

**INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC)
AND THE CONDUCT OF 2011 ELECTION IN NIGERIA: A PARADIGM SHIFT**

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ABSTRACT

It is an established fact that Nigerian's electoral process has always been marred with irregularities; the 2011 election is a paradigm shift in the history of electioneering in the country. Though some challenges were encountered in the conduct of the elections, INEC was given a pass mark by both local and international observers and thus made the general election a watershed. This makes it imperative in this paper to examine the conduct of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria. The paper infers that if the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) can be built out of political influence and move away from status quo where a political party dominates the constitution of drivers of INEC there is every tendency that there will be a better conduct of election in the future. The paper taps various means of getting relevant materials to put this study together for onward academic utilization and to reshape the conduct of Nigeria's forthcoming general elections.

KEY WORDS: Election, Paradigm, Democracy, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

The 2011 general election, the fourth in the series of National Elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) since Nigerian's return to electoral democracy in 1999, marked a watershed in the history of the conduct of elections in the country being the first election that was appraised by both local and international observers as being

credible and transparent. Unlike the previous elections that were characterized with high level of malpractices and rigging of highest order, the 2011 election to some extent showcased the wishes of the electorates.

The conduct of 2011 elections in Nigeria could be traced to the voters' registration exercise which took place from January 15 to February 7, 2011 witnessed high level of enthusiasm with which Nigerians turned out massively and queued up to be registered. At the end of the registration exercise, 62 million eligible voters were registered (The Nation, April 10, 2011). Interestingly, the voters' registration exercise being the first major assignment under the head of Attahiru Jega, a Professor of Political Science, after the sacking of Maurice Iwu, the former INEC chairman, was given applause due to the manner and methods designed to carry out the exercise. With the release of election time tables which was slated thus: April 2, National Assembly Election, April 9, Presidential Election and April 16 Gubernatorial and State House of Assembly election respectively, the politicians had the floor by embarking on rigorous campaign. However, due to logistic constrain, the election time table was revisited and rescheduled. The postponement of the election led to the conduct of National Assembly Election on 9 April and that of Presidential was slated for April 16 and finally the Gubernatorial and House of Assembly Elections were held on 26th of April, 2011 (Daily Trust, April 28,2011) Notwithstanding the change in the timing, the election went on peacefully and witnessed massive turn up from the electorates. The security agencies also ensured conducive atmosphere during the electioneering process

ON THE CONCEPT OF ELECTION

Election is the heartbeat of democratic setting. Elections are among the most ubiquitous of contemporary political institutions and voting is the single act of political participation undertaken by a majority of adults in a majority of nations in the world today (Rose and Mossawir, 1974). Democratic virtue can be enhanced vis a vis free and fair elections. As rightly observed by Ojo (2007:5), election is qualified as the process of choosing people for particular jobs by voting. He argues further by giving the examples of two major types of election-direct

and indirect. The former emphasizes direct participation of voters in election. Each voter goes to the poll and records a vote in favour of one candidate or another. The candidate with the maximum number of votes is declared elected. This method is said to be the most popular and is used in all democratic countries.

On the other hand, indirect election does not give room for direct participation of voters electing their representatives but elect an intermediary body that has the final decision. The final choice of electing the representative is not that of the general mass of voters but of the intermediary body of electors whom the general mass of voters had elected in the first instance (Kapur, 2006:50)

However, election became imperative as a result of development of the idea of representative democracy due to the impossibility of direct representation in the modern society. In essence, elections play an important role in the life of a nation. It is one of essential ways by which citizens choose their leaders and by so doing contribute meaningfully to the identification of the kind of development they would like to see (Albert, 2007:132). Thus elections are significant because they confer legitimacy to leaders and governments when they are democratically conducted but generate legitimacy crises when persons and governments that are not the true choice of the people are foisted on them (Nwolise, 2007:156)

In the final analysis, elections demonstrate that political power derives from the people and is held in trust for them; and that is to the people that political leaders must account for their action. In the last resort only the possibility of being turned out of office ensures that those elected fulfill their trust and maintain the standards of public office, and guarantee those changes in the personal and policies of government that changing circumstances require (David and Kevin, 1995:35)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Due to the nature of the study that focuses on the conduct of 2011 general elections in Nigeria, structural functionalism would be used to anchor the role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) during the electioneering process. As it is known that structural functionalism as a theory to the study of political phenomenon tries to explain the basic function of the political structures in the political system and it is also a tool of investigation. In essence, it explains the relationships between the parts (structures) on one hand and between the parts and the whole (political system) on the other hand. The relationship is explained in terms of the functions of each. (Olaniyi, 2001:73)

Considering the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, it can be observed that the conduct of the elections which was appraised to have been credible witnessed positive role from the electoral commission. The commission which happens to be a structure contributed its role in ensuring free and fair election that produced representatives of the people based on the electorates' decisions. The magnificent impact of the electoral body enhanced the sustainability of the entire political system. The argument here is that peaceful political transition is achieved through the credibility of the conduct of election by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The electoral body helps to maintain the system because it performs the tasks. However, the functions are not necessarily the monopoly of the electoral body, other structures like the Civil Liberty Organizations (CLO) and some other election observers team assisted in carrying out some of their functions that ensured transparent, credible, free and fair elections in the country.

