

Nigeria's post-election review:¹ A case for electoral reforms and grassroots advocacy strategies

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Democracy has been the world's predominant form of government in the last five decades, and there has been significant global progress on some of its key elements. However, conducting credible and transparent elections remains an immense challenge in many African countries. For instance, Nigeria's troubled elections are a constant reminder of the country's enduring "do or die" politics, poor electoral management, and endemic impunity. Such hurdles equally thwart attempts to establish democratic standards. This article stresses the necessity for effective legal frameworks that integrate every component of electoral reforms in accordance with best practices. It recommends an empirical application of the hybrid of both participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, through informed, active, and engaged citizenry.

Keywords: Democracy, Electoral reforms, Post-election review, Advocacy strategies, Engaged citizenry.

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INTRODUCTION

Some of the vital elements often associated with democracy include limited government, judicial independence, equality of citizenship, electoral accountability, social inclusion and popular participation, rule of law, as well as political rights and freedom. More pronounced among these values is the allowance democracy affords citizens to choose their representatives through elections that are free and fair. This is very fundamental to a wider process of democratization and development. But not all elections are free and fair in a democracy, given the imperfections that often mar the processes. As a result, democracy is always described as a work in progress. Despite the fact that democracy has been the world's dominant system of government for the last five decades, and that there has been significant progress on many of its elements, conducting credible and transparent elections remains an enormous task in many African countries.

Nigeria's troubled elections are a constant reminder of the country's persistent "do or die" politics, poor electoral management, and endemic impunity. Such impediments also thwart attempts to establish democratic standards. As a result, many citizens had called for post-election assessments, particularly following the 2019 general elections. They contend that

¹ Post-election reviews can be undertaken internally or externally. Internal reviews would entail that the Electoral Management Body (EMB) itself undertake an assessment of its own performance and the circumstantial factors influencing its work in the context of a concluded election. External reviews, on the other hand, are undertaken by experts outside the EMB managing the elections in question. Such reviews can be undertaken by a team of election experts recruited internationally, regionally or nationally. Alternatively, postelection reviews may be undertaken in a peer-review fashion, e.g. by an EMB from another country or by a network of EMBs (IDEA, 2014).

such exercise will help to enhance democracy and promote free and fair elections. It is conventional for participants in a post-election review and consultation to offer ideas for consideration on concerns such as voter attitudes, stakeholders' reactions to election management, polling and vote-counting, and more. The author strongly aligns with this proposition. Thus, deliberations on the seven rounds of elections conducted since 1999 should commence among all key stakeholders, bearing in mind that political progress may be delayed without renewed dialogue and cooperation among all stakeholders.

Stakeholders and the Imperativeness of the Process

According to the IRI/NDI International Election Observation Mission Report (2019), the pressing desire among Nigerians for a national conversation about the future of their democracy "must begin with addressing the clear and urgent need to resume the electoral-reform process that stalled prior to the 2019 election cycle." While INEC spearheads the initiative in partnership with election specialists, input should also come from other organized civil society groups, including political parties, traditional institutions, religious bodies, academic think tanks, non-governmental organizations, election monitoring and observer groups, as well as media organizations. Given that debate is a fundamental human feature, not merely an intellectual exercise, and if viewed from the lens of democratic legitimacy, the Nigerian government cannot but embrace this process. This idea, in the author's opinion, will further reinforce the value of cross-sectoral cooperation, good communication, and stakeholder trust as necessary elements for successful future elections.

Post-Election Review Process and Reforms: The Reality, the Conundrum.

One noticeable trend that should attract public concerns in the course of this deliberation is that while the country is tending toward two-party system, as indicated by the electoral outing of the two dominant political parties –All Progressive Congress (APC)/People's Democratic Party (PDP)– since the 2015 elections, in spite of the growing number of political parties in every election cycle, there is also a seeming shift from voter apathy to outright voter boycott. For instance, the 2019 elections recorded 35 percent voter turnout while the 2023 presidential election recorded the lowest national turnout of 25.7 percent not only in Nigeria since 1999 but the worst turnout in Africa. Why large numbers of citizens continually refuse to participate in this most basic democratic process should naturally provoke agitation. There are undoubtedly, numerous variables that contribute to low turnout, including boring voting methods, the veracity of political promises, disillusionment, institutional factors, distrust in the political process, voter suppression, apathy or contentment, fear/insecurity, and others.

