

Electoral Malpractices And Crises In Nigeria: Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper discusses electoral malpractice and crises in Nigeria. The introduction of the Clifford constitution of 1992 marked the beginning of electioneering activities with the introduction of the elective principle by virtue of which four (4) Nigerians (three from Lagos and one from Calabar) were elected into the white dominated legislative council. Franchise was later extended to other parts of the country by subsequent constitutions. The most remarkable election held prior to independence was that of 1959, the general elections that put into place the first democratically elected and constituted post-

independence government of Nigeria. A number of factors were involved in the election and its consequences have continued to affect the composition and running of successive governments in Nigeria up till today. The desire to control the central government made the various parties, especially the three leading ones to resort to various methods in order to win the election. However, the first pronounced electoral malpractices and the attendant crises was witnessed during the 1964 general election as well as during the 1965 western region elections. Subsequent elections with the exception of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election (the only one adjudged both internally and internationally to be the freest and fairest in the history of Nigeria) has continued to follow the same pattern whereby a win at all cost has continued to be the syndrome. The objective of this paper is to look at the menace of electoral malpractices-its causes, cases and effects on the nation's body politics and proffer a workable solution for the future.

Introduction

Anifowose (1982) observed that in a situation whereby the ruling party, through its control of the government machinery and other resources manipulates the electoral process and flagrantly interferes with the electoral procedures and interprets the result to its own advantages, intense frustration and general disillusionment will be created among the losers. To him, this may result in violent unrest if the government does not accept and allow for the possibility of the opposition taking its place. Demands for violent change will tend to follow.

In his own view, Balogun (1983) pointed out that the subversion of true democracy by the politics of party patronage and ethnic jingoism has considerably

eroded the basis for the emergence of a genuinely representative government within our present political framework. To him, it is a paradox that the ideas of democratic government seem further from our grasp than ever, inspite of the outward semblance of democracy enshrined in the constitution of the second republic. He further observed that major preoccupation of the contending parties seemed to be the ascension to power and nothing else, winning has become an end in itself.

Joseph (1987) opined that it would probably take a few electoral cycles before the mere practical business of casting and counting votes in Nigeria achieve general acceptance and become a routinised aspect of the political process. He pointed out that one significant barrier in the way of the normalization of electoral procedures is the folk or collective knowledge dating from the pre-1966 period which has been handed down to successive generations of party militants. According to him, the social terrain needed to sustain the system of competitive party politics did not exist in Nigeria. While assessing the April 2007 elections, Pierre Richard Prosper, a member of one of the independent observer teams said and I quote.

“The system failed the Nigerian people. The process failed the test of credibility. What we are talking about is that the system as designed, did not work. It is a case of the government failing the people”.

He identified cases or electoral malpractices such as underage voting, voter registration errors, group voting, stuffed ballot boxes, lack of privacy for voting, lack of or insufficient electoral materials, falsified result sheets, and early closing among others.

To Olukorede Yishau (2007) “the role of INEC official and security agencies was dismal”. According to him, field reports during the April 2007 elections revealed that INEC officials and security agents sold themselves to the desperate political class. They colluded with and assisted the politicians in manipulating the whole electoral process. A number of them compromised as a result of financial inducement while some were threatened by desperate politicians and their thugs who wielded dangerous charms, guns and other weapon.

Causes of Electoral Malpractices and Crises

Electoral malpractices and violence has continued to be a menace in Nigeria because of several factors among which are the following;

Nature of Politics: The Nigeria political system is based on zero-sum game, that is, winner takes all. In a situation whereby a party or parties have to lose everything for a party/parties to win everything; there is always a stiff competition as all the contestants will want to emerge as the winner. In such a situation, it is not unlikely that the parties will adopt extra legal means of achieving their objectives while others will also attempt to thwart the ambition of others. Thus manipulation and other forms of malpractices will come into play and the direct consequence is usually violent protests and crisis by the aggrieved losers.

Lack of Tolerance for the Opposition: Stemming from the above point is the fact that winning or ruling party (ies) often disregards the need to recognize and tolerate opposition parties. This failure to accommodate opposing views and

parties more often than not usually leads to crisis as those in the opposition parties feel alienated and are denied the benefits accruing to political offices.

Perpetuation of office: The attempt and the actual desire to remain in office for long on the platform of particular party and the attempts by other parties to dislodge the ruling party whether at state or federal levels often result in electoral malpractices and the attendant crisis. The boasting of the People Democratic Party (PDP) will rule Nigeria for fifty (50) years and Obasanjo's statement that April 2007 general elections will be a "do or die affair" was taken by many an opponent to reflect the party's desire to perpetuate itself in office whether or not the people vote for it.

Lack of Political Education: Lack of adequate orientation of the people about their roles and the importance of election as well as the do's and don'ts guiding both the voters and contestants before, during and after election is another reason for electoral malpractices. When people are properly educated and understand the need to guide and protect their votes they will render immeasurable support toward the prevention of electoral malpractices. Political education will also enlighten political office holders to see themselves as servants of the masses rather than lording themselves over the hapless majority.

