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SUSTAINING THE VALUES AND VIRTUES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTIONEERING PROCESS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explores the ideals of political participation and the values and virtues it is supposed to propagate in a democratic setting as we approach the threshold of a new political dispensation. It takes a historical review of the electioneering process in Nigeria and how this has been riddled with thuggery, rigging of elections, god fatherism, political praise singing, constitutional manipulations and amendments to favour the party in power. Cases of assassinations, arson and murder have occurred as a way of destabilizing the opposition. Corruption has become the order of the day while the need for capacity building has been completely neglected. The culture of poverty has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society and so people sell their votes to the detriment of the political process. It concludes with the assertion that only an independent electoral commission free from governmental interference is desirable for the country. Also is the need for us to change our values towards selflessness, sincerity and integrity so as to enhance the gains of our nascent democracy.

Introduction

In every known society, especially on our continental plain, there is this inexplicable desire on the part of those who find themselves in positions of trust, to at every given opportunity, ensure the total extermination of perceived enemies. The truth, however, remains unhidden, unshaken that, for every action taken in that direction, there is the commensurate result of negative consequences. This is a virtue most un-African: hence not fit for Africans.

- Prof. Ali Mazrui, foremost African Historian (Sunday Independent, April 2, 2006)

Values are ethical principles, standards or codes to which people feel a strong emotional commitment and which they employ in judging behaviour. They are general ideas that a people share about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable. In as much as values provide the framework upon which a group of people develop norms of behaviour, then it is pertinent in this

context to examine what values we must uphold in relation to the sustenance of our democratic process.

According to Adejuge et al (2004) the Nigerian situation can be described as one with epileptic development as encapsulated in the colonial period, the period of flag independence, the collapse of Westminster model of parliamentary democracy through coups and counter-coups, and after a prolong vacillation, the reluctant transition to civil rule. This has been clearly stated in the emasculation of political freedom through the denial of citizenship rights. Today, it would be myopic to continue to blame colonialism for all of Nigeria's social ills.

The current political arrangement started in 1999 after the sudden demise of the Military Junta, General Sani Abacha. The subsequent release from prison of the present civilian head of state, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and the handover of government at the completion of the presidential elections of 1999. Unfortunately, majority of those who have contested for political positions both in 1999 and 2003 elections have been retired military officers and recycled politicians some of whom have been masters of praise-singing no matter which government was in power. This has had great drawbacks for the government of the day as the government has become less sensitive to the needs and challenges confronting the citizenry. Indeed after the inauguration of this democratic government on May 29, 1999, some Nigerians took the change of government from military to civilian to mean that they had been excused from past experiences of living under hostile regimes. Little did they know that this wasn't the case.

It is necessary to state that privatization has become a pertinent evil to the detriment of the masses for whom development efforts are ideally intended for. The expensive nature of Abuja, the sale of 1004 and Bar Beach Towers, and even the GSM revolution have been a reap off on the masses considering its expensive tariffs. The removal of Toll Gates and destruction of Satellite Settlements around Abuja have led to the loss of jobs for a lot of those in the informal sector of the economy. There is also the continuous hike in the prices of petroleum products, the high levels of inflation, misery, poverty, hopelessness and insecurity which have made the current political experience a painful and regrettable one.

Nigerians can be good followers as shown for example in the experience of War Against indiscipline (WAI) of the Buhari/Idiagbon government. So leadership has been our bane because leadership at all levels has hardly been by example. The story has been from expensive official cars to struggle for furniture allowance, to infighting and scheming in the different legislative houses, between Governors and their deputies and even between the President and the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, thus making a mockery of the democratic process in the country.

Essence of Political Participation *

The need for politics arises from the fact that, as the German philosopher Karl Marx once observed, human beings are social animals. People generally choose to live in communities with others rather than as hermits. Given this, all human communities of whatever size are faced with two fundamental and inherent challenges:

- i. How can we live together in harmony, without resort to violence?
- ii. How should we distribute the resources upon which our lives depend?

