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ELECTORAL TURBULENCE IN NIGERIAN POLITY: A NATIONAL QUESTION

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Abstract

This paper intends to x-ray burning issues in electoral process which often culminate in crisis and turbulence. We are seeking answers to the following questions in electoral abnormality and irregularity; where lies the fault? Is the fault with electoral organization or deficiency in the Electoral Act? What are the implications on the corporate existence in the society? These questions provide a broad cover for other issues pertaining to the nature and processes of elections. These broad questions are also central to the concern of electorate against the backdrop of "One man, one vote". One of the questions could have contributed majorly to the violence that trailed all our elections during and, lately, post-elections of 2011 general elections. We, therefore, attempt a review of some activities in Nigeria general elections in the past and proffer a recipe for future elections in this country.

Introduction

Hopes were high at the verge of Nigerian general elections for 2011 having experienced crisis-ridden and acrimonies in the past democratic elections since independence. Appeals and persuasions went out through the print and electronic media urging the citizenry and politicians to get it right this time around. Assurances were proclaimed by Government officials and politicians including Chairmen of Political Parties, of a peaceful atmosphere and to play the game according to the rules. The underplayed clause of the Electoral Act of 'One man, one vote' was re-echoed prominently, first, by the Governor of Edo State, Mr Adams Oshiomhole, and others followed suit. Oshiomhole had intended it to truncate the prevailing guts of 'God fatherism' which had gained ground in Edo State and which was glaringly used in the past elections. 'One man, one vote's doctrine is designed to draw the attention of corrupt and aggressive politicians to be orderly, discipline and check the excess of political parties in their actions towards smooth, reliable, free and fair elections as against the bestial and jungle justice that characterized past elections. The past elections had been marked with mudslinging, violence, maiming, 'do or die' slogan and blatant electoral malpractices.

The Concept of Electoral Turbulence

There are many and various factors that are responsible for electoral turbulence in a given democratic elections. A group that loses faith in the efficacy of conventional

political channels and modes of action often sees violent protest as its only alternative. (Roskin et al, 1991). Also, individuals edged out of political power are extremely dissatisfied with the existing order and are probably greatly frustrated. Therefore, "they proposed not only that the system be immediately changed at its foundations but that it be changed by violent means".

A situation could also arise when after an election a party perceived itself to be the winner of the election but was denied the victory, would react adversely. Such a situation can generate intense ethnic, populist and regional antipathy particularly in a State or region of the country where it was felt that injustice had been meted out by the power that be.

Elections in Nigeria in the past four Republics have often been characterized by a lot of irregularities and malpractices. The disturbing practice, to a large extent, is deliberate and calculated by politicians and at times by electoral officials intended to bias the electoral process to their advantage. These electoral vices start from the registration of voters. Registration of voters is done by the electoral officers in such a way either 'to deflate or inflate both, the eligible voters in a particular place, for either promised or anticipated reward'. This explains why in Delta State, the population of one infinitesimal local government area in the riverine area outnumbered two large Local Government Council areas put together in the last Re-run elections in Delta State. The essence of the increment is to enhance the electoral fortune of the candidate of their choice or from their area. All this dishonesty and fabrications can culminate in questionable election results leading to electoral turbulence.

The Concept of National Question

The National question can be perceived to be what constitute a multitude of questions relating to political, economic, issues and social well-being of any nation. A fundamental aspect of the national question relates to the problem of bringing together culturally and ethnically diverse groups in the country to co-exist as one nation. The second aspect of the national question concerns how the individuals with these diverse characteristics feel towards their state at large. The third aspect of the national question examines the different methods adopted by nation state to tackle the various issues relating to the national question. (Offiong 1995).

In effect, the national question has to do with arresting the problems of social development, elimination of national oppression and inequality, overcoming hindrances to the formation of nations and ensuring the freedom for the development of peoples. Perhaps, the national question could be better comprehended when Ajayi (1992) sees the national question:

Essentially, the national question concerns the fundamental basis of our political existence, that is to say our co-existence of Nigerians as individual and cultural group within one political system or state. It involves the sharing of power and management of our Resources in terms of access, control and distribution...

