

DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

A Qualitative Study of the 2023 Presidential Elections

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ABSTRACT

Discontentment with democracy in West Africa centres on abuse of power and political corruption. In Nigeria, dissatisfaction lies not just with these but also with insecurity, economic recession and the electoral process – a system fraught with complications, controversies and contradictions. Using the political economy of elections as its theoretical framework together with mixed research methods, this paper interrogates the relationship between Nigeria’s democratic culture and the 2023 presidential elections. Here I present a politicised electoral management institution, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Its performance is shaped, not by legislative instruments and constitutional guidelines, but by a dysfunctional democratic culture that reflects the extent to which ethnicised politics, class, institutionalised loyalty and money politics determine election results and Nigeria’s version of democracy. Although fragile and prebendal, democracy continues to consolidate amidst delayed development. The paper recommends increased media advocacy for reform.

Keywords: Democratic culture, Nigeria, elections, money politics, consolidation

INTRODUCTION

On 25 February 2023, Nigeria’s electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), conducted the seventh presidential poll since democratisation in 1999. Although 18 presidential candidates, including a female aspirant, contested the election in the end it was a three horse race – the first of its kind in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

The leading contenders were Bola Tinubu (All Progressive Congress), Peter Obi (Labour Party) and Atiku Abubakar (Peoples' Democratic Party). As with previous presidential elections, the stake were high – insecurity, especially threats posed by Boko Haram and bandits, needed to be tackled. Economic underperformance evidenced by high unemployment (33% overall and 42.5% among young adults), grinding poverty, skyrocketing inflation of 35% at the time, fuel shortages and naira scarcity were also problematic (Bilquin & Delivorias 2023). More than ever, Nigerians expected a transparent election whose outcome would reflect the will of over 90 million registered voters. Within West Africa, a free and fair election in Nigeria could provide a workable template for struggling democracies on the brink, or inspire Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso to re-democratise (Tayo 2023).

Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC) was declared president-elect on 1 March by INEC, with just under 9 million of the total 24 million votes – the lowest since the end of military rule in 1999. Nigeria's two main opposition parties, the PDP and LP, described the election as fraudulent, marred by vote buying, systemic irregularities and technology failures, and called on INEC to overturn the results. Aggrieved parties not only expressed their disappointment with the electoral system but also sought redress at the Supreme Court. Local and international observers also raised grave concerns about the organisation, conduct and outcome of the presidential polls. The European Union Election Observation Mission in Nigeria (EU-EOM Report 2023) flagged several instances of abuse of power and privilege, the use of incumbency to influence voting outcome, and outright result manipulation. For example, the report questioned the independence of the Electoral Commission whose leadership included INEC's chairman as well as key resident electoral commissioners at federal and state levels who were handpicked by the outgoing APC president Mohammed Buhari. 'The election exposed enduring systemic weaknesses and therefore signals a need for further legal and operational reforms to enhance transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability' (EU-EOM 2023). Itodo (2023) questioned why INEC was unable to publish a comprehensive voter's register prior to and during the 2023 general elections.

Other reports such as the Centre for Democracy and Development Report by Jinadu (2023) and the Yiaga Africa Report (YAR 2023) highlighted a multitude of issues that include, but are not limited to, legal, institutional, financial and operational irregularities by INEC. For instance, lengthy dispute handling times by the commission increased uncertainty between parties as the elections drew near; special courts to deal expediently with electoral cases were not empowered to function smoothly and on time, leading to instances in which pre-election

disputes spilled into the election period; INEC failed to publish publicly-available PVC data prior to election (CDD, 2023). More worrisome were issues associated with the failure of the newly introduced BVAS and iREV technologies to transmit voting results immediately after the presidential election. INEC also failed to issue consolidated official version of the laws, particularly the 2022 Electoral Act guiding its operations. INEC's Regulations and Guidelines for Political Parties were issued in late 2022, barely four months ahead of elections. Additionally, the *Yiaga Africa Report 2023* and NDI/IRI 2023 highlighted the general lack of timely and key information which is inconsistent with international standards on transparency.