This is very relevant in our situation in Nigeria, a country described by the UNDP, (1998) as a rich country with a poor population. The major cause of violent conflicts both within and between communities in Nigeria today is the struggle for the control and allocation of resources.

Political participation is the series of activities linked to the political process practiced by members of a society with intent to influence life. It is an umbrella term that includes different means for the public to directly participate in political, economical or management decisions. Political participation is about creating a level playing field for participation not only in electoral process but also in democratic governance.

The right to democratic governance is an entitlement conferred upon all citizens by law. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution by virtue of Section 40 states the following:

“Every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons and in particular he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interest: provided that the provisions of this section shall not derogate from the powers conferred by this constitution on the Independent National Electoral Commission with respect to political parties to which that commission does not accord recognition,”

Section 42 of the same constitution further states that:

“A citizen of Nigeria of a particular community, ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion or political opinion shall not, by reason only he is such a person, be subjected to any form of discrimination.”

Section 77 states that:

“Every citizen of Nigeria who has attained the age of eighteen years residing in Nigeria at the time of the registration of the voters for purposes of election to a legislative house, shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for that election.”

Tocqueville identified the tendency of the state to centralize power, and underlined the need for alternative civil and political associations to counter-balance and control this power. He argued that the willingness on behalf of citizens to participate fully in the governance of their own lives was central to a thriving civil society. Such participation was an expression of citizenship, and was crucial to engendering a shared political culture.

Political participation is “the active engagement by individuals and groups with the governmental processes that affect their lives”. This encompasses both involvement in decision making and acts of opposition. Acts of active engagement include conventional political participation (such as voting, standing for office and campaigning for political party) and unconventional (acts, which may be legitimate (such as signing a petition and attending a peaceful demonstration), or illegal (such as violent protest and refusing to pay taxes).

According to Faulks et al (2003) political participation should indeed matter to us all because politics is concerned with fundamental questions that are of profound relevance to human beings, whenever or wherever they may live. Political participation goes beyond voting at elections and the question of how we can live in peace. It must also address the problems of the masses such as poverty, unemployment and insecurity. Also, as a citizen, what rights am I entitled to? How can I make my voice heard? Why should I obey the government? What should be the limits, if any, to my personal freedom?

It was because of the essence of political participation that Aristotle (348 – 322 BC) asserted that it was the duty of all to engage in political activity, for humans are by nature 'political animals'. (Faulks et al 2003) As Schedler (1997) notes, 'politics delineates the realm of common affairs'. As long as human beings live in interdependent relationships with other individuals and, importantly, they recognize that their existence is interdependent with that of other people, then politics is a necessary and fundamental human activity.

Participation must ensure that government of the state is a two-way process. If the elite who occupy the institutions of state are indeed doing it 'for the people', then the demands and ideas of the masses must permeate through to the decision-makers. It is imperative, therefore, that citizens have the opportunity to participate in their own governance. The most obvious mechanisms to provide this participation are elections, as they allow citizens to select between competing political elites. Through political participation power is said to reside in the hands of the electorate, and so would always demand a say if the affairs of the state are not being run in consonance with the wishes of the people who voted them into government.

In Nigeria the situation has been very different from what political participation should represent. The crisis that have emerged from such participation have been that of thuggery and rigging of elections with flagrant disregard for the votes cast by the electorate. Political parties often have back-up plans as to how best to attain victory at elections. Hence, the electorates have little or no say as regards who rules eventually because sometimes while counting will be going on in the polling booths, the result of that area would have been announced by the state Electoral Commission. History has it that part of the problems leading to the overthrow of the first Republic by the Nzeogwu led military force was due to electoral manipulations and the destruction of lives and property which followed, especially in the Western Region. So, we are all stake holders in the government of the Nation, and this can only be enhanced and guaranteed through political participation.

According to Dobratz, Buzzell and Waldner (2002) political participation continues to be a fundamental and key concept in the study of politics. A rather conventional form of political participation has to do with electoral participation. An aspect of political participation involves its impact on ethnic oppression. According to Aquirre and Turner (2001) discrimination is a central force which denies minorities equal access to resources and as a result, generates a system of ethnic stratification. Discrimination confines individuals to particular places and positions in society. Consequently some ethnic groups enjoy dominant positions while others occupy subservient positions. Access to political positions and opportunities among ethnic groups and even tribal sentiments have determined the level of political participation enjoyed by people in Nigeria.