Low turnout can be problematic for democracies, but in Nigeria, one might deduce from the evidence available that the citizens of the country may not have realized the utility of casting their ballots over the years. This is an indictment on the legitimacy of the current system or democratic legitimacy that the election ought to generate. Given that voter turnout is essential to the legitimacy of democratic governments, people who opt out of voting, especially those who have strong ideological motivations to do so, should not be brushed off as nuisances, because they offer a critical assessment of both the current power structures and the ruling party. Low voter turnout is not peculiar to Nigeria because it has been a global trend in recent decades as seen in many established democracies. However, it is crucial for electoral reformers and governments to guarantee that all eligible Nigerians have the opportunity to vote. In other words, for Nigeria's democracy to thrive and function properly as well as for government to provide fair representation, the benefits of participation should be equally available to everyone.

Alternative Voting Options

Nigeria ought to consider more practical voting choices, such as early voting to make it easier to go to the polls, compulsory electoral participation (also known as "compulsory or required voting"), and vote-at-home (also known as "vote-by-mail/electronic voting") to encourage potential voters. The first part of the poser –an increase in the number of political parties and the emergence of a two-party system– has received a variety of responses from academics and writers. Undoubtedly, one of the key components of democratization is expanding the political space to include more participants. Nevertheless, the decision of most political actors between only two of the various parties is similarly uncontrollable. What is feasible, and probably not in dispute, is how to prune the numerous political parties that clutter the ballot papers, confounding the predominantly illiterate electorate, once such parties fail to meet minimum registration/valuation requirements and standards specified by the electoral authority. As a matter of fact, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) admitted that "a large number of political parties that participated in the 2019 general elections caused it a lot of logistics problems" (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

Beyond Electoralism

While concentrating on election issues, it is also essential to evaluate the country's democratic governance image to determine how it has matched voters' expectations in all ramifications. Though, a close examination will reveal that in spite of the narrative of democratic gloom in the country as enormously exhibited in form of electoral malpractices, official recklessness and impunity that characterise our national life, it has not been a case of bleak future after all. At

worst, it has been a confusing oscillation: raising hope at one end of the spectrum with the possibility of democratic consolidation and, at the other perilous end of the spectrum, creating serious doubts about the survival of the country as one entity much less its democracy. Interestingly, the country and its democracy, at every critical moment, have incredibly wobbled into new phases where new hopes are cuddled.

However, the receptive platform for optimism appears to have been energized by Nigeria's ongoing democratic experiment, which has lasted an unparalleled twenty years. It may not have met all criteria for ideal democratic consolidation as propounded by notable scholars (even though the conceptualization and understanding of democratic consolidation in Nigeria are rooted in 'electoralist bias'), surviving within the terrible peculiarities of the country's political actors remains an intriguing phenomenon to many researchers. All the same, it should be stressed that a country can thrive more on equitable and realistic political interventions capable of mobilising diverse groups to share enough values and preferences, as well as implement socio-economic policies that make life meaningful rather than mere fantasies.

Admittedly, since the democratic transition that ended lengthy years of military dictatorship in 1999, elections in Nigeria have been periodically consistent in bestowing the authority to elect representatives on the people. In fact, for the first time in the political history of the country, there was a transfer of power from a national ruling party to the opposition in 2015 and this has been replicated at the state level. This seems to have signalled a turning point in Nigeria's transition to democratic governance and constitutionalism. And that is the good news. Nonetheless, if Huntington's two-turnover tests² as a useful is considered, though not perfect, indicator for democratic consolidation, it is obvious that Nigeria has not yet met the criterion. Similarly, Andreas Schedler highlights five notions of democratic consolidation: avoiding democratic breakdown, avoiding democratic erosion, institutionalizing democracy, completing democracy, and deepening democracy. If the following three

² Consolidation of democracy has been defined as "the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate and so habitually practiced and observed that it is very unlikely to break down" (Diamond, 1988: 69). Originally, the term —democratic consolidation was meant to describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, immunizing them against the threat of authoritarian regression. According to the political thinker, Samuel Huntington, the consolidation of a democracy takes place if "the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election."

main conditions are also presented, in addition to Schedler's criteria, as prerequisites for democratic consolidation in Nigeria, namely: an independent civil society; a working consensus about procedures of governance; and constitutionalism and the rule of law, can Nigeria's democracy be said to have passed the test based on these parameters? It is evident that the true essence of democracy in Nigeria has not experienced significant advancements. This remains the case, even though the 2019 and 2023 elections presented an opportunity to enhance the electoral system.

