigeria, as noted by (Iyayi 2005: 2) include massive electoral frauds, the conception and practice of politics as warfare, the lack of continuity in the political platforms used by members of the political class, high levels of opportunism and thus a low level of commitment to the different variants of right-wing political ideologies that characterise the political class, the objectification of politics, and the mobilisation of ethnic identities as the basis for defining the legitimacy of claims to political power.

'Consolidation elections' are more complicated to manage in Nigeria. This is because the interests and forces with a stake in the consolidation process are more diverse, with some of them controlling the election machinery. Consequently, the process reproduces some of the tendencies associated with transition elections, including a deliberate attempt by the ruling party to contrive and monopolise the electoral space, engineer grand electoral fraud, as well as hatch a deliberate plot to move the process towards a one party dominant democratic order in favour of the ruling party. In 1964/65, the NPC's desperate manipulation of the electoral process to monopolise political power in western Nigeria, using the NNDP as its proxy, resulted in the political chaos that eventually collapsed the first republic. In the 1983 elections, the NPN which hitherto controlled seven of the nineteen states wanted to expand its dominion from seven to twelve states through electoral fraud. This manipulation collapsed when the scheme backfired in Ondo State. In his memoirs, Ahmadu Kurfi, a former Secretary to the Federal Electoral Commission gives an insight into the electoral conspiracy in Ondo State and how the process was quickly reversed when the state exploded into political violence. According to him,

I was attending a meeting at the Cabinet office, Lagos in my capacity as the permanent secretary, ministry of internal affairs, which was presided by the secretary to the Government of the Federation, Alhaji Shehu Musa, and attended by the Inspector General of Police, Sunday Adewusi and top officials representing other security departments, *when a message was flashed that Ondo had been 'delivered'*. Some of us at the meeting could not believe our ears regarding this message and were apprehensive of its security implications. Our fears were confirmed later when another message was relayed to us that serious disturbances had erupted in Akure and that several lives were lost and properties destroyed. At the end of the day, NPN had to concede Ondo governorship slot to the UPN, the ruling party in the state (Emphasis ours) (Kurfi 2005: 100).

The presence of the security chief and top officials of government at the meeting where the message was 'delivered' reveals that the electoral fraud was a well organised plan involving the government and key institutions of the state, including the police.

In the 2003 elections a more sophisticated version of the 1983 electoral fraud was staged. The PDP moved into the states hitherto controlled by the AD in western Nigeria, and managed to capture four of the five states controlled by the AD. A simple statistical analysis of the declared voting figures suggests that the election results were in many cases fixed (see *Analysis Magazine*, No. 5, May 2003). A Commonwealth Election Observer, Stuart Mole who monitored the elections in the Niger Delta reveals how the election results were fixed. He notes that while voter turnout for the April 2005 elections was very low in many polling stations, with some polling booths not opening till 2.00 p.m. and closing before 5.00 p.m., the election results declared for most constituencies indicated a 90–100 percent voter turn-out (Mole 2003: 427). Furthermore,

Most extraordinary of all, this apparently phantom election recorded extraordinary high turnout figures generally in excess of 90 percent. In Tai district, where we had seen few voters and where the polls had only opened for a few hours, turnout was recorded at an incredible 99.6 percent (and the PDP share of the vote at 99.2 percent). Clearly, widespread voter intimidation had accompanied massive electoral fraud.

Referring to elections for higher level political offices, Mole (ibid.) commented:

However, the story in Rivers a week later, at the Presidential and Governorship polls, was if anything, worse. We came across pre-marked ballot papers, already thump-printed, being issued by electoral officials. There were stuffed ballot boxes and I watched a youth who casually attempted to empty his bulging pockets of marked ballots into the ballot box. Later, as I watched

over two ballot boxes, waiting for them to be collected and counted, a gang of about 30 youths, high on booze, burst in and seized the boxes, rifling through them as they drove away.

