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Electoral Malpractice and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: An Analytical Approach

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Abstract

This research examines the intrigues that surround the process through which Nigerians elect their leaders periodically and its impacts on the nation's democratic growth and survival. Election is meant to be a process through which the electorate periodically evaluates and appraises the performance of their elected leaders. In this way, they can remove unpopular elected leaders who are found corrupt and nonperforming. On the other hand, they can also reaffirm their support for popular and performing government and elected individuals. But in the history of Nigeria, the reverse has always been the case. Findings have revealed that the electoral will of the masses had often been thwarted by the fraudulent actions of the political class, security agencies, and the electoral umpire, presently known as the "Independent National Electoral Commission" (INEC). Findings have also revealed that elections in Nigeria have always been marred by violence, electoral fraud, vote-buying, manipulations of election results, falsification of election results, and imposition of candidates on the masses. It has also been revealed that the 2023 general election stands out as the worst and most rigged election since the return of democratic rule to Nigeria in 1999. This study adopts Analytical Historical research approach that explores both primary and secondary source materials. This study therefore suggests that there should be a total overhaul of the electoral process. The electoral body (INEC) and the judiciary should be made independent in the real sense of it and given free hand to operate without incumbency influences, and also that electoral offenders should be punished adequately for electoral offences.

Keywords

Electoral Malpractice, Impediment, Democracy, Electorate.

Introduction

Since 1960 when Nigeria got her independence from the British Colonial government, the conduct of elections in the country had often been marred by violence, electoral frauds and malpractice occasioned most often by the desperation of the political gladiators and gullible uninformed Electorates. These unholy acts are most

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unfortunately perpetuated and carried out under the watch of the security agencies and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) staff.

Popular view has it that the prevalent corrupt electoral process in the country is the reason why political office holders in the country are never accountable to the masses. Instead of good governance, they misappropriate public funds, and most often stock such money to influence their way in the subsequent elections. Hitcher & Harbold (1966) noted that in a disciplined society, elections guarantee political stability, as it gives effect to smooth and orderly change of government.

Analysing what election ought to be in a true democratic dispensation, Ogunna (2003) stated that election as a democratic institution and process is established to ensure popular participation of the masses, promotion of political responsibility and accountability and also to constitute political test for political office holders. As earlier observed, during elections the performances of elected leaders are periodically evaluated by the masses. Through the process of election, the Electorates could remove unpopular government found to be corrupt, non-performing and unproductive. On the other hand, they can reaffirm their support on popular government and other individuals elected for other political offices. In this way, political leaders who wish to retain their positions and continue in political offices are compelled to be more conscious of their responsibilities to the electorates and give regular accounts of their stewardship.

In any case, Nigerians have not had it well with election right from her independence, but more so since the return of civilian rule in 1999. The process of electing political office holders had always been thwarted and manipulated by the political class, and the electoral umpires who are supposed to conduct free and fair elections in the country. It is no longer in doubt that elections conducted in this country in the recent time had always been marred by all forms of electoral frauds such as vote buying, electronic device manipulations, falsification of election results, imposition of candidates, killings, thuggery etc. These had slowed down the democratic process in the country.

Over the years, Nigeria has recorded high degree of electoral apathy. This is because Nigerians have lost confidence and interest in the electoral process because their electoral wishes were never upheld by the electoral bodies. Put differently, their votes had never counted.

Despite this however, Nigerians had high expectations over the 2023 general election more so, because of the introduction of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), the passing into Law of the 2022 Electoral Acts and the persistent assurance of both president Muhammadu Buhari and Prof. Mahmood Yakubu's led Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) that there was going to be free and transparent elections in the country. This gave much confidence to Nigerians who were already tired of President Muhammadu Buhari's All Progressive Congress (APC) led government and seriously yearning for change. Nigerians came out en masse and voted for their preferred candidates, but unfortunately this election turned out to be the most rigged, greatest scam and mother of all riggings in the history of the country. As it stands presently, most Nigerians including our humble selves have completely lost confidence in Nigeria's electoral process.