The implication of the statements as quoted above is the need for corporate existence politically, economically, socially and culturally where a segment or a region will not perpetuate political dominance over others, where leadership and control of the nation is not exclusive to same segment or region. To behave and act otherwise will prop up national question and, if unanswered, leads to turbulence or anarchy. With all the historical occurrences of crisis-ridden elections in Nigeria either combative or outright mayhem during or post-elections, when shall Nigeria conduct an election devoid of crisis or, at least, manageable crisis without recording deaths and destruction of property?

Issues Leading to Political Turbulence

(i) Formation of Political Party

The evolution of political parties in Nigeria dated back to 1923, with the formation of Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) with Egerton-Shyngle as President. But, for brevity and space, we shall here emphasize the tenets, discipline and requirements and stress the roles they play leading to political turbulence in an election period. It is on record that most parties in Nigeria sprang from cultural clubs with parochial orientation and therefore ethnically based. We also had the confrontational defected groups. For example, Action Group (AG), was an off-shoot of Egbe Omo Oduduwa, while the Northern People's Congress (NPC) emerged from *Jam'iyyar Mutanem Arewa* (JMA). And second, probably from 1996, were the defected groups (break-away) from original party. These defected groups formed a political party in opposition and competition to the original party. They easily assumed a name and slogan and the movement commenced. This is easily accorded recognition because of the absence of party clear political ideology in Nigeria as we find in America and Britain.

It was because of the unnurtured and parochial undertone of the parties in the first Republic, that the Constitution Drafting Committee, the Constituent Assembly and the Obasanjo Federal Military Government, working in concert, introduced certain

requirements before any party could function as a political party in the Second Republic. These requirements, as contain in Degree No. 73 of Dec. 29, 1977 and as amended in Degree No. 23 of Sept 21, 1978, include the following. These are also entrenched in 1999 constitution.

1. No association by whatever name called shall function as a Political Party unless it is registered as a Political Party by the Electoral Commission.
 - a. The names and addresses of its national officers are registered with the Electoral Commission.
 - b. Its membership is open to every Nigerian citizen irrespective of his place of origin, religion, ethnic group or sex.
 - c. Its name, emblems or motto has no ethnic or religious connotations, and does not give the appearance that the Association's activities are confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria.

Despite these stringent conditions, which obviously intended to inform and accord the political parties status and enable them to perform their institutional and democratic functions, the parties that emerged to contest elections since then and now have abused the democratic process. Their activities carried ample ethnic and religious connotations and the requirements for parties to properly establish branch offices in each of at least two-thirds of the states in the Federation were jettisoned. As at least count before April 2011 general elections, Electoral Commission registered 63 political parties. Where are the branch offices in the 36 states including Delta State? Or are the majority of the political parties' base and activities restricted to the state of the founders?

Even though, we may agree that their functions and activities have a lot of impact on the Nigerian democratic process, their impact has been more on the negative side than the positive. Most parties have no national outlook. In a system where the struggle for power is based on the winner-takes-all, the quest for political power becomes a matter of life and death (Do or die). As a result, etiquette, norms, ethos, ideals and procedures are thrown to the dogs and Machiavellian strategies are brought into play. Consequently, political parties look at electoral process as electoral wars with an organized 'armies'. The effect of this reaction on the democratic process is that the game of politics could not be played according to the rules.

(ii) Party Discipline and Electoral Process

The origin of political parties in Nigeria can easily be located within historical-crisis theory. The environment from which political parties emerge determines to large extent their organizational forms, strategies and behavior which in turn affects the country's democratic process. According to Tyoden (1994), when parties emerge

from natural democratic processes resulting from the interplay of political forces and the unfolding of the political process in the society, they will tend to reflect the dominant social, sectional and class interests of the society, as well as the personal idiosyncrasies and orientation of the individuals who were instrumental in their emergence in both their composition and mode of operation. But this, however, has not been the actual mode of formation in the early days. The two of the political parties of the First Republic, as mentioned above, emerged from socio-cultural organizations, willfully created for the promotion of ethnic interests and identities and not from "natural democratic processes". The implication of this development for the process is that there will be no national consciousness and the competition between the political parties will be interpreted to mean a competition between the ethnic groups represented by the political parties. This has been the noticeable mentality of Nigerian political parties. Hence, the struggle for political power between the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and other political parties in the South was confined to be a struggle between the Hausa/Fulani North and the other ethnic group in the South in the First Republic. No much change in the attitudinal behavior in the Second Republic with (NNDP) and Action Group (AG). A wrong signal and bad precedent have been put in place which is permeating to the present decade. The *ethnic* and *religious* considerations weigh more heavily on party members and indiscipline becomes the order of the day as each group tries hard to project its own principal candidate at the detriment of others. Political thuggery and lawless party supporters are organized for fighting 'electoral wars' by those party candidates who lost at general elections and even at Primaries elections.