Poverty and High Rate of Unemployment: Absence of sufficient means to meet the basic needs of life constitutes a high risk towards the conduct of a free and fair election. It is very easy to bribe and obtain votes of indigent people who are primarily concerned about their immediate needs such as food, shelter etc.

Likewise the high rate of unemployment especially among the youths have turned into ready-made tools in the hands of politicians at periods. They form the bulk of adhoc staff often recruited for election exercises and are thus easily bought over by money bag politicians desperate to win elections at all cost. They also constitute the army of rioters and demonstrators engaged by disgruntled politicians to forment crisis in the society.

Role of Electoral Body and other Security Agencies: The institution empowered to organize and conduct elections in Nigeria has never lived up to the expectation. Although, they are expected to be neutral and independent, but more often than not, they have remained and appendage of ruling party and are always at the mercy of the ruling party in terms of finance and logistics, the security agencies expected to maintain peace and orderliness are in most cases agents of the party in power and thus they too usually assisted in the perpetration of electoral fraud and even take sides with government sympathizers during crisis (Ezeani, O.E 2005).

Poor Preparation: Absence of adequate preparation (whether deliberate or otherwise) on the part of the electoral body also constitute another reason for electoral malpractices. When necessary activities are not carried out e.g. registration of voters or updating and display of voters register, provision of electoral materials and training of electoral officials etc, the actual conduct of election is not likely to be free and fair. Also political parties need to be fully prepared and ready for the election by presenting candidate and organize campaign rallies were people can see their manifestoes. Where all this is absent

the issue of do or die affair will be the order of the day and the consequence will be crisis.

Imposition of unpopular candidates; unfulfilled promises and ostentatious display of stolen public money among others, also constitute factors accountable for the menace of electoral malpractices and crises.

Cases of Electoral Malpractices and Attendant Crises

As earlier observed, with the exception of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections, all others were in one way or the other manipulated and the consequences have always been crises in various degrees. Beginning with the 1959 general elections that ushered in the Balewa government of the first republic, there were accusations and counter accusations by the various political parties alleging others of electoral malpractices in order to secure the power at the center. However, serious cases of electoral malpractices and crisis (full blown) were recorded by many scholars and historians as well as students of Nigeria-government and politics, during the 1964 general elections and the 1955 regional government election of the western region. As recorded by Anifowose (1982) and Dudley (1973) among others, there were serious cases of manipulation during the two elections. The desire of Balewa's government of the remain in control of the centre at all cost despite its loss of public support due to lack of performance and likewise the desire of Akintola to remain in control of western region even though, he was unpopular made the elections to be volatile. The opposition too were in top gear and thus crisis ensured. This was stopped only when the military entered the scene on January 15, 1966.

With the exception of the issue of the technical twelve-two-third ($12\frac{2}{3}$) there were less malpractices during the 1979 general elections. This was attributed to the presence of the military that checked the excesses of the politicians (see Kurfi 1983: and Adam of the u and Ogunsanwo 1983). However, the same thing cannot be said of the 1983 general elections. According to Joseph (1987) the 1983 elections were excessively falsified to the extent that the electoral system lost capacity to reflect, even roughly, the relative strength of the parties. The attendant crises that ensued after the declaration of the bogus election results have been comprehensively documented by Babarinsa (2003) in his book titled *House of war*. The violent destruction of lives and property as witnessed during the first republic (operation 'wetie') was re-enacted most especially in Ondo state where the popular candidate of the citizens was not declared the winner of the election. And just like it happened in the first Republic, the military struck again in December 31, 1983 to terminate the political logjam.

The adoption of open-ballot system of election drastically reduced electoral malpractices during the aborted third republic. However, its transparency unfortunately led to the premature demise of the republic as the emergence of a popular candidate not favourable to the top military hierarchy led to the annulment of the globally acclaimed freest and fairest election in the annals of the country. The annulment of the June 12, 1993 elections also led to volatile civil and political unrest in the country.

The present fourth republic which commenced in 1998 with a military midwived transition programme has raised the issue of electoral malpractices and crises to high levels. Even though, the 1999 general elections witnessed few cases of reported malpractices, the same thing cannot be said about the 2003 and 2007 general elections, the worst being the latest that is the 2007 general elections whereby various means were adopted by the various political parties to rig the elections, the highest

culprit being the ruling PDP whose campaign train was led by the apostle of do-or-die election in person of Olusegun Obasanjo the immediate past president of Nigeria. He did everything to ensure the emergency of his preferred candidate (Umar Musa Yar Adua) not only as the presidential candidate of PDP but also as his successor. Opposition candidate (Buhari and Atiku especially) were frustrated to the extent that voting hardly took place in their stronghold or areas where they had many sympathizers.

