

Electoral Violence and Conflict in Nigeria: The 2007 Elections and the Challenges of Democratisation

(A section of the paper I presented at the 27th Annual Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA) Conference at Benue State University, Makurdi, 16th-19th 2008)

By

Mashood Omotosho

Department of International Relations,
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

momotoso@oauife.edu.ng
mashomotosho@yahoo.com
234-0823-612-722

Introduction

Elections have meaning for most people only in a democratic context, because they lead to the choice of decision makers by the majority of the citizens. Elections and democracy are therefore inextricably linked. Electoral rigging and other fraudulent electoral practices frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted or would have voted into office someone other than the eventual winner. The inability to conduct “free and fair” election has made the country the butt of bad jokes in the international community.¹ The recent development in the political scene are clear indications that there is no end in sight to the crisis and instability that characterised our nascent democracy. Why it that no improvement has been made in the way elections are conducted in the country?

After 13 years of military rule (1966-1979) the Federal Military Government handed over power to a new civilian government on October 1, 1979 and Nigeria's Second Republic was born amid great expectations.² The first elections under the 1979 constitution were held but unfortunately the transition to civilian rule did not result in a democratically accountable government for Nigerians. The outcome of the elections conducted in 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2007 has been so fiercely contested that the survival of the democratic order has been compromised in many ways.³ Electoral fraud or election rigging has serious implications for Nigeria's democratic future because the phenomenon is growing rather than declining. The result has therefore been the subversion of the democratic process rather than its consolidation. Not surprisingly, major political conflicts have emerged around contestation over elections. The objective of this paper,

therefore, is to focus on the electoral violence and conflicts in Nigeria by highlighting the issues involved and their impact on the country's nascent democracy, and to suggest solutions to these perennial problems and challenges.

Electoral Malpractices in Nigeria's Political Settings

The military overthrew both the First and Second Republics after controversial elections that took place in 1965 and 1983. The Third Republic under Gen. Ibrahim Babangida was stillborn, as he annulled the 1993 Presidential elections. The principal forms of rigging and fraud were perfected in the elections of 1964, 1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003 and 2007.⁴ The elections so far conducted by the various federal electoral bodies since independence, i.e. Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have been marred by serious allegation of fraud and violence. During the 1979 general elections in the country, five major parties, the Unity Part of Nigeria (UPN), National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP), Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP) and the Peoples Redemption Party (PRP) competed for power. After the general elections, Alhaji Shehu Usman Aliyu Shagari, of the NPN was declared winner of the Presidential Elections amidst serious controversy.

In 1983, and under the administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, Nigeria conducted its second general elections since the return to civilian politics in October 1979. The nationwide elections were again marred by widespread allegation of fraud and human rights abuses. In some areas the campaigns were even bloody; many people lost their lives in the run-up to the elections. Intimidation of voters and candidates was rife in many states of the federation, especially in the South West, sometimes referred to as the "Wild-Wild-West". Vote buying was also common; ballot boxes were stolen; and result tallies were falsified.⁵ Three months into the new Government, on 31 December 1983, another military coup d'etat again aborted Nigeria's journey in democratic governance.

On June 12 1993, millions of Nigerians voted in the best election ever conducted in the history of Nigeria. Nigerians made their sacred choices, under a peaceful and congenial atmosphere.⁶ Adequate organisational, logistical and security facilities were put in place to enhance the conduct of a free and fair election.

Unfortunately, in the most flagrant, capricious and inexplicable manner, the 1993 presidential elections, contested by Chief M.K.O. Abiola and Alhaji Bashir Tofa, were annulled, an act almost dealt a fatal blow to the national psyche. The integrity of the federation was severely tested. Thus the Third Republic under General Ibrahim Babangida was inconclusive because of the annulled 1993 presidential elections.⁷

After the prolonged transition of General Ibrahim Babangida and the interim government of Chief Earnest Shonekan, General Sanni Abacha and General Abdul Salami, Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999 after a total of over three decades of military rule. The results of the 1999 general elections indicated that the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) had more national spread by winning in 21 states across the country. The All Peoples Party (APP) came second with nine states, while the Alliance for Democracy (AD), which held sway in the Yoruba Southwest, had six states. The general belief is that the 1999 general elections took place without systematic rigging, although, it should be emphasised that the elections were also as contentious as all previous ones.