The incidents documented by Mole were not isolated. All the major political parties were actively involved in the rigging process. The PDP simply excelled in this electoral fraud, making it possible for it to increase its share of the federal states it controlled from 21 in the 1999 elections to 28 in the 2003 elections. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), a coalition of over 90 civil society groups, in its report on the 2003 general elections, gave a vote of no confidence in the elections. The group declared (TMG 2003):

While the voters waited and persevered in the polling stations to cast their votes, the political class and the political parties had different ideas. The voters wanted their votes to determine the winner of elections while the political class wanted to corrupt the process and rig their way into elective office... On the whole, the results can be said to marginally reflect the choice and will of the Nigerian people.

Political barons, clients, and the fallacy of elections

The informalisation of politics is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria's electoral process. Historically, Nigeria's political party formations have been characterised by mobilisational leaders, who as founder-leaders, exercise tremendous influence. Notable examples of such leaders are Obafemi Awolowo of the AG and UPN, and Nnamdi Azikwe of the NCNC and NPP in the first and second republics (1960–1966, and 1979–1983), respectively. Also Sir Ahmadu Bello and Tafawa Balewa were the icons of the NPC in the first republic, who though not alive by the second republic, nonetheless commanded a mythical presence and inspiration within the NPN in the second republic. Such leaders influenced party nominations and other internal party processes to the extent of compromising internal party democracy.

After the second interregnum of military rule (1983–1999), the nature and texture of party politics changed. Political parties were no longer guided by an ideology or specific focus; they were not led by a mobilisational leader who could drive and guide their actions and policies, and inspire internal cohesion and discipline. Political parties assumed the character of electoral machines, whose sole aim was to win political power through the ballot. Aspiring election candidates were mostly individual actors sponsored by some powerful individuals; because the cost of electioneering has now become astronomical. A senator of the Fourth Republic, Femi Okurounmu, has noted, for example, that a candidate would need one billion Naira (about US\$74 million) to run for a senate seat in some parts of the country; and that even

running for a council seat required a huge financial outlay (Okurounmu 2003: 45).

The immediate consequence of a monetised electoral politics is the emergence of 'political barons' - political entrepreneurs, who invest in election candidates for higher financial and political returns. Political barons hold neither elective political offices nor party positions. They often constitute informal leaders, who are more powerful than the party chiefs and formal office holders. They sponsor candidates, control the internal party nomination process, finance electoral campaigns, rig elections on behalf of their candidates, corrupt election officials, and sometimes change the names of candidates after elections have been concluded. They are virtual kingmakers. Jubrin Aminu, a professor of medicine turned politician once lamented on how political barons create elected political representatives.

This business about the 'man on the street' ... he does not really feature too much in these things, I am very sorry to say. This has to wait until after three, or four or five elections. When the man in the street becomes the centre, then democracy will be assured. Right now, what seems to happen is that so long as the big political barons and baronesses can agree at the top, that's it. This is what matters (Aminu, 2003, cited in http://allafrica.com/specials/Nigeria_elections2003/).

The logic of the market is reproduced in the political sphere: there is a political market, and there are investors, sellers, and consumers or buyers interacting to make the market functional.

In Nigerian parlance, the political barons are 'political godfathers', who deploy a vast array of resources—financial and political contacts, and networks, and even traditional social capital - to support their preferred candidates. In return, those candidates when elected are expected to do the bidding of their 'godfathers'. In Kwara State, the former governor, Commodore Lawal, was beholden to his political godfather, Olusola Saraki, who is widely regarded as the most powerful political personality in that state. In Enugu state, Jim Nwobodo was the acclaimed political godfather of the governor, Chimaroke Nnamani. In Anambra state, Chris Uba, a young poorly educated but unquestionably rich person, is the political godfather of the governor of the state, Chris Ngige, who holds a degree in medicine. The list is infinite. The godfathers desire not only to participate in the sharing of the spoils of office; they also control it.

