

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: A SATIRICAL THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper was motivated by a desire to generate further critical debates on the course of democracy in Nigeria. Attempt has been made in the paper to identify the major flaws in Nigeria's electoral democracy. The methodology of the study is the critical mode of research. The theoretical framework is the elite theoretical framework. Findings of the study indicate that democracy is actually, precariously on course in Nigeria. It is finally opined in the paper that what needs to be done truly entails preaching to the Nigerian elite and converting them to the ways of genuine democracy. In the meantime, the understanding of democracy by the Nigerian political elite remains immensely at variance with the way; "we the people" understand democracy.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Nigeria, Nigerian elite, satirical thesis.

INTRODUCTION

The first understandable issue about democracy in Nigeria is that as long as elections are being conducted and ostensible winners and losers are emerging, particularly at the Presidential level, and power is being handed over from one regime to another, then democracy is on course. Under Nigeria's military regimes, such luxuries were not contemplated. In fact, in military regimes, they simply take over. They detest handover. To hand over therefore, is highly democratic. Thus, to understand democracy in Nigeria, it is not the credibility of the electoral process that is germane, we look at where we are coming from and agree that to have handed over as and when due, are profoundly democratic feats. Hence, defining democracy may ordinarily be a difficult endeavour in other environments. In the Nigerian system however, all the debates about the meaning of democracy have become unnecessary. Democracy is understandably practiced as government of my people, by our people and against their people. The central element of the democratic process is exclusion. Its most portent manifestation is the solemn exercise of handing over. What has become the most notable dividend of democracy therefore is the cycle of elections in which the citizens are highly privileged to be participants. Hence in the Nigerian orthodoxy, democracy is monumentally translatable to electoral democracy.

According to Kukah (2012) evidence suggests that countries in transition remain quite prone to backsliding and failure. He contends that this is why it must not be taken for granted in Nigeria

that democracy is secure (Kukah, 2012). In any case, it is immediately obvious that Kukah, who is actually the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto in Nigeria, belongs to that class of Nigerians who think that they must express opinion on every subject matter, including democracy. As further evidence of the distractions that Kukah and his school of thought cause for democracy in Nigeria, he claims:

We may pride ourselves with having survived four back-to-back elections and create the illusion that our democracy has been strengthened. This is misleading because first, the elections are still massively fraudulent and our level of success is not measured by international best practices as such. Secondly, with very little evidence of changes in the lives of our people, our democracy remains risky, volatile and vulnerable to internal and external shocks.

The challenges that commentators of Kuka's hue usually confront is that they have been exposed to too many research materials on issues that ordinarily are outside their primary calling. They are not actually scholars. They are also not politicians. To understand democracy in Nigeria, their viewpoints must be disregarded. In any case, the general objective of this study is to attempt to further understand democracy in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (i) identify the major tendencies of electoral democracy in Nigeria and (ii) demonstrate that truly democracy is on course in the Nigerian State. The methodology of the study is the critical mode of research. The theoretical framework is the elite theoretical framework. Furthermore, electoral democracy in this study stands for a process of equal opportunities for citizens to choose their leaders and when the need arises, to replace the leaders by free and fair election. Against this backdrop, we proceed to consider the understandable tendencies of Nigeria's electoral democracy.

TENDENCIES OF NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

Democracy by Proxy: The Nigerian brand of democracy is classifiable as democracy by proxy. It is quite distinct from representative democracy and is also quite different from participatory democracy. Under democracy by proxy, hundreds of thousands of citizens would participate in the final campaign rally of a candidate for an election that is taking place in the following twenty four hours. During the voting proper, only about 20% of that number would actually cast their votes. This scenario is not strictly classifiable as voter apathy. Its roots are embedded in a belief that those citizens who would go out to vote will actually vote for "my candidate". He has campaigned for his preferred candidate in commuter buses, in beer parlours, in his own home, using the social media and at every forum he was opportune to campaign for this candidate. And when this candidate eventually wins, he will also genuinely be among the jubilant crowd. Meanwhile, he did not go to cast his vote, despite being a registered voter and a well known supporter of this candidate.