Another act of indiscipline observed among the political parties are the incessant cross carpeting. This is achievable because of ideological fluidity (sometimes no party identified ideology at all), ethnic and religious connotations and, essentially, parochial orientation. This indiscipline is also extended to face-offs in intra and inter party minor misunderstanding. Official wrangling, accusations and counter-accusations washing of dirty linens in the public, litigations, break-away or fractionalizations become a common place.

Another cause is the fact that political awareness, level of enlightenment and exposure in Nigeria is so low that some Nigerians can afford to sell their voter cards for as little as twenty naira or exchange them for fish or bottle of beer. We therefore cannot expect enduring commitment for a particular political party and no accurate forecast or predictions can be made in relation to electoral processes. This definitely will have adverse impact on the democratic process resulting in negative behavior, action and a struggle that ends up in political turbulence. We have had records of this turbulence in the past electoral processes.

Precedents of Election Crisis

The springboard of turbulent elections in an independent Nigeria was recorded in 1962 with Action Group crisis. The cause was centred on personality clash between Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the party leader and Chief S.L. Akintola, his deputy. Tensions were high, arsons, killings, hooliganism were let loose after the expulsion of Akintola in Jos conference. A state of emergency was consequently declared in Western region. The crisis of 1962 was one of the remote causes of outbreak of violence and civil disorder in Western Region in 1965.

On Oct. 11, 1965, Western region election was conducted in a frenzy and chaotic atmosphere with wide spread electoral malpractices as in burning of ballot boxes, intimidation, abnormal counting of votes etc. Prior to the election, electioneering campaign was fraught with acts of hooliganism, killings, assassination of supporters, arsons, etc.

The 1979 general elections were not without pandemonium. It was the first Presidential system of government. Only five political parties were registered out of 52 political groups who bided for registration. The unregistered groups engaged in campaign of calumny and marginalization. But, the major issue in 1979 Presidential contest was the dilemma of interpreting 2/3 of 19 states. There were spotted incidents of political disturbances here and there. UPN, the closest rival, headed for Election Tribunal and on to Supreme Court where Justice Atanda Williams upheld the verdict of the election tribunal, 'maintaining that the election of Shagari was justifiable and not out of place'.

The 1983 general elections had slight changes in arrangement. This time, the Presidential election came first, to be followed by Gubernatorial, Senatorial, House, and State Legislatures. This arrangement attracted criticisms. It was argued in some quarters that, this new arrangement was mainly to favour the party in power. However, Alhaji Shehu Shagari (NPN) was again declared the winner after the August 6, 1983 elections. There were allegations of massive rigging, falsification of election figures in many centres. The party in government was accused of being responsible. There were reports of rioting, looting, arsons, violent demonstrations in some areas. The outcome of this ugly scene, as a recurrent decimal, was the military intervention of Dec. 31, 1983.

The June 12, 1993, was another frightful political turbulence in the history of Nigeria elections. Lives and properties were callously wasted through the annulment of presidential elections which was widely claimed to be won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola. The inordinate ambition and unpatriotic behavior of the former military dictator,

Gen. Babangida, who annulled the election on the pretext that the 'polls had been irredeemably sullied by legal and administrative complications'. Of course, tensions mounted and there was public restiveness and lives and properties were wasted.

This narrative is a simple patch of actuality. There were blood spilling and vandalization of billions of naira properties across the country over elections. The 1999, 2003 and 2007 (Obasanjo/Yar'Adua) did not record less political turbulence. In fact, there were actually demonstration of criminality and hooliganism at play. When will Nigeria be devoid and cleansed of the hullabaloo and anarchy? We ask again!

Impact of 2011 General Elections

For once, it has been claimed in Nigeria and some foreign countries that this year general elections are about the fairest of all Nigeria elections. Foreign observers too lend their credence to the claim. Yes, it might be fair; was it free and credible too? We opine that it was a smoke screen. If the electorates are human beings, citizens and potential voters, and the same electorates are being used as sacrificial lambs, where lays the freedom and credibility of such elections?