However, this political baron-client relationship is inherently conflictual, and sooner than later unravels. While the client in power seeks to assert himself or herself, and establish some independence, the baron insists on retaining control and recouping his earlier investments. This dialectic unleashes

conflict which could destabilise the political order. The greatest danger however lies in the crudeness with which wealth triumphs over the rule of law, and powerful people employing wealth and political power to subvert the sovereign will of the people. The conflict that raged in Anambra State between Chris Uba, the godfather, and the governor of Anambra state, Chris Ngige, is a classic reminder of how the power of wealth in politics could easily corrupt and undermine democracy, especially where wealthy people are allowed to act in public affairs with impunity. In this case, President Obasanjo's reaction to the struggle for hegemony in Anambra state, which let the culprits off the hook, rather than bringing them to order, is striking. To quote the President (Obasanjo 2004):

Theirs was like the case of two robbers that conspired to loot a house and after bringing out the loot, one decided to out-do the other in and the issues of fair play even among robbers became a factor... the two robbers must be condemned for robbery in the first instance and the greedy one must be specially pointed out for condemnation to do justice among robbers.

The incident in Oyo state is similar to that of Anambra. Lamidi Adedibu, the Oyo State political godfather, was in conflict with his protégé, Rasidi Ladoja the governor of the state. In December 2005, hired hoodlums from the camp of the godfather sacked the governor from office and took over the state House of Assembly in a triumphant show of money power over the sovereign power of the people. Again the federal government looked on apparently unconcerned as anarchy unfolded and unelected people violently seized control of the state. The two governors, Ngige and Ladoja have since lost their positions due partly to power politics with their godfathers.

Conclusion

What are the implications of the above? First, the culture of impunity is growing wild, as cases of political assassination, intimidation, violence, and general disorder ostensibly perpetrated by powerful political forces spread, placing Nigeria's nascent civil rule at grave risk. The height of criminality in public affairs was the assassination of the former Attorney General and Minister for Justice, Bola Ige. The riddle behind Ige's death is yet to be uncovered; but it remains a serious blight on Nigeria's democracy. Second, the rule of law and due process are being subverted. This is antithetical to the growth of democracy. Third, elections in Nigeria are rapidly becoming shams - mere political rituals in which the people have neither voice nor power, and their mandate is freely stolen by the political barons and their clients.

Elections and democracy can only survive where institutions are strengthened, relatively independent, functional and efficient, and procedures and

processes are consensually reached, transparent, and adhered to. In the situation such as we have reviewed in this paper, democracy cannot flourish. Unfortunately, what prevail in Nigeria is a constant erosion of institutional capacity and the subversion of rules and procedures. As Agbaje has warned, if the erosion of institutions that should strengthen Nigeria's current democratic experiment is not addressed, the 'country could gradually substitute electoralism and democratism for a properly functioning electoral and democratic process, a replacement of substance with appearance. Left unchecked, the republic will end up with elections that are highly inadequate and a democratic process emptied of much of its democratic content and credentials' (Agbaje 2004: 219).

Notes

1. This is the title of the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) report on the 2003 general elections in Nigeria. The TMG is a coalition of over seventy civil society groups involved in election monitoring. This title, 'Do Votes Count?', expressed the dismay and disaffection of the organisation with Nigeria's electoral process.
2. For observations on the Liberian elections of October 2005, see ECOWAS Preliminary Statement on the 11 October, 2005 General Elections (Press Release).
3. For a discourse on the Nigerian federal system and its deformities see Adejumbi (2004: 211-231); also Amuwo, A. Agbaje, R. Suberu, and G. Herault (1998).
4. The former INEC Chairman, Dr Abel Gobadia, studied physics, while the current Chairman, Dr Iru, studied chemistry.

References

- Abdullahi, Bolaji, 2003, see, [http://allafrica.com/special/nigeria_elections_2003/+](http://allafrica.com/special/nigeria_elections_2003/)
- Abubakar, Atiku, 2005, 'Elections and the Peoples Mandate', Keynote Address delivered at the National Conference on 'Elections, 2007: Protecting the Peoples' Mandate' organised by the International Human Rights Law Group, on 25 August 2005.
- Adejumbi, Said, 2004, 'Civil Society and Federalism in Nigeria', *Regional and Federal Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer, pp. 211-231.
- Adejumbi, Said, 2000, 'Elections in Africa: A Fading Shadow of Democracy?', *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No 1, pp.59-75.
- Adejumbi, Said, 2002, 'Democracy and Good Governance in Africa: Theoretical and Methodological Issues', in A. Bujra and S. Adejumbi, eds., *Breaking Barriers, Creating New Hopes: Democracy, Civil Society and Good Governance in Africa*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press.
- Adejumbi, S., 1997, 'The Two Political Parties and the Electoral Process in Nigeria: 1989-1993', in Georges Nzongola Ntalaja and Margaret Lee, eds., *The State and Democracy in Africa*, Harare: AAPS.