Ultimately however, promoting democratic principles depends largely on the will of the people to nurture the right attitudes and mind-set receptive for positive change beyond the present modernised *subject political culture*; and their elected leaders to create a political system that can guarantee fairness, justice, and governance deliverables. Genuine democratic elections continue to serve as the means by which citizens freely express their preferences over who should have the legitimacy of governance (Michels and Binnema, 2019) on a basis established by law. To avert the emergence of widespread anti-democratic tendencies, a coordinated effort should be made to create effective responses to the new and constantly changing manipulative techniques deployed by Nigerian politicians and their followers. This is also to avoid a reversal of the gains of democratisation thus far.

It is necessary to suggest that empirical application of the hybrid of both participatory democracy and deliberative³ democracy, through informed, active and engaged citizenry is desirable at all stages of the democratic process. Deliberative and participatory approaches, according to Gaynor (2009), "can be found in democratic innovations as well as within political parties, legislatures, social movements, civil society organisations (CSOs) and community pillars of corporatist systems". Beyond citizen participation in elections every four years, Nigerian citizens have not been given a fair chance to fulfil their potential in public policy making through critical/strategic engagement. This is different from freedom of speech: when everyone can make both uninformed and informed opinion about government's programmes or issues of public interest, mostly at informal level.

As a student of political sociology, the author considers the need for widespread citizen participation through meaningful opportunities in the political space as *sine qua non* for checkmating rampant impunity and official recklessness.

³ "Participatory democracy" is founded on the direct action of citizens who exercise some power and decide issues affecting their lives; "deliberative democracy", is founded on argumentative exchanges, reciprocal reason-giving, and on the public debate which precedes decisions (Florida, 2014).

After all, democracy is primarily a void and meaningless concept without citizen deliberation and participation. Indeed, forging political consensus through dialogue is the beauty of democracy; not leaving the deliberations to authorized elites as we presently witness at all levels of governance. Or *citizen participation* that merely reflects window dressing for decisions as already, or will be, made by others. In contrast, meaningful efforts to engage citizens help governments explore their values and access their voices on issues of governance. Such a practice carries enormous potential to strengthen the quality of democracy especially at the grassroots level. This is yet another explanation why a variety of coalitions, non-governmental organizations, consultants, think tanks, and other organizations are currently exploring and utilizing this grassroots potential to create an army of policy advocates particularly among young people.

But in an increasingly expertise-driven society, Fischer (2000) once asked rhetorically if “most citizens have the knowledge and the intellectual wherewithal to contribute meaningfully to the complex policy decisions facing an advanced industrial society”. The author does not think an empirical research is needed to confirm that most citizens do not possess such capacity, even in advanced democracies. Nevertheless, that does not also justify their non-inclusion because “it is difficult in a democracy to legitimately deny citizens a place at the decision-making table” (Fischer, 2000). In an emerging democracy like Nigeria, this non-inclusion is partly responsible for the mounting disillusionment of citizens with the electoral process and subsequent government formations. Such a situation is only worsened by absence of a sense of connection with elected representatives and bureaucrats. This is where citizen empowerment comes in, not only to be equipped to speak up or protest against bad policies, but have the capacity to suggest better alternatives and act even as change agents in their communities.

Nevertheless, while “public deliberation is essential to democracy” (Page, 1996), the author is inclined to suggest that, for it to achieve a desired outcome, it should be strategically coordinated. The type of active citizen engagement emphasised here, which is almost crippled in party meetings/conventions, town hall interface among grassroots dwellers, school communities and policy making process in Nigeria, can be reinvigorated “through a network of civil associations, groups, and organisations which mobilise political action, provide political information, and communicate collective concerns to decision makers” (Fraser, 1990; Parvin, 2015). The impact of this on politics, public policies, and society can be very productive in a young democracy like ours particularly in advancing social justice, enhancing the quality of public policies and democratic reforms.

The Case for Electoral Reforms and Advocacy Strategies

One fundamental issue that resonates in almost all my public engagements with relevant stakeholders in the last few years is the need for effective legal frameworks that integrate every ingredient of electoral reforms⁴ according to best practices with a view to addressing the “institutional weaknesses and systemic challenges, which all impact negatively upon the preparations and conduct of elections” (Jega, 2015). Fundamentally, this should include the use of technology to improve biometric voter registration, database management, verification of voter eligibility, automate recording and counting of votes cast and transmission of election results. Also, other issues that are usually incorporated are: judicial processes such as boundary delimitation, registration of parties and candidate lists, campaign conduct, out-of-country (overseas) voting and accreditation of election observers among others, some of which often propel pre- and post-election litigations.