This work therefore examines the electoral processes in Nigeria and the intrigues that surrounds the process through which Nigerians elect their leaders periodically. The work exposes the dirty games and atrocities associated with elections in Nigeria and the demeaning roles of different categories of Nigerians such as the Security Agencies, the politicians, INEC officials, the Electorates and the Judiciary in undermining efforts made towards consolidating democracy in the country, particularly since 1999 when democratic process was restored back to the country after so many years of Military rule. Also, the work specifically carried out an in-depth investigation on the 2023 general election, forces that worked against that election, and its impact on the electoral process and efforts made towards consolidating democracy in the country. It also provides viable measures that can help in reducing electoral malpractice in Nigeria.

Theoretical Foundations

It is institutional theory rather than the exceedingly critical approach that provides the theoretical foundation of this article. Institutional theorizing is a fairly recent development dating back in contemporary sense to the works of C. B. Black (1966), Lucian W. Pye (1966), Huntington (1968), Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983) etc.

The theory of institutional or political development sees the political system as institution defined by its function of behaviour regulation guided by the principle of specialization or structural differentiation, democracy or popular participation (Ake, 1982 in Okereke and Ekpe, 2012). It is the contention of these theorists that political institutions which are humanly devised rules shaping incentives have fundamental causes on development and underdevelopment of a given society. Essentially, the concern of institutionalism covers the political institutions, form of government constraints, and distribution of political power which consequently influence the economic performances of the society (Obiukwu and Abaneme, 2013).

Institution is simply the rule of the game, pertinent to the institutionalists discourses is therefore the determination of how a game should be played which depends mostly on the preset rules. The rules of the game are set of constraints comprising of regulations, culture, perceptions, societal norms and other similar elements that shape human behaviour, responding to society's numerous demands (Ayinde and Miah, 2008). The theorists therefore conclude that since institutions define and limit the set of individual choices, their presence in the society would govern and set the direction for human behaviour. For example, what they ought to do and what ought not. In this sense a good institution can be viewed when a country adopts a set of rules that promotes and encourages value-enhancing activities at the same time constraints rent-seeking and individual empire-building through irrational and unethical means which are unproductive and waste of society's scarce resources (Ayinde and Miah, 2008).

Although institutionalism appears rather state-centric, they nonetheless emphasize the inclusive approach to the evaluation of Nigerian electoral process and democratic development. Understanding the chronic challenges of Nigerian difficulties in conducting acceptable free and fair elections is better captured from the prisms of institutionalists theoretical postulation prisms, hence the justification for the adoption in this study. A chronological evaluation of the Nigerian electoral process exposed the weakness of electoral institutions, negligence of the rules of the game, corrupt and non-application of constraints on the election management bodies. The Nigerian democracy and electoral process has been under trials since independence. The electoral process of the first republic failed as a result of ethnicization of politics. The second and third even the subsequent elections and their processes are still not devoid of ethnic politics, institutional anarchy, electoral violence, vote buying and selling, insecurity among others. All these demonstrate the weakness on the side of the country's institutions.

Conceptual Discourse

Democracy as a concept has been perceived from different prisms by scholars and statesmen. The concept may be regarded as a form of government, a way of life, or an attitude of the mind (Abaneme, Mgbachi & Abaneme, 2024). In its simplistic and etymological conception, democracy connotes government by the people. On this backdrop, Appadoria (1975) conceives democracy as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power. It is instructive from the above definition that democracy is primarily focused on the people. However, the above definition was devoid of the extent of people's involvement in a democracy. Some essential conditions of democracy are the opportunity for political participation, habit of tolerance, possibility of an alternative government, and equal access to economic and educational opportunities (Abaneme et al, 2024). Heater (1964) in Abaneme et al (2024) therefore identifies five basic elements without which no community can call itself truly democratic. These elements are: equality; sovereignty of the people; respect for human life, the rule of law and the liberty of the individuals.

Democracy allows the voice of all to be heard but the wish of majority to be implemented. This is because it is the government of the majority. The minority will have their say, but the majority will have their way. Indeed, democracy is a system of democratic government in which decisions are arrived at by securing the agreement of the majority (Okafor, Odigbo & Okeke, 2022). Democracy is a process and means not an end. The end therefore is democratic consolidation. Succinctly, Britton (1981, in Madubuegwu, Agudiegwu, Onyia, Odoh & Egbo, 2020) sees democratic consolidation as involving the widespread acceptance of the rules to guarantee political participation and political competition. He further argues that elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, but a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation. The regularity, openness and acceptability of elections signal whether basic constitutional foundations are being laid for sustainable rule. In a nutshell, for democracy to be consolidated, which simply means stabilization and solidification of democratic system in a country and perpetuation of its long-term survival and effectiveness, it must involve: strengthening democratic institutions like parliaments, courts, and electoral bodies; legitimization and consolidation of democratic norms, values and principles; minimization of authoritarian tendencies; and increased political participation of the citizens.