INEC's underperformance during the 2023 presidential election was both unexpected and problematic. The body had guaranteed a free and fair election by reason of funds at its disposal (305 Billion Naira), two-decade long polling experience, new technologies (iREV and BVAS) and the 2022 Electoral Act that strengthened its operational infrastructure (Muazu 2022). However, INEC's conduct of the 2023 presidential elections reflected a long history of inconsistent, contentious, and below-average elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011 that were adjudged to have fallen short of acceptable international standards in a process was not transparent and credible (EU-EOM 2007). Elections in 2015 were less controversial, making it the first time an incumbent president lost an election (Nwagwu et al. 2022; Verjee et al. 2019; Ogbeyi 2010; Odusote 2014; EU-EOM 2011).

This paper interrogates the link between Nigeria's elections and its democratic culture in order to unpack their symbiotic relationship and deconstruct their consequences for the country's democratic future. My focus on presidential elections is informed by its stake and volatility. This is in part due to Nigeria's ethno-political and socioeconomic cleavages. In Africa, presidents wield enormous political power that shapes resource allocation, influences ethno-religious contestation for power, and determines the performance of state institutions. Importantly, therefore, this study examines the nature, dynamics and political undertones of the 2023 presidential election to determine its connections with Nigeria's democratic culture.

While an abundance of local and international election monitoring reports as well as scholarly literature abounds, much of it is focused on INEC's institutional shortcomings (EU-EOM 2023), INEC's strategic plan (INEC 2022), INEC's key issues in election 2023 (Walker 2023), mitigating the risk of violence (Africa Report 2023), legitimacy (Fasakin 2023) and election logistics (CDD 2023). However, this contribution pays particular attention to democratic culture, elite capture and money politics, and their implications for democratic

consolidation or otherwise. The paper contextualises the immediate post-independence era in Africa that witnessed significant violence during elections which often escalated to war in some nations. Even when democracy was reintroduced in the 1990s after long periods of military rule, Adejumbi warned that that an uneasy future awaits competitive elections in Africa, indicating that democracy on the continent is bedevilled by a ‘gradual but dangerous reinstitutionalisation of autocratic and authoritarian regimes clad in democratic garb who circumvent elections, distort the electoral process and manipulate the voting public’ (Adejumbi 2000, p. 1). Are his warnings still useful today?

NIGERIA’S INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC)

Free and fair national elections are rare in Nigeria. Although elections were first introduced over 100 years ago through the 1922 Clifford Constitution which allowed four elective seats into the Lagos Legislative Council, 100 years later elections are still controversial and problematic. The first general election was conducted in 1959 by the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) to replace the outgoing colonial government. Unlike the former which was restricted to British or Nigerian men aged 21 and over who lived in Lagos and/or Calabar municipality and earned at least 100 pounds per annum, the latter included all adults over 21 (Osiki 2010). Women in Northern Nigeria were disenfranchised. Ethnic and sectional politics also marred that election and sowed seeds of discord that in part led to the Nigerian/Biafra Civil War (1967-70). Post-independent elections in 1979, 1983 and 1993 were all controversial. For example in 1979, Shewu Sagari’s victory sparked nation-wide protest in the South, due to widespread claims of rigging, fraud and corruption in the North. In 1983 and 1993, military coups annulled the process and invalidated both elections (Oyeleye 1981).

Democratisation in 1999 flagged off Nigeria’s Fourth Republic and symbolised a new beginning after three-and-a-half decades of intermittent military rule. A new constitution instituted balanced relations between the different branches of power as the rule of law, judicial reforms, federalism and minority protection became cemented in law. Importantly, a new electoral management body – the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) – was set up to organise all elections (Muazu 2022). It replaced the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) set up in 1995 after 1993’s aborted elections. INEC was established in accordance with Section 153(f) of the 1999 Constitution to ‘organise, undertake and supervise all elections, register and monitor political parties, audit their funds, monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations...’ (FGN 2010). These functions are underpinned

by a vision to ‘be one of the best Election Management Bodies (EMB) in the world that meets the aspirations of the Nigerian people’ (ibid.).

However, multiple studies have indicated that from 1999 to date, INEC’s ability to organise free and fair presidential elections has been debateable. The body has been at the centre of electoral controversies, disputes and voting irregularities. The 1999 presidential election between Olusegun Obasanjo (Peoples’ Democratic Party) and Olu Falae (Alliance for Democracy) ended in the Court of Appeal when the former was declared winner. According to Ogbeidi (2010), both local and international observers reported large-scale irregularities amounting to 40% in 2003, and violence, poor planning and INEC’s mismanagement of the process marred that year’s presidential voting (Aluko 2008). INEC again missed an important opportunity to conduct free and fair elections.