Another general election was conducted in 2003, and President Olusegun Obasanjo was returned to power for the second time. It should be noted that those elections were so badly flawed that they were described as the “most fraudulent elections” in the history of the country.⁸ In fact, the election results proved and confirmed that proper National Assembly, Gubernatorial and Presidential elections were not conducted in accordance with the INEC guidelines and the electoral law. Rather, figures were literally manufactured’ in government houses or collation centres to abide by pre-determined results for President Obasanjo and the PDP’s victory. The alleged electoral malpractices by of the ruling People’s Democratic Party were regarded as the most sophisticated in the electoral history of Nigeria.⁹ Many foreign and domestic observers also noted widespread irregularities and fraud in the elections at all levels, and concluded that the minimum standards for democratic elections were not met in some states of the federation. The report by Nigerian observers confirmed numerous reports allegation of fraud in many states across the country.¹⁰ The varied forms of electoral malpractice and the high number of incidents of electoral violence rekindled old fears that the basic

institutional weaknesses associated with the electoral system could bring the democratic experiment to untimely grief.¹¹

Fraud and Malpractices in the 2007 General Elections

The 2007 general elections did not live up to the hopes and expectations of the Nigerian people and the process was not considered credible, although they marked the first peaceful transfer of power between civilian governments in Nigeria's history. Nonetheless, and far from improving on the 1999 and 2003 elections, the conduct of the election was perceived as the worst. Charges of corruption, vote buying, vote rigging, lack of transparency and other voting irregularities abound. There were also instances of politically motivated killings in the run-up to the elections. Many political parties, especially parties of incumbents, relied on electoral fraud rather than popularity to stay in power. The various electoral malpractices that characterised the 2007 general election include:

a) Inclusion of fictitious names on voters' registers: Often times, politicians mobilise their supporters heavily during voters' registration exercises. Besides ensuring that their supporters have the franchise through the voters' cards, politicians used crooked means to register "multitude of voters" sometimes with fictitious names and at other times, with the names of family members leaving in the towns and cities or even abroad and those that are even dead. It did not matter whether if such family members had registered in the towns and cities they lived or not.

b) Illegal compilation of separate voters' lists: This is a crucial step in the entire dragnet of rigging. Politicians solicit the "co-operation" of appointed electoral officers right from the level of the electoral officers at the polling booths to the resident electoral commissioners. Oftentimes, "deals" are struck between the politicians and such electoral officers in such a way that the operation is mapped out neatly well ahead of the polls. This way, elections day is merely a formality to fulfil righteousness and to give it the veneer of a democratic conduct.

c) Illegal printing of voters' cards: Desperate politicians in a desperate bid to sweep polls engaged in the criminal acts of printing electoral materials like ballot

papers or result sheets after "sighting" the specimen model copies from the electoral body. With that, and working with a syndicate of other electoral rogues, such politicians cooked up figures and manipulate the election results, and with such a fraudulent instrument in place, aided by a network of accomplices.

d) Illegal possession of ballot boxes: Where a candidate feels that in a free and fair contest he or she may not be able to defeat his/her opponent, he/she may resort to thuggery mainly to scare the supporters of his/her opponent, so that they will either withdraw their support from the opponent or be so sufficiently intimidated that they will come out to vote on election day. That way, only the supporters of a particular candidate will have the "security cover" to go to the polling stations on election day.

e) Stuffing of ballot boxes: This type of rigging is done with the active connivance of both electoral officers and security agents. As the name suggests, it involves the indiscriminate thumb printing of ballot papers in favour of a pre-determined candidate in order for him to win. Most times, the act is so perpetrated when the turn-out at the polls is perceived as low. The fraudulent officers agreed to utilise all the ballot papers by thumb-printing the ballot papers themselves and then stuff the ballot boxes.

f) Multiple Voting: Multiple voting involves the issuance of more than one ballot paper to a voter several times within the voting period. This was done with the active participation and connivance of the electoral officers. The purpose of ink-painting the thumb of a voted person during polling is aimed at checking this possibility, but it was ineffective in the face of the deliberate ploys used by electoral officers to pervert the system.

g) Voting by children: This is when an unauthorised person who is not up to voting age are given voters' cards, apparently by the "area politician" who had registered a "multitude" during the registration exercise. In order to prove that he has the voting crowd, he distributed cards to underage persons after instructing them how and where to vote during election.

Other forms of electoral fraud include, illegal printing of forms used for collation and declaration of election results; deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas; announcing results for places where no elections were held; unauthorised announcement of election results; harassment of candidates, agents, and voters; sudden change of the list of electoral officials; ballot box-switching and inflation of figures. While these malpractices were isolated in some areas, in other areas, they were part of a grandiose systematic plan to either disenfranchise the voters or distort the votes.¹²

Another major problem was that incumbent governments meddled with the electoral process as including their unwillingness to tackle threats of violence to undermine the polls nationwide. In 2007, INEC did not, obviously, adhere to the essential signposts on the road map to free and fair elections in the country.¹³