We had thought the elections would sail smoothly with the slogan of 'one man, one vote' which was echoed by all Government and party Chairmen including Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) of Gen. Buhari. Our hopes were dashed when election scheduled for April 9, 2011, was deferred and some elites were clamouring for the deferment of the whole elections. Then, the presidential election of April 16 was trailed with unprecedented macabre theatre. In a system where politicians value political power more than humanity, the quest for it is insatiable.

The 2011 general elections were indisputably characterized with turbulence and civil disturbances. The Nigerian boys and girls (particularly the stark illiterates, the *almajiris* in the North who knew not the meaning of election and the objective of voting) were engaged and armed to break heads, snatch ballot boxes, stuff the boxes, thumb-print thousands of ballot papers, and commit arson and murder.

Some of the victims of the hoodlums' mayhem were National Youth Service Corpers drafted by INEC to assist INEC officials as they were comparatively assessed to be neutral and dispassionate in the discharge of their duties. Comments from certain personalities involved in the elections were suggestive that the turbulence was pre-meditated. For instance, Gen. Buhari was reported to have advised his blind supporters "to lynch anyone who conspires to rig the elections". He was also quoted to have no intention of going to election Tribunal or Appeal Court but threatened

that "whoever rigs should be prepared to face the consequences". Pastor Bakare, his running mate, was not flawless in his utterances when he threatened too, the eruption of 'a wild wild North' in semblance of 'wild wild North' in 1965 elections in Western region (Vanguard April 17, 2011).

We have no doubt that there were pockets and sometimes, large scale of election malpractices in forms of rigging, intimidation, deprivation of voting cards and rights and coercion. We are yet to believe that the Nigeria of 21st century, there were acts of cannibalism, mayhem, vandalism, arson, carnage, electoral chicanery and bombings after elections. More callous, were the butchering of the young ones at the broom of their youths – the NYSC Corpers, for the crime they did not commit. These were the ugly scenes in some states of the North particularly Bauchi, Kano, Kaduna etc after the Presidential elections. Fingers were pointed at the CPC's vandals and mob whose violence claimed many lives and destroyed properties worth billions of Naira. The reason for their action, it is argued was, "that if they do not have Presidency, there will be no Nigeria". In reaction to this assertion, Osuntokun (Vanguard 8th May), says, there has been this psychological fixation among politicians that elections cannot be won without a resort to self-help. In every election in Nigeria for decades now, the nation was subjected to fratricidal struggle, horror and massive destruction of lives and properties because, perhaps, of primordial assumptions and unenlightenment. The heterogeneous composition of Nigeria is not far from Mill's (1958) assertion that;

Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities. Among a people without fellow-feeling, especially if they speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government cannot exist.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have attempted in this paper to discuss the issue of the national question as it affects the electoral turbulence in Nigeria, in pre-elections, during and the post-elections and we demonstrated that the national question may be an unending question without adequate answers found. Before the 2011 general elections, efforts were made by Executive and Legislature to amend the Constitution and Electoral Act as a strategy to resolving the national question for smooth and peaceful transition, yet people describe the turbulence in 2011 elections to be worse than 2003 and 2007 put together. Part of the failure to resolve national question

perhaps, lies on the part of our political leadership not having the political will or the ability to find lasting solutions to this specific question and maybe, others. We also examined the circumstances under which Nigeria political parties emerged, their organizational strategies and the implication of party indiscipline, electoral processes and party opinions on elections. Consequently, we recommend the following:

- i. It should be made mandatory for the leadership of all political parties to attend National Seminars before elections. There, they will be educated on the tenets and objectives of conducting general elections to enable them gear their energies towards nationhood.
- ii. Prune down the number of registered political parties which was, at the last election (2011) 63 parties. This should be reduced to a manageable size of 3 parties. This number may not create room or basis upon which individual party will engage in a vicious struggle for one political placement. After all, the two-party system (NRC & SDP) though imposed on Nigeria, produced adjudge free and fair general elections in 1993.
- iii. Break-away groups or factions should not be registered. The factionalized groups from original party appear more repugnant and aggressive in its poise for keen competition and full of campaign of calumny. They may not have solid foundation and influence to excel but they want to win at all cost to spite the original party. Such new groups should not be registered.

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