The 2007 presidential election was the most poorly organised and massively rigged exercise since democratisation, according to the Crisis Group Africa Report (2007) which indicated that INEC practically abdicated its responsibilities as an impartial umpire, was ineffective and non-transparent in its operations and acted as an accessory to active rigging, result falsification and electoral malpractice. Security officers deployed to curb violence either turned a blind eye to, and in some cases helped in the brazen falsification of results (CGA Report 2007). The Commonwealth Observer Mission (2019) stated that ‘Overall, in organisational terms, these elections fell short of the standards Nigeria had achieved in 2003 and certainly well below those to which Nigeria is committed’. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM 2007) reported that: ‘The 2007 State and Federal elections have fallen far short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections’. INEC was alert to the necessity of getting it right in 2011 but rather than consolidate democracy and facilitate development, the 2011 presidential election was a major national crisis after which violence erupted in the North (Husaini 2023). Overall, elections in 2015 and 2019 failed to ensure trust in INEC, or guarantee the public that elections were conducted transparently and progressively (Kohnert 2023).

This study links the 2023 presidential elections to broader dysfunction within the Nigerian political system. It argues that INEC underperformance during the 2023 elections is not just a reflection of deeper decays within other democratic institutions but is also a mirror of Nigeria’s dysfunctional political culture.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

To interrogate the link between 2023's presidential election and Nigeria's democratic culture, qualitative research methodology was used to elicit comments and responses from randomly selected participants (Devereux 2007). First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants in Lagos in July 2023. Lagos is Nigeria's former capital, the most cosmopolitan state in Nigeria and the nation's commercial nerve centre. The city's rich multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-cultural diversity embodies a range of Nigerians from all walks of life. Although it ceased to be Nigeria's capital state in 1991, it still wields enormous political and economic clout. Lagos has the highest concentration of banks, tertiary institutions and on- and offline news media establishments. It is also the second-most populated state in Nigeria, next to Kano.

For the purposes of this study 25 participants were selected randomly across Lagos Mainland and Lagos Island to represent the major geographical divide in the state. Of these, 14 participants identified as men while the remaining 11 were women. The socio-economic background of participants also varied to include five business owners, seven civil servants, three graduate students at the University of Lagos, five reporters, two unemployed graduates and three grassroots politicians. Their ethnicity was also broadly spread, with seven Yorubas, five Ibos, three Hausa/Fulani, three Edos, two Middle Belters, three from Calabar and two from Abuja. Thematic analysis was used to filter and unpack gathered data.

Secondly, focused group discussions (FGD) were used as an additional research method to gather qualitative data. In August 2023, three FDGs, each comprising six participants, was conducted in Lagos. Of these FGD1 had six news reporters, FGD2 had six regional politicians, and FGD3 had Youth Corp members, most of whom served as polling station personnel during elections. Snowballing technique was used to assemble participants. Familiarity among them allowed for the free exchange of ideas and comments (Lunt & Livingstone 1996). News content such as polling-day irregularities, opposition party claims, security lapses prior to, during and after voting, as well as issues surrounding electronic transmission of results, was used during News Game to engage participants. News Game facilitated rich discussion during FGD (Kitzinger 2000).

Critical discourse analysis provided the analytical framework used to make sense of data. It enable comments to be contextualised in their historical, political and social settings in order to gain a proper understanding of how perspectives function (Van Dijk 2015). Data was subjected to interdisciplinary and intersectional analysis to interrogate what happened during

the 2023 presidential elections, why it happened and what consequence this had for democracy. All ethical procedures were adhered to. The study's purpose was communicated to participants prior to, and their consent was obtained before interviews and focused group discussions commenced. For fear of reprisals, all participants agreed to take part on condition of anonymity and confidentiality.

In sum, this section unpacked the methodological framework for this study. It adopted qualitative research tradition, focusing on semi-structured interview with 25 candidates in Lagos but from diverse backgrounds, different genders and ethnic origins. It aligned best-practice thematic analysis as it observed all standard ethical procedures.

FINDINGS AND ALYSIS

This section situates the 2023 presidential election and INEC's role within the context of Nigeria's evolving democratic culture. It examines the failure of other democratic institutions, especially law enforcement. It also argues that while religion and ethnicity may have played decisive roles in previous dispensations, in its current form, Nigeria's dysfunctional democratic culture shaped by money politics, the power of incumbency, elite-controlled political parties, and the use of state machinery for elite domination indicate the extent to which elections and democracy in Nigeria intrinsically reflect the Marxist conceptualisation of class, politics and underdevelopment.