Political Violence and Ethnic Insurgencies During the Election

Our recent study showed that the major ethnic groups and leading political parties were deeply enmeshed in internal crisis with a high level of violence,¹⁴ which led to the assassinations of some party leaders. Scores of such incidents were reported across the country. Between June and August 2006, three gubernatorial candidates were assassinated.¹⁵ The run-up to the April 2007 elections was violent, as campaigning in many areas was punctuated with political killings, bombings and armed clashes between supporters of rival political parties. The violence formed part of a broader pattern of violence and abuses that is inherent in Nigeria's still largely unaccountable political system.¹⁶

Local and international observers in the 2007 elections concurred that fraud and violence occurred in most parts of the country, and were perpetrated by the political parties supporters. Yet, official election results were announced, and majority of the incumbent state governors were re-elected. In some locations, there was no pretence at staging elections. For example, many polling stations stopped voting almost as soon they started or postponed them to the following day i.e. in the Niger Delta. As a result, angry youths burnt down INEC offices in protest at the postponement of the elections.¹⁷ In other locations, armed thugs snatched ballot boxes or vandalised election materials. An election observer described vehicles full of PDP thugs screeching into polling stations, and large

numbers of youths jumping out and leaving the doors open to show that they were full of guns and ammunition.

Electoral Malpractices and Political Violence: Bane to Viable Democracy in Nigeria

Incessant political killings and explosion of violent ethno-religious and communal conflicts in Nigeria have eroded the widespread expectation that the inauguration of the civilian administration in 1999 would usher in a democratic dispensation.¹⁸ Electoral fraud and political violence not only challenged the authority of the Nigerian state as the custodian of the legitimate instruments of coercion, but also posed systemic threats to democratic governance. The unconstitutional interruptions through flawed electoral processes and dramatic upsurge in deadly clashes between and among the various political parties during the election period have continued to affect the country's nascent democracy.

The perceived failure of democratically elected governments to conduct free and fair elections and end their complacent attitude towards election-related violence are also probably, the greatest threats to democracy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

If Nigeria wants to attain sustainable democracy, government must be able to ensure that the citizens are to exercise their civic rights in free and fair elections and to hold their leaders to account through democratic means. Election to political office must be less dependent on the strategic deployment of corruption and violence. If this process is to start, then future elections must be seen to be credible; less violent, better organised and more reflective of the actual decisions made by voters than all previous elections. Finally, if the cycle of violence and corruption that pass for political competition in Nigeria is to be broken, credible free and fair elections are the proper starting points. As long as electoral malpractices continue, democracy will never be the government of the people, by the people and for the people; and the wishes of the people will remain a distant dream.

Endnotes

- 1 Bayo Adekanye (1990), "Elections in Nigeria: Problems, Strategies and Options," *Nigerian Journal of Electoral and Political Behaviour*, 1, no. 1.

- 2 Ahmadu Kurfi (2005), *Nigerian General Elections 1951–2003: My Roles and Reminiscences*. Abuja: (Abuja: Spectrum Books)
- 3 “Nigeria’s Elections: Avoiding a Political Crisis,” in *Africa Report* No. 123, Dakar/Brussels, 2007.
- 4 Jibrin Ibrahim (2007), “Nigeria’s 2007 Elections: The Fitful Path to Democratic Citizenship,” *United States Institute of Peace Special Reports*
- 5 Ahmadu Kurfi (2005), *Nigerian General Elections 1951 – 2003: My Roles and Reminiscences*, (Abuja: Spectrum Books)
- 6 *Ibid*
- 7 Abubakar Momoh (1993), "The Legacy of Military Rule on Democratisation" CODESRIA Conference on the Expansion of Nigerian Democratic Space, Lagos,
- 8 Jibrin Ibrahim (2007),*op.cit.*
- 9 *Ibid*
- 10 Transition Monitoring Group, *Report 2003*. p.120
- 11 Jibrin Ibrahim (2007),*op.cit.*
- 12 *Ibid*
- 13 S. Okechukwu Mezu (2007), *Nigerian Elections 2007:Chronicle of Shame and Deceit*, (Baltimore: Black Academy Press.)
- 14 Jibrin Ibrahim (2003), *Democratic Transition in Anglophone West Africa*, (Dakar: CODESRIA.)
- 15 Mashood Omotosho (2007) “Political Assassinations and the Prospects of Democracy in Nigeria”, (*Being a Paper Presented at the 1st International*

Conference, Faculty of Administration, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, 5th-7th September.)

- 16 L. Ibrahim, and S. Egwu, (eds.) (2005), "Nigeria Elections 2007: Defending the People's Mandate", *Global Rights*, Abuja.
- 17 Nigeria: Elections Threatened by Violence and Abuse of Power, (April 4, 2007) <http://hrw-news.c.topica.com/maagaEiabxDxBbqdkILb> accessed on 2nd November, 2008)
- 18 Mashood Omotosho (2007) *op.cit*