- Agbaje, Adigun, 2004, 'Prospects for the Fourth Republic', in E. Gyimah-Boadi, ed., *Democratic Reform in Africa: The Quality of Progress*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp. 201-234.
- Ake, Claude, 2000, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Amuwo, K, Agbaje, A, Suberu, R. and Haurault, R., eds., 1998, *Federalism and Political Restructuring in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Anifowoshe, Remi and Babawale, Tunde, 2003, *2003 General Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Bayart, Jean-François, Ellis, Stephen, and Hibou, Beatrice, 1999, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, Oxford and Bloomington and Indianapolis: James Currey and Indiana University Press.
- Centre for Democracy and Development, 2003, 'CDD's Summary Report on the 2003 Elections in Nigeria', Lagos, Mimeo.
- Electoral Reform Network, 2001, *Nigerian Civil Society Input into the Electoral Bill 2001*, Abuja: ERN.
- Fawole, Alade, 2005, 'Voting Without Choosing: Interrogating the Crisis of Electoral Democracy in Nigeria', in Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, ed., *Liberal Democracy and its Critics in Africa: Political Dysfunction and the Struggle for Social Progress*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
- Guardian Newspaper*, 2005, 'The PDP Congresses and Convention', Editorial, *Guardian*, Lagos, 21 October.
- Haruna, Mohammed, 2001, 'The Electoral Law as Obasanjo's Defining Moment', *The Comet Newspaper*, Lagos, 19 December, p. 9.
- Ihonvbere, Julius, ed., 1989, *The Political Economy of Crisis and Underdevelopment in Africa: Selected Works of Claude Ake*, Lagos: Jad Publishers.
- Iyayi, Festus, 2005, 'Elections and Electoral Practices in Nigeria: Dynamics and Implications', *The Constitution: Journal of Constitutional Development*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June.
- Jinadu, L. Adele, 1997, 'Matters Arising: African Elections and the Problem of Electoral Administration', *African Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1-11.
- Kurfi, Ahmadu, 2005, *Nigerian General Elections, 1951-2003: My Role and Reminiscences*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- LeVan, A., Pitso Titi, C. and Adebo, B., 2004, 'Elections in Nigeria: Is the Third Time A Charm', *Journal of African Elections*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 30-47.
- Lewis, Peter, 2003, 'Nigeria: Elections in a Fragile Regime', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 3, July, pp. 131-144.
- Madunagu, Edwin, 2005, 'PDP and the Nation', *Guardian*, Lagos, 10 October.
- Mill, John Stuart, 1948, '*On Liberty*' and '*Considerations on Representative Government*', edited with an Introduction by R.B. MacCallum, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 161-174.
- Mole, Stuart, 2003, 'The 2003 Nigerian Elections: A Democratic Settlement?', *The Round Table*, July, No. 370, pp. 423-28.

- Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2002, 19 September.
- Obasanjo, Olusegun, 2004, 'Text of a Reply to Audu Ogbeh in Response to Ogbeh's letter on "Re: Anambra and other Related Matters"', 10 December.
- Obi, Amanze, 2005, 'DP versus MDD', *Daily Sun* Newspaper, Lagos, 14 November, pp. 56.
- Okurounmi, Femi, 2003, 'To Get to the Senate, You Need to Have About 1 Billion Naira', Interview in the *Saturday Punch*, Lagos, 5 April, p. 45.
- Ogunsanwo, Alaba, 2003, 'Keynote Address', in R. Anifowoshe and T. Babawale, eds., *2003 General Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Onuoha, Brown, 2003, 'Comparative Analysis of General Elections in Nigeria', in R. Anifowoshe and T. Babawale, eds., *2003 General Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Lagos: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Sunday Champion*, 23 July 2003.
- Yaqub, Nuhu, 2001, '1993 Presidential Elections in Nigeria and the alleged Use of Excessive Money: Implications for the Country's Political Culture and Future Politics', *Journal of Third World Studies*, Fall.