There has also been discrimination against women. Quadri (2004) considered the importance of women participation in politics, arguing that women participation in the past had been hampered by local values and norms, as well as by religious and anti-feminist prejudices. The British Indirect Rule and the relatively retarded female education in Nigeria compounded the problem of women participation in politics. In Nigeria, we live in a patriarchal society where the woman's place is said to be in the Kitchen. She cannot go against the wish of her husband. And within political groups, the woman is seen as a threat that must not be allowed to thrive.

Historical look at Nigeria's Political Culture

The political entity known as Nigeria today was the creation of the Colonialists. In 1914, the British Governor, General Lord Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates to form Nigeria. This basically was for administrative conveniences without any form of respect for the socio-cultural and political differences of these entities.

According to Adebisi (1999:21) the seeds of ethnic violence were sown by the British colonial policies in Nigeria with the adoption of a divide and rule tactics, which later robbed Nigerians of the common front for nation building. The consequent effect of this is that the Indirect Rule System paved way for the emergence of regional leaders and political parties whose manifestoes were designed along ethnically determined interests.

In the West, the Action Group (AG) was headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in the East was headed by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe while in the North, we had the Northern People's Congress (NPC) headed by Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sark of Sokoto. According to Arazeem (2005) the Richards Constitution of 1946 provided for the division of the country into regions, each built around one of the major ethnic groups. This culminated in a pattern of political rivalry between the regions.

Ironically, each of these dominant groups had its own history, traditions, customs, values and languages distinct from each other. Within each of these regions there were numerous other ethnic groups with distinct culture who were known as the minorities. This arrangement provided a "playing ground" for fear of domination by one region or the other. This suspicion, distrust and fear of domination was clearly exhibited when political leaders of the North and South met for the first time in 1947 in the Federal Legislative Council initiated through the Richards' Constitution of 1946. This has been the unfortunate situation in Nigeria as the country has suffered from series of political crisis which have not resulted in the political development for the country and which has also reflected in the country's political culture.

ELECTIONEERING PROCESS IN NIGERIA

According to Olukoshi (1998), without doubt, the increased focus on elections as an exercise that is central to the effort at promoting democracy in Africa has served the useful purpose of illuminating some of the progress that has been made, and the difficulties that continue to dog the process of political reform on the continent. However, there are also several other important ways in which our understanding is beclouded by the dominant approaches to interpreting the role and place of elections in the struggle for meaningful or lasting political change in Africa.

Some scholars, for example, have expressed justifiable concern that there is an uncritical tendency first, to isolate and the, simplistically to equate the fact of 'free' and 'fair' elections with

the dawn of a new democratic era. Because of this, the advantages that could have been gained from a more sober, less hasty understanding of democracy as a process rather than as an episode is lost. Thus, many African countries such as Nigeria where authoritarian political practices are still widespread are declared 'democratic on the basis of just conducting elections.

Cowen and Laakso ed. (2002) have also stated that ideally, in the quest for civil rule in Nigeria, elections were expected to make a difference to political rule. It was supposed to serve as a means of change in regime to make a transition away from 'corruption' as a systematic form of government. Elections were meant to be the means for establishing 'governance'. As an alternative to violent change, through a coup or revolution, elections were to legitimate a change in regime and make a new regime, through successive elections, and accountable one.