Election is the ideal of democracy and democratic consolidation and the participation of the people in any democratic process underscores the substance of representative government beyond symbolism (Madubuegwu, Agudiegwu, Onyia, Odoh & Egbo, 2020). According to Britton (1981) in Madubuegwu et al (2020), elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic government, but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation. The regularity, openness and acceptability of election signal whether basic constitutional foundations are being laid for sustainable rule. Unfortunately, in Nigeria ample evidences have shown that the country is still at the cross road on its democratic process and consolidation. Ende (2013) in (Okafor, Odigbo, & Okeke, 2022) lamented on Nigerian case, that the bottom line is simply poor management typified by the lack of independence, political attachment, corruption, ingrained Nigerian culture and inadequate capacity. He further argued that experience indeed reveals that successive electoral commissions in the country have either been pro-ruling party or they engaged in the manipulation of election results in favour of the highest bidding contestants. In most cases, it is feared that INEC officials collaborated with politicians to rig the elections. This presented the citizens with the impression that their votes do not count and as such going to the polling units viewed as waste of time.

An Overview of Nigeria's Electoral Processes since Independence

Since independence Nigeria's democracy has been under test and trial. This is majorly because of the multi-ethnic composition of the country and misguided electoral process. At the inception of independence and democratic process in 1960, the first election which brought in the first set of Nigerian Leaders was characterized by massive rigging in favour of regional political parties. It was the ethnic and religious colouration of the political leadership of the First Republic and the failure of the founding fathers to manage the intrigues that followed the outcome of the first election in the country that led to its early collapse in 1966.

Ahamefula & Onwuharaonye (2022) observed that it was in order to correct this anomaly created by the Independence election, that the 1979 Constitution admonished all political parties to adopt the Federal Character principle in the formation of their Executive Board, names, mottos, emblems etc. Expatriating further on this, Owunwa (2003) stated that "no association, no matter by what name it is called should function as a political party unless among other things the leadership is open to every citizen of Nigeria irrespective of his place of origin, sex, religion and ethnic groupings. The name of the association, its emblem or motto should not contain any ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearance that the associations were confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria.

The 1979 2nd Republic election which brought president Alhaji Shehu Shagari to power was more national in information and character as political parties that participated in that election effected the federal character principle. Although there were elements of rigging but not as was witnessed in the 1983 general election when

President Shehu Shagari led National Party of Nigeria (NPN) government used its incumbency influence to massively rigged the election in favour of its candidates at all levels of governance. This election was also marred by thuggery, arson, political victimization, inflation of election results, destruction of voters' lists, corrupt practices in party nominations among others. Democratic process was truncated by the military coup of 1983 which brought Major General Muhammadu Buhari and Brigadier General Tunde Idiagbo to power. This marked the beginning of long period of military rules in the country.

The Underlining Historical Dynamics that undermine Nigerian Democracy and democratic Consolidation

➤ Institutional Problems

Democracy and civilian administration were restored in Nigeria in 1999 after many years of Military rule. Nigerians embraced the new political dispensation with much aspirations and expectations. But unfortunately, these aspirations and expectations were dashed by "Institutional Anarchy" and other Factors which invariably had continued to work against the nation's democracy and electoral process. The actions and inactions of these institutions have never been fair and encouraging and therefore have been a serious hindrance to the development and consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. These Institutional Factors working against smooth electoral process and the full realization of true democracy in Nigeria have been identified as: The executive, The Judiciary, Security Agencies, The Electoral Umpire, The Electorates, and Defective Federalism, often referred to as the "Five Gods/ Institutions" + one

➤ Executive Interference in Electoral Process

Executive Anarchy or what the president of Ghana referred to recently as Institutional Anarchy is a major problem to the growth and consolidation of democracy in Africa, but particularly to Nigeria. A flawed situation where an incompetent and non performing incumbent government manipulates an election with his incumbency power to return back to office or bring in an equally incompetent party members to power against the wishes of the masses, is a serious call to anarchy and this can easily truncate the democratic process. The incessant coup attempts in some parts of Africa and welcoming of such by the masses are signs of institutional decay and failure of leadership.