NIGERIA'S POLITICAL CULTURE

This study found that Nigeria's democracy is not a level playing field. Opportunities are not equal, party nomination is non-transparent, access to resources is not even and there are no winners in the true sense of competitive elections. No one wins but somebody emerges as president after every general election. Six decades after independence, Nigeria's democratic culture remains topsy-turvy, regressive and dysfunctional. Steady democratic progress remains elusive, partial and fragile. This dysfunction is a colonial legacy that became cemented during extended spells of military rule. Both periods had negative consequences for the concept of political leadership, inclusive politics, the social contract and decentralised decision-making that underpins democracy. Colonialism may have denied Nigerians adequate space and time to imbibe, cultivate and practice self-rule; but at independence in 1960 the new inheritors of state power were preoccupied with tribal politics laced with mutual suspicion and ethnic distrust,

rather than laying the foundation for a new Nigeria based on equality, transparency and respect for the democratic process. Military coups, the first in 1966 and several more thereafter, restricted civil liberties, banned elections and centralised absolute power in their leadership. For more than three decades (from the 1970s to the 1990s), a tribunal replaced civil courts, coups replaced elections as military rulers exercised absolute power through decrees. A brief spell of civil rule between 1979 and 1983 was also cut short by more military coups. By 1999, when the military abdicated power, command-style laws and authoritarian fiat endured.

In essence, a significant deficit in the culture of tolerance, civility, competitive elections, fair trial and media freedom manifested in multiple forms after democratisation in 1999. The emergent ruling class were not interested in living for politics but in living from it. The mass media were either state-owned (subservient to the incumbent government) or privately-owned (controlled by advertising revenue and ownership structures). The emergent political parties were in the firm grip of former military rulers. And civil society groups were just regrouping after decades of deliberate witch-hunts by successive military regimes. Politics became the path to personal wealth and influence, and elections were thus seen as a way to control the people and not as a means for the people to control politics. For politicians, multiparty elections are must-wins by any means possible including rigging, voter suppression, organised chaos and violence because it is through politics that unchecked wealth is accumulated. While it is in the nature of the political class across the world to win every election, in the Nigerian case very few play by the rules, where there are rules. According to one participant, ‘the only rule is to make plenty of money through hook and crook and use that ill-gotten wealth to win the next election through every conceivable means’.

Ethnic, religious and regional rhetoric

One such method is the use of ethnic, religious and regional rhetoric as a dividing factor for political gains. Ethnic tensions that manifested prior to, during and after the February 2023 presidential election were re-manufactured and used by the three leading candidates, Bola Tinubu (Yoruba), Atiku Abubakar (Hausa/Fulani) and Peter Obi (Ibo) in the run-up to the 2023 election. Rather than base their campaign on ideology, action plans and issues, each candidate resorted to and used their ethnicity as a means to win votes. Ethnic tensions, addressed in the 1946 Richards Constitution, were part of a larger regional crisis that the 1914 Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates attempted to resolve. Ethnic suspicions and mistrust among the major regions after independence led to the creation of the Mid-Western Region in

1963. These tensions subsequently increased and developed into Nigeria's civil war from 1967 to 1970. Further decentralisation in 1967 led to the creation of 12 states, with a further 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991 and 36 in 1996. However, the ethno/religious politics of identity has remained a delicate subject in modern Nigeria and politicians often use it to stir controversies and whip up tribal sentiments. In the 2023 presidential election, ethnicity was however not that important.

Money

Money politics played a far larger role in shaping the 2023 presidential elections. Politics across the world is impossible without money. At federal, state and local government level, running for office is impossible without plenty of personal wealth. Financial resources serve two purposes, one, for visible projects such as political advertisement, posters, campaign logistics and mobility. Second, it is 'used to grease the campaign machinery as it exchanges hands' noted a participant. The latter purpose also has two parts: the first is logistics, as money is used to pay party representatives in polling units, wards and in local council stations within each jurisdiction. Party agents are paid, not by the political party but by each politician, to engage in grassroots campaigns and monitor political developments of interest to the paying candidates. According to one participant, 'Agents that oversee units and wards are also paid. In the same breath, INEC officials, police officers, polling station staff, area boys (thugs) are bribed! Each politician is essentially paying for the whole machinery to work on their behalf.' And more often than not, it is a race for the highest payer. In addition, more money is spent to buy influence, to persuade voters and 'sort out' officials. This comment and many more that validate it suggests that elections are won not on campaign rhetoric or ideological leanings (while these are important in themselves) but through plenty of money exchanging hands: aspiring politicians to party agents, community leaders, INEC officials, the police and non-state actors. Money therefore determines to a significant extent who the public votes for.