According to Mustapha (1986) there are various dimensions to power relations in contemporary Nigeria. These dimensions often express themselves in terms of the overlapping, crosscutting contradictions that have been built into the national political process and which pitch one group against the other with varying degrees of intensity. They include the struggle between the rich and the ever-growing army of working and unemployed poor; the conflict between the bearers of a vision of autonomous national development and the forces of local and international capitalism; the political competition among the different geo-political zones in the country (broadly, north versus south and within this east versus west, west versus north, and east versus north); intra-regional contradictions (such as those between the middle belt and emirate north, the minorities of the oil rich Niger Delta and the Igbos of the South east, and among the minorities themselves); the closely related tensions within and among the diverse ethnic groups that make up the country; the tensions between ethnic minorities and majorities; the contradictions between rural and urban Nigerians; the widening gulf between Chiefs/Emirs and their 'subjects'; the contradictions between Christians and Moslems; gender- and generationally-based disparities that display varying degrees of rigidity in different parts of the country; and the contradictions within and between Military society and civil society. The way in which these contradictions alone and in combination play themselves out is central to an understanding of the nuances of politics in contemporary Nigeria.

Ake (1996) has further stated that when this is taken together with the precarious economic foundations on which the political system in Nigeria rests and the fact that the state and access to it are central to the definition of individual and group opportunity, then we will begin to understand why elections could mean so much to contestants and their constituencies.

The electoral politics in Nigeria, especially during the 1990s has been clearly examined by Olukoshi (1998). According to him, the whole intention of the successive military regimes democratic transition project in Nigeria, in spite of its ideological illegitimacy, and gross failure to sustain political and economic stability, was to provide a number of local and national elections for entrenching military rule. Therefore, the administration of electoral processes was doomed to be arbitrary. Yet, even more importantly, elections took place through increasing state repression of civil and political liberties, since they only served to evoke opposition to military rule.

The domestic pressures against the Abacha Junta came from activities of the civil and political society groups such as Afenifere, National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) National Liberation Council of Nigeria (NALICON) Campaign for Democracy (CD) Movement for the

Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) Democratic Alternative (DA) who pushed for the recognition of the results of June 12, 1993 Presidential elections won by the late M.K.O. Abiola that had been annulled by the Babangida government. More pressure came internationally after the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni/minority rights activists on 10 November 1995 by the Abacha Junta, including the suspension of the country from the Commonwealth.

No election in Nigeria's post-independence history till date has ever gone uncontested. So intense was the contestation of the first post-independence elections that it not only resulted in the collapse of the First Republic (1960–66) and the onset of military rule but also paved the way for the onset of the country's civil war. It was also the violent contestation of the results of the 1983 elections coupled with the crisis in the national economy that provided justification for the overthrow of the Second Republic (1979–83) by the military.

So the bitterness of electoral disputes has often been associated with incidents of massive rigging, thuggery and violence on the part of the key players in the political process. One remembers vividly the Western Region crisis in the First Republic between Obafemi Awolowo and Ladoke Akintola and their supporters. Or the killings and destruction in Ondo during the Second Republic. In recent times one cannot forget the assassination of Harri Marshall, the attacks by law enforcement agents on the orders of the 'powers that be' leading to health complications and eventual death of Chuba Okadigbo and perhaps Beko Ransom Kuti and the death of Comradé Chima Ubani, so that Nigeria could be a country worth living.

Consistently therefore, this government has used security apparatus to antagonize Nigerians and stop them from expressing themselves in a manner that is consistent with democratic rule. On Saturday October 9, 2004, Adams Oshiomole, President of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was assaulted by security officers during the build-up to a nationwide strike against another round of increase in petroleum product prices, a cause for which Chima Ubani also lost his life. (Guardian, April 2, 2006).

ROLE OF THE NATIONAL POPULATION COMMISSION

The essence of the National Population Commission is to ensure that adequate and reliable statistics necessary for planning and development are available. One of such ways of doing this is through a census exercise. Unfortunately in the history of Nigeria, this has not been a fair and sincere exercise. The process started as early as 1866, though in limited scope. 1952-53, it took place in the Lagos, Calabar and Bonny area. The census of 1962 was rejected, that of 1963 was estimated at 56 million people. The census of 1973 was rejected due to alleged inflation of figures. The 1991 census was also tentatively put at 88 million people.

The implication of this is that census has always turned out to be a political issue and this has ultimately affected our political process and development. So the political will has always been there, but we have allowed other political considerations to overwhelm the essence of a credible census. This also has become worse as we have failed even in the twenty first century to play down on ethnicity and religion as shown in the recent census exercise, and this has become a double edged sword. Indeed, census has become an avenue for political gains.