Constitutionally, the Executive arm of government is saddled with the primary responsibility of providing the basic amenities for the citizens and also protecting their lives and properties, which is the surest way of upholding good governance, but unfortunately most past and present Nigerian Heads of State, as well as the political class have failed Nigerians. Over the years, majority of Nigerians groans under excruciating pains of poverty, insecurity, and non-provision of basic amenities such as electricity, pipe borne water, good and motorable roads, good health care delivery etc. Ironically those saddled with the responsibility of governance live in opulence and care less about the sufferings of those they lead. The former Minister of Finance and Coordinating Minister of the Economy under President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration, Dr Mrs Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala captured how bad the situation is in Nigeria when she stated that " Nigerians have lost trust and confidence in government and don't believe that government can do anything for them" noting further that everybody has become their own government, as they dig their bore holes to get water, generate their own electricity/ power supply through generator sets, do everything for themselves. (Oko, 2023).

Holistically, Nigeria is a country blessed with huge human and material resources but the crop of leaders the country has produced have refused to rise above its redundancy and to streamline this gift of nature to its appropriate utilization. Unfortunately, Nigerian leadership from the military to civilian administrations have always been a setback to the country's economic growth and political consolidation. According to Ibekwe and Idika (2014) "the type of leaders Nigerians have had are those who would love to impoverish the Electorates so that during elections, they would have no choice than to accept their ill-gotten money and vote for them.

They intentionally create insecure environment so that the coast would be clear for them to manipulate and rig election in their favour". They noted further that Nigerian leaders have left the nation's economy crawling, while they wash their feet in champagne and struggle to maintain power instead of solving problems the nation faces.

Within the eight years of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, Nigeria became a safe haven for terrorists, bandits, Fulani-killer herdsmen, kidnappers and armed robbers who killed and maimed innocent citizens in their numbers along the highways, in the churches, in their homes and at their farms while government and security agencies watched aimlessly. The state of insecurity is such that Nigerians now live in fear, not sure of what the next moment would bring forth. Politically motivated assassinations and economic hardship is now the order of the day. Even with all these, our leaders still bask in opulence while the masses die in abject poverty.

➤ **Non-Application of the Principles of True Federalism in Nigeria**

Federalism, also referred to as federal government is an international political system in which two levels of government control the same territory and citizens. Countries with federal political systems have both a central government and governments based in smaller political units usually called states, provinces or territories. These smaller political units surrender some of their political power to the central government, relying on it to act for common good (Appadorai, 1975). Due to the multi-ethnic composition of Nigeria, the founding fathers adopted a federal system of government as constituted by the Richards constitution of 1946 in which each of the three regions used their resources to develop their regions and paid tax to the central government. This worked wonders, as the federating Northern, Western, Eastern and later Mid-Western Regions were able to record faster economic growth rate due to the near sense of autonomy and independence they had at the time. Collaborating this, Oguji (2014) stated that the fast growth of industries, the numerous palm plantations and large farming were living testimonies. However, the evolution and trappings of the Biafran war aroused the sentiments that it was the autonomous powers granted to the regions that encouraged the Eastern region led by Ojukwu to attempt secession. Hence the 1979 constitution reduced the emerging States powers by reversing some of the privileges initially granted to federating units in the Richards constitution.

Therefore, under this new arrangement, Instead of the States generating their own revenues and employing it to the service of their needs and paying tax to the central government as required by the tenets of federalism, the reverse became the case. The States now generate revenue to the central government and receive monthly allocation. This poses a serious threat to true democracy and genuine electoral process in the country. If the Federal Republic of Nigeria applies the tenets of federalism, allowing the smaller units (States) to assume and appropriate their powers, there wouldn't be so much apprehension and quarrel among the various ethnic groups as well as the political class to grab the centre because it would be unattractive and the whole madness of using the nation's resources to rig election will no longer be fashionable.

Oguji (2014) notes that it is because true federalism is no longer in operation in the country that States are now crawling in development as their fate is being determined from the top. It is also the reason for the present impoverishment of Nigerian citizens and current negligence of our democratic consciousness.