These financial arrangement are put in place by every candidate keen on winning. In the West, politicians are able to raise campaign funds from public and corporate bodies; in Nigeria, it is the opposite; politicians give money to key officials to get attention. As one participant stated, 'the sad reality is that politicians "invest" during elections and reap the rewards in office'. Politicians within the same party may pool resources to form an alliance or go it alone. Either way, money enables a system through which the rich and powerful colonise the political space for their reproduction. Without adequate, personal financial resources, it is

practically impossible to run for office. In spite of the 2022 Electoral Act that spelt out limits of campaign finance, findings indicate that the 2023 presidential election was marred by vote buying, widespread bribery and INEC's inability to monitor party finance. In the same breath, the Act enabled big parties with huge resources to dominate the political scene but made small and emerging parties with minimal resources less able to compete at national level.

Incumbency

The power of incumbency is another determiner of political culture, and its influence in the 2023 presidential election was no less significant. The government of President Mohammadu Buhari (2015-2022) significantly shaped the outcome of the 2023 presidential election in favour of his party, APC. He did so through access to enormous financial resources with which they could oil the machinery of politics. The former president, along with his party members in the National Assembly (Nigeria's parliament), also disrupted the political landscape with legislation such as the 2022 Electoral Act that capped campaign spending for the presidency at 5 billion naira (8 million USD), an amount beyond the reach of new political parties. Other methods included unparalleled media coverage online and on private and state-owned media companies (unmatched by other parties), and the new naira policy that had a crippling effect on transportation and logistics during elections. Elections, being a one-day event, served the interest of incumbent politicians who were able to provide necessary and adequate funds to oil the election machinery and control the state apparatus. According to another participant, 'In some states however the incumbent was not ready to "play politics – use money to get things done" and lost the election'. During the 2023 election, whoever was able to throw money at the electorate often won. Politicians and other stakeholders are aware of the one-day nature of event and are pragmatic about winning the polls to control state resources for four years.

Distinct from previous elections, the 2023 presidential polls were unique as a three-horse race. Peter Obi's Labour Party, unlike PDP and APC parties, did not spend as much money during its election campaign because the Nigerian youth supported his candidacy. People preferred him to Tinubu and Atiku, not because Obi is not part of the political class but because he was perceived to have more integrity, more vocal about corruption and more sympathetic to the plight of young Nigerians (Fasakin, 2023). He represented something that people yearned for (change) and wanted (a new Nigeria). A symbiotic relationship between him and the youth developed that gave him grassroots support and national appeal online.

State Machinery

State machinery is the fourth determiner. This includes state security apparatus like the Nigerian Police Force, INEC officials, polling station personnel, Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Independent Corrupt Practices and other related Offences Commission (ICPC), State Secret Service (SSS), Road Safety, the justice system, state-owned and private mass media stations, including social media handles. Findings indicate that the 2023 election was not significantly shaped by ideology or religion (though they played a part) but by money and whoever had enough of it to manipulate the machinery of the state. According to a participant:

with cash, APC and PDP bent the system to Tinubu and Atiku's favour. It is no coincidence that the presidential polls result in many polling stations across the nation, especially in Lagos, was not uploaded to the national result portal as promised by INEC. Those that were uploaded were stations where Tinubu or Atiku won.

The same participant added, 'It is also no coincidence that police officers were complacent and even looked away when thugs of APC disrupted proceedings at polling stations in which they perceived that PDP or Labour Party was perceived to be in the lead'.

An appendage of the state machinery are non-state actors – thugs, community leaders and political influencers such as Asari Dokunbo, founder of the defunct Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, and Musiliu Akinsanya popularly known as MC Oluomo, head of the Lagos state branch of the National Union of Road Transport Workers) who used whatever means, often illegal, to win elections. The mass media, print and broadcast, were co-opted and also functioned as part of the machinery through advertising, ownership or political alliance. According to a participant, 'The machinery of the state – police, INEC... meant to ensure a level playing field in the interest of public progress has been made morally and politically corrupt. They are politicised!'