On the other hand, the large gathering of citizens at the campaign rally was actually made up of sundry street vendors, unemployed graduates that do not have voters' cards, teeming fans of the reigning musicians and professional praise singers, who have been paid in advance to attend the campaign rally. It is this same set of "party faithful" that appeared at the rally of the opposition candidate. They attend these carnivals to listen to the manifestos of their favorite musicians, playing at the event. They know that the political parties have no manifestoes. Whoever cares can vote on their behalf on the day of the election.

Rigging as Opposition Blame Game: In the Nigerian brand of electoral democracy, only the opposition candidate rigs the election. Yet election rigging and general gerrymandering are among the core problems of the electoral process in Nigeria. Citing Kurfi (2005), Awopeju (2011) opines that rigging is almost synonymous with Nigerian elections. Yet, only the opposition candidate rigs the election. If the opposition candidate wins, it can only be because he rigged the election. The only time the election is adjudged free and fair is when I win or when my candidate or the political party to which I belong wins. In the Nigerian brand of democracy therefore, elections are not won, they are rigged.

Electoral Democracy of Elite Contradictions

The elite are undoubtedly the prime beneficiaries of the prevalent electoral malfeasance in Nigeria. But the elite in Nigeria hardly go out to cast their votes on Election Day except the newsworthy political elite whose voting would make headline news. The typical Nigerian elite would consider it demeaning to stand in the queue, and wait for his turn to cast his vote. The contradiction is that it is also the elite that are standing for the election. But they will not cast a vote for their own election. So they wait for the artisans, peasants, the unemployed, the disabled, the aged, underaged voters and indeed the very wretched of the earth, to do the ostensible voting, then the elite would manipulate the process to their inevitable advantage. When you are outmaneuvered, you head for the courts for the commencement of a process of judicial abracadabra.

A Culture of Democratic Judicial Abracadabra

Once elections are over in Nigeria, the losers move to the courts to contend that they were supposed to be the winners. In the process, an individual who did not stand for election, was fielded and subsequently replaced by his political party, could be declared by the courts, as the winner of an election in which he absolutely did not participate. He did not make a single campaign speech, mounted no soapbox but simply retreated to a quiet corner of the universe and from there, sending supplications to the Almighty. Mr Rotimi Amaechi became Governor of Rivers State, under this setting, following the 2007 elections (See Ogunye, 2013). This must be the very meaning of political jaywalking and legal jiggery-pokery (Amadi, 2011). Kuka (2012) also argues:

The failure of our electoral system has thrown up a lucrative culture of electoral tribunals which have now become the latest cash cows in our democracy. Many lawyers and judges are now making fortunes from our electoral failure in the same way that the coffin maker benefits from death.

In September, 2014, supporters of Ayo Fayose, Governor-elect of Nigeria's Ekiti State, concluded that enough was enough on this issue of legal jiggery-pokery. Hence, according to Premium Times (2014) hoodlums believed to be loyal to the Ekiti State Governor-elect, stormed the state High court, beat up litigants and chased away the trial judge in a case challenging the eligibility of the Governor-elect in the June 21 election. The case was brought by E-11, a group opposed to the emergence of Mr. Fayose as governor. Pandemonium started when the trial judge, Justice Olusegun Ogunyemi, ruled earlier in the day that the court had jurisdiction to hear the matter and subsequently ordered the two parties to prepare for hearing in the case by 1pm. When the court consequently resumed by 1p.m, the hoodlums descended on the court, unleashing terror on the judge, lawyers and workers of the court. The hoodlums swooped on the complex in their numbers and beat everybody in sight. In the process some lawyers, litigants and workers in the

complex received serious beating which led to serious injuries. They laid siege on the court premises and dared any judge to hear the case. Journalists covering the case were also attacked and chased away (Premium Times, 2014). Democracy, to the hoodlums, is government of the people! It is not government by the law courts!

A Culture of the Loser's Tongue-in-Cheek Talk

Nigerian elections are constitutionally party based elections. There are no rooms for independent candidates. In the past, the loser usually rejected the results and headed for the courts. Currently however, he would first make his tongue-in-cheek statement, congratulating the winner and thanking his supporters for their support. The news would thus spread that he has accepted the results of the election. In his next statement, he declares that he did not precisely accept the results, even where he congratulated the winner, that he has decided as the candidate not to head for the courts but that his party's lawyers are however studying the results, preparatory to contesting the outcome of the election in court.