Cases of malpractices recorded during the period include imposition of candidates, substitution of names, absence of opponents pictures on ballot papers, allocation of fictitious figures even in areas where no election took place and harassment or outright beating of non cooperating electoral officials among others.

Effects/Consequences of Electoral Malpractices and Crises

There are many side effects of the menace of electoral malpractices and its attendant crises. However, due to space factor I will try to discuss the most pronounced ones.

In the first instance, electoral malpractices usually lead to the emergence of unpopular or unwanted candidate(s) or part (ies). As a result, people's freedom of choice is denied them and this may lead to political apathy and alienation when people are made to understand that their vote means nothing. In addition, such an unpopular candidate or party is not like to have the interest of the masses at heart, they will regard as unsympathetic to their cause. Thus the people will have no say in government and will expect little or nothing from it.

Secondly, electoral malpractices and crises often encourage insecurity of lives and property. Cases of threats to life and political assassinations are too numerous to mention. Opponents to each other are regarded as threats and diverse means are usually adopted to eliminate perceived oppositions including assassination.

Thirdly, where electoral malpractices and crises prevail, the government of the day usually depends on force (whether legal or extra legal) to administer the state. Democratic institutions are usually jettisoned and brute or naked force becomes the order of the day. Arbitrary arrests and detention of both perceived and real enemies (opponents) of government become common. The judiciary itself is often compromised as judges turned into politicians who make themselves available to be used by the government of the day for little gratifications (TELL November 16, 2009). Furthermore, since one of the reasons for electoral malpractices is to perpetuate in government or secure the reins of government at all cost, other forms of corruption such as looting of the treasury, embezzlement, inflated contracts and money laundering among others usually feature prominently in the society. In fact, in order to cover-up a particular malpractice i.e. rigging of elections, other forms of corruption will be committed by such desperate office or power seekers at the detriment of the society.

In addition, where electoral malpractices and crises are prevalent the issue of development is always relegated to the background. In fact, it is usually a non-issue at all. Development cannot thrive in a crisis environment and since the country is engulfed in crisis, serious development cannot take place. Foreign investors will be scared away as a result of the prevalent crisis situation and local investors too will be guiding against any loss that may arise at any time there is violence and destruction. It is only in a stable environment that development can thrive.

One can conclude this section by saying that electoral malpractices and crises promotes bad governance and under development (NISER 2008:2).

The Way Forward

It is crystal clear from the above discussion that electoral malpractices and its attendant crises constitute a big problem to the country's overall development. Having identified the cause and consequences of the menace, it is necessary at this point to proffer solutions to eradicate it from our body politics.

Firstly, there is the need to reform the country's electoral processes and the nature of our politics should be changed from winner takes all to a more accommodating system that will make allowance for the opposition no matter how small. Here I will strongly advocate proportional representation as recommended by the Uwais Electoral Reform Committee where different shades of opinion will be represented in various strength. This will checks the power of the almighty executive under the presidential system and also give the opposition voice to express themselves and checks the excesses of the ruling party.

Secondly, there is a need for better political education on the part of those in position of authority and the masses as well. Ignorance is believed to be a disease. Related to this is the issue of poverty. Those who cannot afford three square meals area easily bought over with little inducement, this as a result of poverty. Political enlightenment will serve to orientate them than alleviate their votes will only compound their problem rather than alleviate it. Political education will help in orienting political office holders that they are servants and not rules, thus they should not lord themselves arbitrary on the people.

Furthermore, there is the need to guarantee and ensure total neutrality on the part of the electoral commission as well as the judiciary. Being the custodian of electoral activities, the electoral body should be free from any form of interference that could jeopardize its integrity and render its activities unacceptable to the general public. The conduct of INEC during the 2007 general elections in Nigeria left much to be desired. The judiciary on its part is expected to adjudicate on matters arising from election petitions and it is not independent the outcome of its work will be useless. The same thing goes for the law enforcement and other security agencies. They need to perform their roles with all sense of patriotism and neutrality.

Again, all adhoc staff to be recruited for future elections must be properly trained and they should be made to take the oath of allegiance and to uphold the truth. Crash training of the day or two before elections will not be adequate. Proper education on the do's and don'ts as well as the importance of the election to national development should be inculcated into them.

In addition, politicians, both office holders and seekers should be made to uphold and adhere strictly to the rule of law. The constitution (and the electoral act) stipulated the do's and don'ts guiding their activities before, during and after elections. Non compliance with the law should never be over looked no matter who is involved. Since all of them cannot win at the same time, in fact, some have to lose for others to win, others must realize that they have to wait for their turn as loser (s) of today will be winner(s) tomorrow.

Finally, the basic aim of every public office seeker should be how to develop the country on all fronts rather than amassing or looting public treasury. The dividends of democracy should be seen on the ground rather than in abstract figures and statistics that contradict the reality of things.

The observation of The West African (August 15, 1983) that rigging election has for long time been a Nigerian thing like pounded yam or millet needs to be corrected.

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