Political parties also exert a heavy influence on the system. All parties have laws and manifestos that are meant to guide their affairs. Unlike in Europe and the US where conservatives and liberals or democrats and republicans are radically and ideologically different, in Nigeria, most parties do not have an ideological structure or strong philosophy. On paper, the party structure is logical and transparent but in practice, this is not the case. The major players in each party are politicians with financial clout (former vice presidents, ex-governors, old ministers, corporate businessmen and former military officers); Godfathers (in

Nigerian parlance) who circumvent party rules and abide by no rule or ideology. For example, 'PDP party rules stipulate that a member must be card carrying for three years before they can seek for nomination but when a few politicians with money join a party, they are exempted and allowed to run for office.' Their mission is to win at all cost. This explains why an average politician in Nigeria will decamp from a losing party to the winning one at the slightest opportunity. An example, according to a participant:

one such politicians is Femi Fani Kayode who in the last decade had gone back and forth from PDP to AD/APC and back almost every four years. Even Peter Obi left PDP for LP to pursue his political ambition. Unhappy people in LP will move to another party.

While it is not a crime for politicians to cross the carpet, it is symptomatic of politics without principles. Parties are therefore fragmented and weak; but as fragmented and weak as they are, their candidates' form the pool from which the public elects government officials.

Again we see money and power as the basis of party politics, as parties with financial resources dominate the political landscape. The policy of most parties is to attract or retain as many well-resourced members as possible in order to raise substantial resources to compete on the national stage. 'The problem with such a system is that these investors are in politics to maximize their investment. Their primary concern is not public service or procedural elections but to gain access to state power through politics.'

The electorate are the final determiner but with the least influence. Although democracy, according to Abraham Lincoln, consists of government of the people, for the people and by the people, one participant commented:

during the 2023 presidential election, popular vote was not that important. Not because Nigeria has an Electoral College like they do in the United States but because votes don't count that much as yet. The system is rigged.

Another participant noted:

The Nigerian Constitution says that the winner must win in 2/3 of the nation, what transpired in 2023 presidential election is that the person who emerged as winner did

not get majority vote. He was not the preferred candidate. Support for Peter Obi was overwhelming across the nation, especially in the South. Obi commanded the respect and support of people from all walks of life, particularly young Nigeria but votes were suppressed, voters were intimidated, results were manipulated and results were forged!

That said, the electorate still have a part to play in elections and Nigerian politics but their influence is not yet as important. Nigeria's democracy is yet to reach a stage where people decide who is elected. While elections have become periodic and normalised, the context in which they are conducted is heavily shaped by money politics and organised chaos. This echoes findings by Kew & Kwaja (2018). In the future, Nigeria's democracy will reach that point but it is not there yet. The general consensus by participants is that subsequent elections will be better than the 2023 election. The reality of this optimism remains doubtful in the short run.

THE POWER ELITE AND NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

Nigeria's ruling class belongs to a variety of political parties but they have no allegiance to any one particular party. For them, political parties, elections and democracy are a means to an end (political power) and not ends in themselves. The ultimate end is to consolidate their economic and political interest through access to the nation's commonwealth. They comply with few rules. The only rule they fully obey is self-made, a victory-at-all-cost rule geared towards winning, if possible, all the time. Nigeria's ruling class is neither interested in developing Nigeria nor keen to follow due process. Their main interest is in exploiting as much of state resources as is possible for primitive wealth accumulation.

Greed is the defining character of the ruling class everywhere; but in Nigeria, they have captured key democratic institutions that could have served as checks on concentrated political power. Nigeria's elite class has captured the system in its totality and continues to consolidate that capture. They control the machinery of the state through incumbency and the control of major political parties; they have the economic and political power to play money politics and control the mass media to the extent that information available to the public is within the framework of what they allow. It is impossible therefore to separate the political class from the media because, directly or otherwise, they own most legacy media organisations.

The same is true of the police force. According to a participant:

The Nigerian Police are compromised. Promotion within the force is based on connection, loyalty and allegiance. What this means is that the top hierarchy of the politics are cheerleaders for politicians, especially those in government. You can hardly find a Commissioner of Police who does not have a godfather.