Dr Kayode Fayemi was a recent casualty of the tongue-in-cheek culture. After paying his dues as a Nigerian pro-democracy activist during Nigeria's military autarchy, he became Governor of Ekiti State in October 2010, after a prolonged battle in court to validate an election he won in 2007 - Segun Oni of the Peoples Democratic Party was rather returned elected. His intellectual and performance credentials were impressive. But he was defeated at the polls by the maverick former Governor of the State, Ayo Fayose. To the admiration of both detractors and fans, Dr Fayemi immediately made a state-wide broadcast, congratulating the winner and also commenced handing over discussions with Fayose. However, the ovation was still in circulation for the erstwhile politically stylish Fayemi, who courageously accepted defeat at the polls, before he began singing new songs; that the text of his broadcast, never suggested the acceptance of defeat and that his party was studying the results! In other words, they were preparing to move to the election tribunal (see Thomas, 2014). Dr Fayemi, by his volte face, has shown that the Nigerian political elite have no steadfast species. They have only breakfast species - those who live by bread alone.

Election as Democracy's Equivalent of Warfare

This resort to militarization of the electoral process became accentuated in Nigeria, after the former President Olusegun Obasanjo described the imminent 2007 elections in Nigeria, as a do or die affair. Ex-President Obasanjo made this declaration on the 10th of February 2007, while addressing a PDP stakeholders meeting in Abeokuta, Ogun State (Tenuche, 2010). The ex-President's most quoted dictum that "this election is a do or die affair for me and the PDP (Peoples Democratic Party), this election is a matter of life and death for the PDP and Nigeria", depicts his perception of politics and electoral competition as a continuation of warfare by some other means (Tenuche, 2010). Obasanjo's successors in the PDP hierarchy have since continued to profess this faith in electoral democracy as warfare. Governorship elections were held in Ekiti and Osun States of Nigeria, on June 21 and August 9, 2014 respectively. The PDP's national campaign committees for the two governorship elections were headed by Vice President Namadi Sambo. As leader of the campaign teams, Nigeria's Vice President Sambo declared at the inauguration of the committees in Abuja on Wednesday April, 16 that the ruling party in Nigeria (PDP) was going to war in the two states, to recover its stolen mandates (Aminu, 2014; Okocha, 2014; Okoro, 2014a). The party was victorious in Ekiti State. They lost in Osun State. The Osun State debacle therefore reminded the party warlords that there may be other issues that count in elections other than conceiving it as warfare.

We shall further make our illustration, by extracting at length from Okoro (2014b). The gubernatorial elections in Ekiti might have come and gone, but it has certainly left series of posers behind. In the week preceding the elections, helicopters hovered the skies. In almost every corner of the state, heavily armed policemen and military personnel became very visible in almost every entry and exit point, parading the length and breadth of the state ahead of the elections. It was not the first time military personnel were being deployed to states for elections. Edo, Ondo and Anambra gubernatorial elections witnessed same, but in the case of Ekiti, there was a general consensus, suggesting that no state in Nigeria had witnessed such military presence during an election as Ekiti did. While some political observers argued that the militarization was indeed necessary, considering the cases of violence that characterized the pre-election campaigns by the three main political parties vying for the election, others held the view that it was a tactic by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led Federal Government, to intimidate the incumbent governor, Kayode Fayemi of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and in turn pave way for its candidate and eventual winner, Ayodele Fayose, to emerge victorious (Okoro, 2014b).

Prior to the election in Ekiti, series of violent clashes between rival political parties became the order of the day. On several occasions, thugs allegedly sent by a rival party clashed with those they felt were obstacles to the chances of their party at the polls. Few unlucky members lost their lives in the ensuing melee, while some who were fortunate, escaped only with injuries. For the Federal Government, the pocket of violent clashes before the Ekiti elections was enough reason to warrant the deployment of about 12,000 troops including, soldiers, men of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, State Security Service (NSCDC), police officers, to keep the peace during the poll (Okoro, 2014b).