At a retreat for top officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and members of the National Assembly (NASS) in March, 2020 to harmonise proposed changes to the electoral law, INEC maintained that it was seeking 34 amendments expected to boost public confidence in the electoral process, enhance its transparency and credibility, entrench internal democracy in political parties, curb election related violence and other forms of impunity by electoral law violators, expand the scope of participation by marginalised groups, deepen the use of technology for elections and strengthen the independence of the umpire (The Nation, 2020). These issues are all crucial not only to strengthen the election management body as an institution, but also to enhance voting outcomes and democratic governance in the country.

However, to promote reform among key decision-makers, members of the civil society⁵ in collaboration with the electoral body must adopt best practices of broad consultation, inclusive participation, transparency, and non-partisanship. Given the fact that getting attention of the legislature, politicians and other electoral stakeholders for

⁴ Any change in electoral rules that leads to alterations in the operation of the electoral system, improves it, and makes it responsive to the expectations of the electorate connotes electoral reform (International IDEA 2006, Chapter 12). It is reform when the change is intended to foster and enhance the impartiality, inclusiveness, transparency, integrity, or accuracy of the electoral process (Jacobs and Leyenaar, 2011).

⁵ Civil society has several essential roles to play: to enhance the quality of democracy (Diamond, 1994), to act as an intermediary between democratic and anti-democratic forces (Chandhoke, 2004), to instill citizens with democratic values, and to provide external protection for democracy from any external threats that might lead to political destabilization (Merkel, 2004).

electoral reforms can be difficult after general elections, CSOs can raise awareness of needed reforms, both with the public and policymakers through public events, social media campaigns, community wide engagements, discussion programmes and signature petitions. In summary, CSOs should champion electoral reforms with a coherent and comprehensive strategy.

For a comprehensive advocacy strategy, three major components have been identified along different stages of *advocacy strategy's continuum*⁶: transformational (citizen empowerment), developmental (civil society strengthening) and instrumental (policy influence). Although there is a relatively politically active civil society in Nigeria, the country still needs interventions in all the three components –either in stages or simultaneously– in order to make substantial headway. It is imperative to suggest in the meantime, that the civil society can facilitate the other two interventions; that is, citizen empowerment and policy influence, while it continually seeks partnership with foreign developmental agencies on capacity building. Though the first two components are usually seen as preconditions to the achievement of the third component, no one is in doubt of the capacity of Nigerian CSOs to facilitate this task.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of the exercise as highlighted above is expected to be more visible in some particular areas. One, as the best guarantee of entrenching democracy, a wide range of measures to promote internal democracy within political parties would have been put in place; bearing in mind that, for so long, Nigeria's political parties have proved incapable of improving the state of democracy in the country owing largely to their lack of ideology and internal democracy. Two, the electoral process would be seen to be the accepted mechanism of choice for popular expression, choice and change of leaders and political accountability. Three, the ability of wealthy elites to purchase power by secretly funding political parties in exchange for contracts, undue influence and other benefits, would have been partly dealt with. Four, electoral integrity, which is necessary to turn elections into instruments for promoting social cohesion and inclusion would, in the long run, be the norm. In other words, the potency of election creating political legitimacy and effective management of diversity would have, albeit in a gradual manner, manifested in the polity. After all, as succinctly posited by Jega (2019):

The only way to successfully stop the elite, especially the reckless segment of the 'political class', from setting off an electoral conflagration that could consume our entire democratic edifice is to strive for and imbue the Nigerian electoral process with requisite integrity that would guarantee the actualization of the aspirations of Nigerians for both stable democratic development and consolidation.

Finally, when Nigeria's democracy is assessed on the parameter of a coherent national identity, strong and autonomous political institutions, a developed and independent (unbiased) civil society, the rule of law, and a strong and well performing economy, it is expected to have made appreciable progress. A combination of an empowered citizenry and strong institutions is what is earnestly advocated in this article. It should be noted that imbibing and inculcating democratic culture, improving upon the quality of the electoral process, promoting the widest possible participation of both contestants and voters in the organization and management of elections and proper electoral institutional reforms are all important in ensuring credible election and legitimacy of government.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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