Although activism on social media platforms poses a threat to elite dominance, this power elite across Africa in general and in Nigeria in particular is the same. They are driven principally by greed, and to perpetuate this greed, they have created a system in which the people's ability to access comprehensive information, express themselves, and demand transparency and accountability, is bogged down and weak.

In light of the above, participants disagreed with claims that a low voter turnout is a consequence of voter apathy. Assertions that suggest voters failed to turn out due to frustration with democracy is too simplistic. Four key factors provide a more cogent and logical explanation. Firstly, significant disruption fuelled by petrol and naira scarcity in the run-up to the elections was due not only to policy flaws but also impacted negatively on transportation, logistics, and the free movement of voters and voting materials across Nigeria.

Secondly, with high hopes in the 2023 elections, civil society engagement, especially among youths in the South, increased exponentially. In total, 93 500 000 registered to vote, an increase of 9.5 million from 2019. Of newly registered voters 77% were youths between the age of 18 and 34. Males made up 53% overall while women constituted 48%. Of the 94 million registered voters, only 87 million collected their permanent voters card (PVC) due to INEC's inept logistics and human errors. On top of these two factors, chronic economic hardship served as a push factor for Nigerians to vote. Findings indicated that many voters spent much of the day waiting for between 12 and 15 hours to vote. Some eventually did, but many more returned home frustrated.

Third, technical glitches in electronically transmitting election results from polling stations to the control centre must have accounted for missing figures and incomplete data. According to a participant, 'electronic transmission of results failed during presidential election but worked when parliamentary results of elections held on the same day.'

Fourth, insecurity, ballot box snatching, attacks on opposition voters, the failure of the police force (participants claimed they stood idly by as chaos ensued) and vote suppression all reflect an alternative reality behind the numbers. According to a participant:

A Nigerian newspaper puts deaths from the 2023 elections at 39 while the European Union Election Observer Mission claimed 21. Either way, people came out to vote during this election. Across my area, particularly in my polling unit, people turned up in high numbers. Turnout this year was way more than in 2015 and 2019 but did their vote count?

Participants also collectively challenged claims that INEC's underperformance during the 2023 presidential poll was entirely institutional, logistics or technology related. Evidence of delayed poll openings, failure to upload results and result falsification in some states coupled with INEC's failure to act transparently indicated gross incompetence on the part of INEC; but most participants asserted that the APC-led ruling party used significant political power, especially money and the power of incumbency, to emerge as winner. Through state resources, APC dominated all state and non-state media establishments both through executive fiat (state) and paid advertisement (see EU final report); they controlled state security apparatchiks who were complacent when thugs, party-sponsored thugs, rampaged opposition strongholds, stole election boxes and disrupted voting in several polling stations. Neither the police nor APC politicians condemned these thugs. The APC also bought votes both remotely and directly at polling stations. They not only made a mockery of the financial caps imposed by the Electoral Act 2022 but demonstrated that this rule applies to everyone other than the APC. If these assertions are true, they corroborate other claims that suggest that the 2023 presidential election results are doctored and manufactured.

Democracy cannot thrive in Nigeria or elsewhere on the continent if civil society in general and the political class in particular ignore, are unaware of or fail to abide by the core principle of democracy – rules and guidelines. When democracy is seen as an end in itself (a way to monopolise power to the exclusion of other groups in society) or a set of institutions, but negates the rule of law, transparency, the separation of power and the institutions that facilitate them, democracy will benefit only a section of society. This will lead to public discontent and trigger its self-destruction. Military coups in Burkina Faso (2020), Mali (2020), Chad (2021), Guinea (2021), Sudan (2021) and Niger (2023) indicate the extent of democracy's

vulnerability and volatility in West Africa. As things stand, ‘...political leaders in Nigeria embrace democracy and enjoy the legitimacy it confers without subjecting it to the demands of democratic practice’ (Idada & Omoregie 2017, 7).

Egharrvba (2018) contends that democracy in its functional form is yet to thrive in Nigeria due to the nature of Nigeria’s rentier state, in which the elite struggle for state power; democracy is thus not a means for public good but a struggle to control the means of production. He argues further that poverty is now weaponised to the extent that the system is collapsing internally and externally. Social morality is sinking so fast that it is now a race to the bottom. According to one participant:

At the top, Nigeria’s system is so corrupt that the important thing to national leaders is primitive wealth accumulation through any means possible- fraud, certificate forgery, election rigging... and as the public witness this, they are directly and indirectly told that probity, uprightness and values are useless. The system is shaping the public to the extent that rules don’t matter anymore.