It is most disappointing therefore to state that in the national census exercise of 2006, while the National Population Commission claimed that the exercise was 95 per cent successful, reports

across the country showed that over 20 percent of Nigerians were not counted. Hence the call for a supplementary census as a way of ensuring that the entire process does not end as an exercise in futility. (Guardian 2nd April, 2006). This has been further confirmed by hastily put together census figures for 2006 which was released on December 29, 2006 and which put our population as 140,003,542 with Kano state having a population higher than Lagos state which is the Nigeria's commercial nerve centre. This has been met with very serious rejection, controversy, shock, surprise and disbelief.

ELECTORAL COMMISSIONS IN NIGERIA

Electoral Commission from time immemorial have been puppets in the hands of the government of the day. The Independence and freedom from interference have never been guaranteed. A notable example of this happened during the Abacha regime's transition programme. The National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) was headed by Summer Daggio-Jack and the Transition Implementation Committee (TIC) was headed by Mamman Nasir. The latter had responsibility for the design and implementation of much of the transition programme; the former set the electoral rules, screened candidates for elections and announced the results of elections. Both of these agencies were central to the manipulation of the rules of the 'transition' process and the political game in order to ensure that General Abacha remained in power.

It is important to note as stated by Newswatch (8 July, 1998), Thisday (27 April, 1998) and the Guardian Newspaper (3 and 7 July 1997) that the political equation in the transition process always changed as rapidly as politicians attempted to surmount obstacles put in their way. The rules governing the programme were also frequently altered in order both to wrong-foot the politicians and to ensure that the political advantage was always on General Abacha's side. This was reflected in the election of delegates to the constitutional conference, the writing of a new constitution, the formation of political parties and the nomination of candidates for elected office. NECO and TIC were very active in weeding out 'troublemakers' from the list of people eligible to participate in different aspects of the transition. This was the same situation of things when General Babangida introduced the National Electoral Commission (NEC). From the days of Prof. Eme Awa, to Chief Dago Jack, to Dr. Abel Gwobadia and now Prof. Maurice Iwu, it has been controversy-to-controversy, rejection of election results, court rulings, claims and counter claims.

In the present democratic arrangement, political observers are worried that government may have gone outside its duties, to commence investigation of a party that was only recently registered by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), having been investigated and found worthy of registration in accordance with the relevant sections of the 1999 constitution. One wonders therefore, if government is telling Nigerians that INEC is no longer competent to register parties and perform its supervisory function. There had been series of other police disruptions of peaceful gatherings across the country all in the name of public order. But these unfortunately have been targeted at the opposition. (Guardian Newspaper, 2nd April, 2006).

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS AND JUDICIAL INEPTITUDE

Constitutional amendments or review on its own can be said to be good if it is based on very obvious challenges confronting us as a people. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case and the clamour by the masses for a National Conference for us to come together as one and discuss our

problems has still not seen the light of day.

Indeed, constitutional amendments have become avenues of manipulation by the ruling party for self-perpetuation against the wishes of the people. This negates the essence of democracy. It signals a bad omen for democratic arrangements now and in the future.

The question of manipulating the constitution to create room for a third term for the President was completely absurd, highly unconstitutional and an abuse on the legal system of the country. The recent boycott of the courts by Lawyers for two days (13 and 14 March, 2006) shows that something is seriously wrong due especially to the flagrant abuse of the Independence of the Judiciary. The case in Oyo state in which the Governor Rasheed Ladoja was swiftly removed from office for which it took over ten months for justice to prevail shows the weakness of the judiciary against the powers that be and the issue of god fatherism shown by Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu in the enthronement of the Deputy Governor, Alao Akala to the position of Governor. Or the power tussle between the former Governor of Anambra state, Dr. Chris Ngige and his political god father Chris Uba and the negative role played by the Presidency and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in supporting Chris Uba. The removal of Dr. Ngige and enthronement of Peter Obi, eventually, showed that justice was delayed. But it also showed how terrible the process of the 2003 elections was. Or the swift removal of Peter Obi for his Deputy and the current manipulations going on especially in the judicial arena to debar Peter Obi from getting back into Government house.