THE CONDUCT OF THE 2011 GENERAL ELECTIONS

It is an established fact that the success of any election must be supported with integrity of credible voters' registration because pre-election rigging include the manipulation of voter register, a document that is considered the foundation of credible election. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was able to compile an acceptable voter's registration list and which contributed to the transparent and acceptable voters' registration list and which contributed to the transparent exercise of the voting system. Not only that, the electoral body

made a remarkable progress during the party primaries by maintaining neutrality and emphasizing on the section 33 of the Electoral Act which makes it clear that no political party shall be allowed to change or substitute its candidate whose name has been submitted pursuant to section 32 of this Act, except in the case of death or withdrawal by the candidates' (Electoral Act, 2010)

For different reason, the 2011 general election was applauded and appreciated; the elections salvaged the bad image heaped onto the country by the scandalous conduct of the 2007 exercise. Although in no way flawless, the performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under Attahiru Jega's watch was a far cry from the disgraceful election conducted by the same organization under the chairmanship of Maurice Iwu (Nigerian Tribune, 13 May, 2011)

One factor that accounted for the glaring difference between the 2007 and 2011 elections is the critical question of leadership. In 2007 the former President Olusegun Obasanjo publicly and unabashedly declared that it was going to be a do or die affair. However, unlike the Electoral body that exhibited gross ineptitude and downright insincerity in the 2007 general election, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) maintained some level of neutrality and impartiality during the conduct of the 2011 general elections, though the President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, displayed political will that ensured free and fair content. This argument can be juxtaposed with the outcome of election results in some state whereby power of incumbency did not count.

Not only that, the manner in which election materials were distributed to various polling units was characterized with transparency and fairness. Most election materials arrived on time and electorates were accredited before normal voting commenced. On the part of election observers they were duly accredited and were also allowed to watch the distribution of election materials, conduct of the voting, sorting and counting of ballots and announcement of results. Although most of rules guiding election observation were highlighted from the Electoral body and even electorates by the observers contributed to the success recorded in the 2011 elections.

The entire process of the 2011 elections was widely adjudged as transparent. To a considerable extent, the open/secret system of balloting blocked the loopholes usually exploited by unscrupulous politicians to perpetrate electoral fraud at polling stations. The novel idea of bringing the National Youth Service Corps participants to serve as adhoc electoral officials greatly diminished the chances of multiple thumb-printing of ballot papers. The involvement of University Dons as returning officers enhanced the integrity of the elections. Although a number of short comings were identified, election monitors both local and international attested to the credibility of the elections (Tribune, May 13, 2011).

CHALLENGES

There is nowhere in the world where absoluteness can be attained during electioneering process, the 2011 general elections in Nigeria despite being applauded, there were shortcomings observed before, during and after the conduct of the election. There were still cases of ballot box snatching in spite of the open/secret system of voting. There were also rampant cases of underage registration and voting. Adhoc INEC officials who resisted the pressure to register minors and allow them vote were threatened and harassed into submission. It is amazing to have heard cases of multiple thumb-printing despite the availability of Direct Data capture machines that were used to register prospective voters electronically.

Another sympathetic and traumatic aspect of the elections is the post election violence experienced in some Northern States. According to Nigerian's Civil Right Congress, more than five hundred were killed in the post election violence. The most painful part of the scenario was the attack and killing of youth corps members as a result of post electoral violence. This was a tragedy of monumental proportions. In fact, it was another dimension of failure on the part of government to protect its own citizens (Tribune, May 13, 2011)

The implication of this according to Civil Rights Congress (CRC) is the displacement of more than forty thousand, (40,000) people. Also, it poses threat to the country's seriousness on consolidating the nascent democracy. Because such violent attitude portrays the peoples'

political behavior and culture to be parochial that cannot be compared to contemporary western politicking.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The conduct of the 2011 elections showcased the country's readiness to embrace electoral democracy and ensure political stability. Comparatively, the 2011 general elections awakened the mandate of the electorates, unlike the 2007 elections that were flawed and condemned by both local and international observer (Omotola, 2007). Though some challenges were dictated, the electoral body (INEC) now has sufficient time to plan ahead and ensure that the lapses are corrected.

Firstly, there should be severe punishment for electoral offenders. Individuals found guilty of electoral malpractices should be dealt with in accordance with law. In fact, application of electoral laws to the latter would change the face of electioneering in the country. Adequate security is also needed to enhance hitch free electioneering exercise. Security should always be provided at both registration and polling centers to frustrate desperate politicians in their bid to pervert the nascent democracy. This can be achieved through neutrality and impartiality from the security agencies.

In addition, voter's education is another important area where government needs to strengthen. It has been observed that most of the electorates in Nigeria still have low level of political culture. Sincerely, majority of the voters still subject themselves to politics of money, favouritism, sectionalism and abuse of voting powers support. But reverse is the case in Africa and Nigeria in particular whereby money politics is the yardstick for gaining peoples' mandate (Ojo, 2008). Not until proper orientation and education is given to the mass electorates, politicking in Nigeria would still be guided by parochial political behaviour.

However, it is not the electorates only that need orientation and political education, there should be a body or commission that would serve as training institute for prospective politicians. In fact,

curriculum should be designed for this purpose so as to have requirements for contesting election. If institute of this nature is established Nigerians politicians would have the opportunity to be trained and prepared for any political positions being aspired for. With this, thuggery in politics can be easily controlled.

In the final analysis, good leadership is the major condition that can enhance sustainability of Nigeria's democracy. If elections are free and fair, the leaders too should be mindful of the fact that people deserve to enjoy dividends and virtues of democracy. Government is by representatives and the interest of the people is expected to prevail over selfish interest.

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