According to another participant,

In Nigeria today, where and how you make money are not the questions, the important thing is to make money anyhow. The common saying is ‘don’t investigate my wealth today because you did not investigate my poverty yesterday’.

Today, the average Nigerian is desperate for money to the extent that kidnapping is rife, as are blood rituals, online love scams, credit card fraud, drug trafficking, human sacrifice, and the manufacture of fake drugs. Very few are interested in following due process. Very few care about the consequences to the public. It is a race to the bottom. The alternative is to relocate abroad.

DEMOCRACY AND CONSOLIDATION

The 2023 presidential election was a missed opportunity to improve on previous elections. The 2022 Electoral Act, though imperfect, is an improvement. The Act is positive but the major actors are not. Mechanisms within the system to regulate itself are still weak yet most participants are optimistic that democracy as a system will work.

A few however assert that liberal democracy is too expensive, too easily influenced by the ruling class and not effective. They lean towards Marxist interpretations of elections and its symbiotic link with class and power. They contend that democracy is an ideology, a system that perpetuates and reproduces the elite class in power. It is designed to ensure the rule of the most powerful under the guise of popular consent. It is a political apparatus designed to ensure the rule of special interest. Elections, according to them, are inherent contradictions in that they appear to suggest political equality between the proletariat and bourgeoisie but in reality this is not the case. Elections are part of the superstructure built on the state's class relations (economic structure) through which power changes hands between or among competing political parties controlled by the dominating class. Elections are seemingly run with an assumption that the public exercise their civil and political rights when voting; but in practice, the dominated class have little control over political parties, are presented with only a narrow choice of candidates at election time and in many cases are only presented with limited information available in mainstream mass media owned and controlled by the dominating class (Lodge 2016, 12).

Suggested alternatives to Western democracy are varied and imaginative. To catch up with the West, Nigerians need to address obstacles, especially political deficits that hinder democracy from producing dividends. In nations with multiple ethnic groups in which politics is ethnicised and ethnicity is politicised, a rotational presidency based on community congress on one hand and on clear-cut ground rules on the other is an alternative (Husaini 2023, 10). At least, this may eliminate the fear of domination or cry of exclusion from groups in the margin. The first option is the proportional electoral allocation process in which elective public offices are distributed based on the number of votes received by each candidate. Another option is regionalisation or region-centred democracy, a system in which each region, not necessarily states, will have a government, separate and different from the national government. The regional government oversees the development within its geographical jurisdiction. Finally, in the politics of consensus democracy representatives are randomly selected from a pool of eligible candidates without general elections. It is believed that such a system would reduce, if not eliminate, the election-related violence that has come to define and characterise elections in Nigeria. These ideas are short on detail but they open up conversations to make democracy work better in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

From an institutional framework, two decades of democratic rule, occasioned by regular, periodic multiparty elections and evidenced by political stability is a milestone; nonetheless, elections alone are now inadequate and insufficient to address the developmental end for which democracy exists. Democracy is not a machine that runs by itself once the proper principles are inserted; rather, it is a system driven by people at all levels of society, committed to resolving social, political and economic conflict by dialogue, election and consensus. In theory, a democratic system is government of the few, for the few and by the few; but in practice, it is government of the people, by the people for people-centred and development-driven goals. People are the end to which politics (democracy) is a means. Government, opposition parties, the mass media and civil society are the ultimate guardians of their freedom. All stakeholders within a political context must forge a path to defend their inherent dignity, and their inalienable human rights on the basis of equality and justice. People and groups do not derive or depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy or authority. Governments exist to serve citizens not subjects. This social contract between citizen and state is fundamental to democracy. Electoral norms in Nigeria do not align with international best practice but are a product of manipulation that encompasses fraud which undermines the process. The power of incumbency is strongly linked to Nigeria's inability to conduct free and fair elections, as is money politics. Nigeria may slide back into political strife, military rule and dictatorship if elections are not revisited, and this will lead Nigeria to a dead end. As indicated by the Brookings Institution, democratic governments across Nigeria must commit to and invest in accountability and transparency in order to create an enabling governance system geared towards improving effectiveness and poverty eradication. Without democratic dividends, social upheavals may well overthrow democracy.

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