One week before the election, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mohammed Abubakar, deployed three helicopters for surveillance in the three senatorial districts in the state with one Assistant Inspector General of Police and four commissioners of Police for effective coordination of security operations. Abubakar confessed that the number of troops, armoured tanks and helicopters deployed in Ekiti was the highest ever to be deployed in a state, saying it was part of the resolve of the police to do anything humanly possible to provide security for election materials and personnel of INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission). Like a war zone, the troops took their positions. Almost every 100 meters from the entry point of the state, police officers and soldiers mounted various check points, with blood-hound dogs sniffing for any likely breach of peace by supporters of the various political parties. On the eve of the election, there was tension. More troops were deployed to the state (Okoro, 2014b). Hence, the foregoing fully illustrates the importance of democracy to Nigerians, as democracy remains on course in the Nigerian State. However, at the same time that Nigerian troops were demonstrating democratic doggedness in Ekiti State, Boko Haram insurgents were daily being reported to be delivering devastating blows on some of us, “we the people”, and some democracy-rejected military personnel in the North-Eastern part of the same Nigeria. But democracy must be safeguarded first, and then we return to insurgency. The democratic war must be won as prelude to the battle against Boko Haram.

The Phenomenon of Vote Buying

Ojo (2008) describes vote buying as a political malady that is pervasive in Nigeria. The Nigerian masses are rather likely to disagree with Ojo (2008) and view the balancing act of vote buying which is vote selling, as one of the beauties of democracy, as the time of vote trading is usually

when the greedy political elite, democratically “share the money” to reach the masses. Ojo (2008:111) further describes vote buying as follows:

Vote buying, in its literal sense, is a simple economic exchange. Candidates ‘buy’ and citizens/electorates ‘sell’ votes, as they buy and sell apples, shoes, or television sets. The act of vote buying by this view is a contract, or perhaps an auction in which voters sell their votes to the highest bidder.

According to Ojo (2008) in both historical and comparative perspectives, vote buying as a phenomenon is neither system specific nor space bound. It is common to all political systems, be it advanced or developing, mediaeval or contemporary. It obtains in all regions and climes; it only differs in magnitude and manifestations from one polity to the other. We opine that this may be true and wonder why it should be a pervasive phenomenon in Nigeria. In every system and space also, vote buying is a deprecatory phenomenon. It is one of the denigrating aspects of Nigeria’s democracy. Vote buying takes place at various institutional levels in the Nigerian polity (Sha, 2008). In the legislature, the name of the malady is not vote-buying, it is called lobbying.

(Sha, 2008:125) further argues: The legislature is the law and policy making institution in every democracy and this explains why individuals and groups would normally want to illegally influence its members to enact laws that would be in their favour. In the Nigerian scenario therefore, we are witnessing the normalization of illegality in vote buying, as the legislators at the different levels of government did not go to their various legislative houses in the State capitals, merely to make laws. However, Sha (2008) still highlights that vote buying is largely illegal, criminal and therefore unconstitutional. But in Nigeria, the ultimate subject matter is democracy. It is neither criminality nor constitutionality. Whatever that is done or left undone in the name of democracy is acceptable to the blind elite (Okeke, 2014). Sha (2008) also argues that vote buying in all its ramifications, violates democratic norms and negatively affects the quality of political transition in Nigeria. At the end of the day, it does no good to either the buyer or the seller as it stymies democracy and transports collective self deceit to a vicious cycle. It is largely a method of sustaining democracy in Nigeria. We agree with Walecki (2008) that money matters for democracy because, much of democratic political activity simply could not occur without it. For instance, ballot papers are to be printed for elections and ballot boxes are to be constructed or procured – all with money. In Nigeria too, money has to be shared because the voter needs to eat to be able to cast his vote. Casting of vote after all is critical democratic political activity.

CONCLUSION

Findings of this study truly indicate that democracy is only precariously on course in Nigeria. We have demonstrated that the tendencies of electoral democracy in the Nigerian State are marked by curious peculiarities. In Nigeria, democracy is not yet about the people in generic terms. It is about my people, to the exclusion of their people. Democracy in Nigeria is not yet about the masses. It is an elite denominated democracy. In the Nigerian State, periodic election is curiously counted as a dividend of democracy. We finally opine in this paper that what needs to be done entails preaching to the Nigerian elite and converting them to the ways of genuine democracy. In the meantime, the understanding of democracy by the Nigerian political elite remains immensely at variance with the way; “we the people” understand democracy.

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