➤ **Poor Attitude of the Electorates to Electoral Matters**

The problem with Nigeria is not only the leadership, although because the leadership has failed in its primary responsibility, every other thing seems to fall out of place. Another major problem that works against the electoral process and true democracy in Nigeria is the negative attitudes and actions of the Nigerian Electorates. In the recent past, most Nigerians do not participate in elections that produces their leaders, this is because they believe that previous elections never reflected the will of the masses, as election in the country were thwarted to favour the ruling party's preferred candidates.

However, for the growth and development of any better society, both the leaders and the led (citizens) are supposed to make meaningful contributions towards the realization of this goal. Ibekwe & Idika (2014) have observed that one of the major problems Nigeria faces today is the unwillingness of its citizens to rise up to its challenges of active and proactive living which are the hallmarks of true fellowship. It is unfortunate that what we experience in Nigeria today is a fellowship of gullibility, in the sense that people assimilate anything being told them by their leaders without any recourse. They noted further that majority of eligible Nigerian voters are puppets pocketed by the delusional politicians Nigeria parade as leaders. During elections, opportunities are provided for the Electorates to vote out leaders who are not doing well but instead of doing that, they rather collect money and mortgage their rights, still vote in such leaders who have over the years impoverished them.

The attitudes, actions and inactions of Nigerian Electorates is not in any way encouraging. "The Electorates in their passivity turn to sycophants and hypocrites and all they do is issuing the praises of their paymasters (leaders) even when they know that these leaders are not doing well and have nothing to offer. It is unfortunate that most Nigerian Electorates cannot emulate or draw one or two lessons from Arab Spring and the bravery of the citizens of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and others who swept off their bad and sit-tight leaders, if for nothing change the narratives of Nigeria political history.

It is even strange and more embarrassing that despite the hardship the ruling APC-led-government had brought up on Nigerians within the last few years, "vote buying" still took a centre stage during the just concluded 2023 general election. Despite of the suffering these Nigerian masses are facing in the country, majority of them were still willing to collect money from these corrupt money bags turned politicians and voted them into power, without considering the implications on the generality of Nigerians and the consolidation of democracy.

➤ **Failure of the Judiciary**

The Judiciary is meant to be the last hope of the common man. It is supposed to correct election anomalies and rewrite the wrongs of any election to restore the rightful candidates who actually won the elections. Unfortunately, most of the Tribunal judges did not do well. In most cases, the judges were bribed or coerced to miscarry justice and favour the wrong persons. According to Iredia (2023) "Nigeria Judges so much cherish pursuing technicalities, making them appear as paid agents of some politicians. In some cases, their verdicts confuse the public. Good examples abound in the 2019 Imo State governorship election case in which the supreme court removed a duly elected governor of the state, Right Honourable Emeka Ihedioha and installed Senator Hope Uzodinma who came distance fourth in the 2019 governorship election in the State. Also memorable are cases where non aspirants became candidates in the 2023 Senatorial election. Examples are those of the former Senate President Ahmed Lawan, former governor of Akwa Ibom State Godswill Akpabio and former governor of Ebonyi State David Umahi who contested for presidential election, lost out and came back to displace other candidates who contested for the Senatorial seats in their respective constituencies. The Law Court surprisingly aided them to grab these positions against the wishes of the original contestants.

It is a general feeling that the election that brought in the current government of Bola Ahmed Tinubu to office is the worst in the annals of democratic politics in the country, even though it was promised to be the best ever. Despite this, candidates of the opposition political parties were repeatedly and mockingly asked to go to court if they feel otherwise over the outcome of that election. It is regrettable that the same APC government and agents of President Bola Tinubu who have told candidates of these other political parties to go to court have ceaselessly chosen to stand in the way of justice by making catastrophic threats to anarchy if justice is not served according to their whims. (Alechenu, Ajayi & Agbakwuru, 2023). The presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2023 general election Alhaji Atiku Abubakar through his Media Adviser, Paul Ibe has raised alarm at Abuja, over what he described as a "sinister plot by the All Progressives

Congress (APC) to undermine the Nigerian Judiciary as well as democracy". (Alechenu, Ajayi & Agbakwuru, 2023)

In any case, it is not every Judge that is part of the corrupt cabal in the Judiciary, who create bad image for the institution as many politicians had equally in the past had their mandates recovered through the court. As it stands now, all eyes are on the judiciary to do the needful, to restore the rightful persons Nigerians voted at 2023 polls, most especially the presidential candidate of Labour party whom majority of Nigerians voted for at the February 25th, 2023 presidential election. This is the only way to strengthen democracy and restore people's confidence in the electoral process.