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY

The last straw that has affected the issue of political participation in the electioneering process is the culture of poverty in the country. This concept originated by Lewis (1961) helps to describe slum dwellers of the Third World and the poor in contemporary developed societies. It argues that the poor create distinctive patterns of behaviour and belief, notably a fatalistic acceptance of being poor and an inability to do anything that might help them to lift themselves out of poverty. The condition is disabling and ensure that the poor remain in poverty and so children from the poor or deprived families are socialized by their parents into the culture and grows up to be poor too.

According to Ukwu (2002) Nigeria is today one of the poorest of the poor among the nations of the world, and we are confronted not just with pockets of poverty-disadvantaged or marginalized areas, groups and individuals – but with a situation in which most of the population exists at standards of living below those required for full development and enjoyment of individual and societal well-being. And Iniodu (1997) sees poverty as the state or condition of living in which people have little or no money, assets, or means of support. In fact, Adepoju (2003) corroborated this assertion by stating that the different manifestations of poverty are widespread and severe in the country, among all sections of the population but especially so for women and children who are the most vulnerable groups.

The implication of this is that majority of Nigerians go through a vicious circle of poverty and this has also affected the political system in the country. Today, it does not matter much as regards the level of credibility of candidates for elections. Rather people consider what such candidates can offer. Votes are now to be sold for the highest bidder who goes round in the course of the campaign exercise distributing money, food items and household needs for the people. And for such persons seeking political office, elections have become avenues towards having a share of

the national cake. Service to the people have been lost to personal enrichment for their families and generations yet unborn. And so, political positions have become opportunities of once in a life time and that of survival of the fittest.

Democratic Values and Virtues

According to Wattenberg and Lineberry (1996), democracy is a means of selecting policy makers and organizing government so that policy represent and respond to citizen's preferences. Hence, Shabanon (1969) described democracy as the subordination of the minority to the majority in all spheres and areas of political life.

Democratic values are the basis for determining whether a purportedly democratic system is indeed democratic or not. Such values and virtues may include:

1. Citizens have the right to form relatively independent associations or organizations including political parties and interest groups.
2. Citizens who are of eligible have the right to vote and also run for elective office.
3. Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections.
4. Control over government decisions about policies is constitutionally vested in electoral officials.
5. Liberty and social justice must be guaranteed as this generally points to the protection of fundamental human rights such as the right of life, right of property, freedom of expression, freedom of association, etc.
6. The rule of law must apply to everyone because no man must be beyond the laws of the land as found in the constitution of the land.
7. Popular sovereignty must be observed as this point to the principle that the power of government flows from the people.
8. The common good of all must be guaranteed by the government as against the selfish interests of rulers.

According to Cohen (1997:535) there are three basic ideals of democracy and these are liberty, equality and fraternity. Above all, Democratic values and virtues must embrace sincerity in government and of followership. This also includes sacrifice, selflessness, credibility and a high sense of integrity.

Conclusion

We must at this stage conclude that for us to continue to live together as one indivisible entity there is need for a paradigm shift towards a thought process that will enhance the ideals of a true democracy through values, virtues and beliefs that will crystallize in selflessness, sacrifices, sincerity and integrity so as to achieve national development.

The citizenry must come to understand that it is more important to put the needs and aspirations of the country before self. We must learn to ask what we can do for the nation and not what the nation can do us. Coming into government should not be seen as an avenue to get one's part of the national cake, rather it should be for service and sacrifice.

It is imperative to also state that the elimination of political violence, the assurance of stability and the control of corruption among public officials, will surely go a long way in the development and sustenance of the political process as we move towards the new political dispensation.

Finally, the win at all cost syndrome in Nigeria must be addressed because it is one reason why people will want to do anything to attain victory at elections as the system gives little or no benefits to the opposition. In addition, people must invest in themselves through capacity building because politics must be seen as a profession and not as an all comers affairs.

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