➤ **The Weakness of the election management body (INEC) in Elections**

Over the years, the National Electoral body had been the most veritable source of election rigging and manipulation in Nigeria. In response to clarion call from well-meaning Nigerians and the International Community for credible election in the country, INEC in 2011 introduced the use of Direct Data Capture (DDC) Machines for voters' registration. Contrary to the underlining perception that the introduction of the machines will reduce electoral frauds to the barest minimum level, investigations revealed that the 2011 general election turned out to be the nation's greatest manipulated polls. (Oguntola, 2011). He noted further that Voter registration formed the primary source and origin of rigging with the connivance of corrupt INEC officers who aided the politicians to hijack and stuffed the DDC Machines with fictitious names.

That notwithstanding, the electoral Umpire, Independent National Electoral commission had widely been condemned by majority of Nigerians for conducting the worst form of election on 25th of February, 2023. It has been alleged that the 2023 polls were highly compromised by INEC officials and other agencies saddled with the responsibility of organizing free and credible election for the country, having spent billions of tax payers money on the introduction of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). Analysing the scam and fraud associated with the introduction of electronic and digitalize model of election in Nigeria, the president of Computer Forensic Institute Nigeria, Olayiwola (2011) noted that abandoning manual registration and transmission of results for electronic is merely a shift from Retail Electoral fraud to Wholesale Electoral fraud". In retail electoral fraud, he explained politicians need many people to perpetuate electoral fraud, whereas in wholesale electoral fraud, "they need only a few smart people" to defraud. Sunday Oguntola.

The chairman of INEC Professor Mahmood Yakubu assured Nigerians that the election results would be transmitted electronically but that wasn't so. In most places in Imo State, whereas the Senate and House of Representatives results were transmitted electronically, that of Presidential was truncated. It was a clear robbery. In most polling units the BVAS were disabled to achieve the ulterior motive of INEC not to transmit electronically. It is disheartening that president Muhammadu Buhari APC led government wasted billions of Nigeria taxpayers' money to fund an election that was already programmed to be rigged by the electoral body itself, despite repeated assurance by the INEC chairman Professor Mahmood Yakubu Abubakar and president Muhammadu Buhari that the election would be free and transparent. The actions and inactions of Mahmood Yakubu led Independent National Electoral Commission is a minus to democracy and can truncate democratic process if not handled properly.

➤ **The undermining role of the Security Agents on election duties.**

In every society the security agencies are saddled with the responsibility of enforcing the law of the land and also to protect the citizens against internal and external aggressions, most especially during elections, but it is unfortunate that the Nigerian police and other security agencies have reneged from providing this service to Nigerians, but instead have often made themselves willing tools in the hand of desperate politicians to rig elections in their favour during elections.

Going by the experiences Nigerians have had in the past in the hands of corrupt security agencies, most especially the police, it will be an understatement to say that the security agencies are the greatest obstacle to true democracy and genuine electoral process in Nigeria. The 2003 polls recorded the highest electoral fraud in Nigeria history since the return of democratic rule in 1999. This was as a result of serious collaboration between Security Agencies and the politicians. The Nigerian youths have not had it well with the Nigerian police. Nigerian police and other security agencies in the recent time have not been fair to the youths whom they tagged internet fraudsters, kidnappers and bandits. Yes, even though most youths have turned themselves into criminals, which in any case became possible because of the impoverished situations government created. Though that the situation had pushed most of them into criminality does not mean that every youth that goes on clean car and outfit is an internet fraudster or kidnapper. The October 2020 EndSARS rebellion was an outburst of the Nigerian youths against Police brutality and harassment on the youths over the years.

The security agencies who are supposed to protect the Nigerian youths and others are the ones extorting and killing them in cold blood. The brutality of the police and loss of confidence in the ability of President Muhammadu Buhari APC led government to protect and provide for the suffering youths was one major reason why majority of Nigerian youths wholly supported the Obidient Movement which later metamorphosed into Labour Party, which had Mr Peter Obi as its presidential candidate in the 2023 polls.

The role the Security Agencies played during the 2023 general election in the country was not in any way encouraging. Some police officers attached to government officials and their political Aides openly assisted them to rig the election. Oparaku (2023) noted that "in Imo State, some corrupt security personnel were used to intimidate and suppressed the ad hoc staff of INEC to write results in favour of the ruling party's preferred candidates. They aided and escorted government officials in carting away ballot boxes from polling units. Thereby making mockery of the whole exercise and placing the nation's democracy on a cross road.

Ogunna (2003) rightly observed that

when elections are not free and fair, no popular decision is made at the polls and there is no representation of popular will. The resultant government is illegitimate and democracy is made a sheer mockery and wishful thinking

Also condemning voters' intimidation and suppression by security agencies and the ruling party, which characterized the 2023 polls, Nigerian UK based and founder of Good Governance Institute Marcel Ngogbehei faults the outcome of the 2023 polls, noting that " if the election results are not seen as legitimate, it could lead to dangerous escalation of tension in Nigeria, with potentially disastrous consequences for the country and region.

How elections were rigged in the 2023 general elections:

Since Independence, Nigeria has had series of elections, though none has been perfect, but the worst form of electoral fraud ever in the history of Nigeria was witnessed in the February 25th, 2023 general election under the watch of INEC chairman professor Mahmood Yakubu Abubakar, INEC electoral officers and the security personnel. Some of them colluded with candidates of the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) to record what has generally and massively been agreed to be the highest form of electoral fraud in Nigeria. The riggings started with the frustrations majority of Nigerians experienced in the process of collecting their voters' cards and on the election day where many Nigerians were denied voting right due to the shoddiness of the exercise. It is on record that more than 25% registered voters could not collect their voters' cards and could not therefore vote. Collaborating this, Olalekan & Omobala (2023) noted that:

of the 93 million voters across Nigeria who registered for the 2023 polls, only 25 million voted in the February 25th election, leaving 68 million unable to participate in the exercise. Many Nigerians didn't vote not because they didn't want to vote, but because some could not collect their voters' cards, election did not start as scheduled in some areas, election continued into the night, many people left the polling units out of frustrations, while those who were prepared to wait ultimately couldn't still vote because INEC officials closed without attending to them.

In the months preceding the 2023 polls, INEC chairman assured Nigerians that the election would be transmitted electronically but that turned out to be a big fallacy. Whereas the Senate and House of Representatives results were transmitted electronically, that of Presidential was truncated by INEC. There was evidence of manipulation of IREV (INEC server) in favour of certain preferred candidates. In some places, BVAS were disabled to achieve this purpose. Most the electoral officers (INEC Ad hoc staff) who were not in the know of the manipulation of the BVAS were almost lynched at the polling units by angry masses who were frustrated by the failure of the BVAS to function optimally.

In Imo State, and other States of South-East region of the country, the home and strong hold of the Labour party presidential candidate Mr Peter Obi, election materials arrived late or were never supplied at all. In most places, figures of original result sheets were altered and manipulated to favour certain preferred candidates. Most of the INEC's Ad hoc staff who served as Collection and Returning Officers in the 2023 polls had expressed their ordeals and experiences. Oparaku(2023) narrated his ordeal, noting that the electoral officers were threatened and coerced into taking huge amount of money to rewrite results in favour APC candidates for the presidential, Senatorial/House of Representatives as well as House of Assembly elections

Amanze Obi, a lecturer in one of the Tertiary institutions in Imo State who served as an Ad hoc staff of INEC in the 2023 general election noted that:

" in what is often referred to as the Omuma Magic, in Oru East Local Government Area of Imo State, fictitious and non-existing names and figures were manufactured and matched with equally fake pictures of non-existing people and in some places, no election was conducted, yet results from such areas were accepted by the INEC Resident Commissioner Prof. Vivian Agu even when the Returning Officer of State and Vice Chancellor of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Prof Charles Okechukwu Esimone and other INEC ad hoc staff testified against and rejected the authenticity of such results.

Another Adhoc staff Odinaka Chukwuemeka observed that:

During the House of Assembly election in Imo State, Armoured vehicles and teargas were freely used to scare voters away from the polling units, while the Security Personnel, Transition Committee Members, and Sole Administrators of the 27 Local Government Councils of the State carted away ballot boxes and BVAS Machines to write results at their comfort zones while the masses watched in awe and dismay. (2023)

These ugly experiences and narrative were collaborated by the EU Election Observation Mission's report on the 2023 polls, which pointed out six areas that would require urgent reform which they believe would improve the conduct of elections in the country and also enhanced transparency, inclusiveness and accountability if implemented.

Conclusion

Electoral malpractice is a phenomenal disease that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society and had continued to work against the wheels of democratic progress in Nigeria. Therefore, there is urgent need for a total overhaul of the democratic process and a re-think and change of attitude towards the conduct of elections in Nigeria.

One major problem working against the nation's democracy and electoral process is Defective Federalism practice in the country. A return to true federalism is the answer to Nigeria's numerous socio economic and political problems. A return to the days when the federating units were autonomous, innovative and proactive in developing their regions, utilizing their natural resources and paying taxes to the centre, would automatically make the centre less attractive. If the federating units are allowed to assume and appropriate their powers, there wouldn't be much apprehension and struggle by political gladiators and ethnic groupings to rig elections to occupy the centre stage.

Also, the Independent National Electoral Commission, the Judiciary, and Security Agencies in collaboration with the Print and Electronic Media should mount a confidence building crusade at all levels of the society in order to restore people's confidence in the nation's electoral process and democracy.

As a way forward, there is an urgent need for a total overhaul of the Electoral Body (INEC) and the Judiciary, most especially the process of appointing the INEC chairman and the Supreme and Appeal Court Judges. The two bodies should be made Independent in the real sense of it, without undue influence and interference from the Executive arms of government and the ruling party. Apart from statutory allocations from government, other sources of raising funds should be left to their discretion. All bottle neck policies that leave them to the mercy of the Executive should be removed. The appointment of INEC chairman, Supreme Court and Appeal Court Judges should not be left in hand of the President alone. This will go a long way in reducing Executive and incumbency influence on them and also correct the imbalances and anomalies that encourage electoral fraud and biased judgements.

It is no longer in doubt that most of the judges compromised justices because the process through which they are appointed are often times influenced by the interest of the political class (the party in power) who often hijack the selection process. Chidi Odinkalu, a Human Rights Lawyer and Activist had observed with dismay the rot in the process of selection and appointment of Appeal and Supreme Court Judges in the country, noting that the current process is not transparent and therefore encourages mediocrity and corruption, as suitable and competent candidates no longer make it to the echelon of the Bar as judges.²⁴ He made it point clear that most of the judges in the 2023 Election Tribunal list are sons, daughters and mistresses of politicians.

Recommendations

The level of interference and manipulations in election matters in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, in order to save the nation's democracy and consolidate the electoral process, there must be honest effort towards checkmating the above mentioned "Institutional Factors" militating against the consolidation of democracy and genuine electoral process in the country. In order to achieve this, there is urgent need to amend the Constitution of land to get things right.

Firstly, the judiciary is meant to be the last hope of the Common Man (Nigerian masses), but the experience Nigerians had in previous elections, it is no longer in doubt that the Judiciary had always been hijacked and manipulated by the government in power. The process of appointing judges to the Election Tribunals was never transparent since it was performed by the incumbent president. This statutory process should be made transparent and free from manipulations by the incumbent President and his party. It should be truly independent and free from manipulations by the Power that be.

The Independent National Electoral Commission should on their own part examine the character and role of its staff and other individuals they engage during and after elections to ensure credibility and transparency of election results.

Government at all levels of government should live up to their primary responsibilities of providing basic needs of the citizens and also ensuring the security of their lives and properties. This is because if Nigerian leadership do the needful, the Electorates would not be "Willing Tools" in their hands during elections.

There is need for the government to examine the existing electoral system and to identify and adopt a system that is relevant to the Nigeria's experience and best practices which would impact positively on the quality and credibility of elections in the country.

Last but not the least is that Nigeria government should as a matter of urgency adopt and implement the six key areas the EU Election Observation Mission's report pointed out that needs urgent reform. This includes: removing ambiguities in the Law, establishing a publicly accountable selection process for INEC members, ensuring real time publication of and access to election results, providing greater protection for Media practitioners and addressing discrimination against women in political life and to address impunity regarding electoral offences.

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