

RESTRUCTURING NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL VOTING SYSTEM: AN IMPERATIVE FOR NATIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Unarguably the subject of elections and electoral practices are so crucial in the 21st Century political discourse in Nigeria. This is because, to a very large extent, elections and electoral practices shape the fate of the modern nation state, this reason is not difficult to establish. Elections provide the medium, by which the different interest groups within the modern nation state can stake and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. Elections therefore determine the manner and methods by which changes in the social order maybe brought about; where this methods fails, individuals and groups may be left to their own dubious means-including assassinations, coup d'états, revolutions, insurgency and bush wars- to press their claims to power. Examples abound all over the world where such dubious means and all illegal actions have been utilised to cling to power, and Nigeria is not an exception. Therefore, one will not be wrong to state that our electoral voting system needs to be restructured, following the current and rising menace and decay to electoral and voting act, of which vote buying and financial inducement are so predominant in such discourse: and this therefore hamper national growth and development. This paper is a critique on the present-day electoral voting system, the financial inducement of voters, unaccountability of leaders, and its implications/effects to the Nigerian state. The Nigerian electoral system is in urgent need for restructuring because it has a great role to play in the democracy, security, economic and socio-political growth of the nation. More so, secondary sources of data were largely used with emphasis on narrative and descriptive analysis of data. Furthermore, suggestions on how to enhance, promote and sustain a good electoral system for the actualization of national growth and development were adduced in the study.

Keywords: Electoral system, Restructuring, National Growth and Development, Voting system

Introduction

It is absolutely necessary to restructure Nigeria's electoral voting system so as to achieve national growth and development; this is because elections embody most of the characteristics of democracy.

However, in Nigeria, one of the problems of post-independence politics which has lingered on to the 21st century is how to deal with the challenges of electoral fraud/malpractices and its resulting implications to national growth and development. A discourse on the Nigeria's electoral voting system and practices is one marred with much irregularity, mayhem, controversies cutting across ethnicity and religious lines, which forestall a free and fair election in a democratic state. The undemocratic acts includes sale of ballot papers by electoral officials, thumb printing of ballot papers by polling agents,

under-age voting, hired thugs absconding with ballot boxes, gross falsification of results amongst others.

These electoral malpractices has a lot of consequences on Nigerian polity, which includes; outwitting the will of the electorates during the selection process, and pronouncing leaders who are not accountable to the people, and do not provide social services such as: security, water, health care, good roads, education, employment to the citizen. On this regard, Gan Famehinmi noted in Madubuko (2008) that election malpractices does not accommodate honesty and integrity. He went on, using the 2003 general election as an example, which he considered to be unnatural, and that "if the results of the election are a reflection of the votes of the electorates, then they (the electorates) voted or were induced to vote for continuation of poverty, hunger, starvation, depressed economy, looting, corruption, low quality of life, weak currency, mass unemployment, insecurity of life and property, lack of water, epileptic electricity supply and bad roads. The trend is abnormal. If the results do not reflect the votes, then it is massively rigged and grossly manipulated. Either way, the fate of this country is doomed. And I pity the people, particularly the masses."

However, it is during election that the air is one of uncertainty, animosity and speculations, hopes and fears are alive at the same time. The possibilities of change and continuity exist side by side in the people's immediate consciousness; as people reflect on the records of the past leaders and the programs of the new aspirants for power. Such discussion also assumes a high degree of intensity (Nnoli: 2003). But the history of elections in Nigeria has not shown that the masses look forward to them as a significant force in changing the material conditions of their existence.

This paper therefore seeks to describe and analyse those issues and developments in the 21st century Nigeria that are contentious to the attainment of genuine electoral process. This paper is further divided into four sections. The first is conceptual clarification, the second section discusses the contentious issues in Nigeria's electoral voting system and practices, while the third section is electoral reforms and restructuring: as impingement on National growth and development. Finally, recommendations were made.

Conceptual Clarification

It is of utmost importance to define the key concepts used in this study, they include; Electoral System, Restructuring, National Growth and Development, Voting System.

Electoral System: Usually, the number of politicians in a political party who wish to be elected to public offices is much greater than the available vacancies. Elections act as a conduit through which the people can hold their elected representatives accountable. If elections are important elements of representative government, the importance of the electoral system becomes obvious. Electoral system can be defined as a complex of rules and regulations that govern the selection of office holders in an organization. It has an important effect not only on those who are recruited into political offices but also may be significant in deciding the person or political parties that can form a government, the size of the government's majority in the legislature and, therefore, also its stability. Similarly, it affects the turnout of voter in an election, the kind and intensity of ideological preferences exhibited during the election, and the legitimacy of the resultant government (Nnoli: 2003). An appropriate electoral system can help to nurture accommodative tendencies. While inappropriately, it can severely harm the process of conflict resolution and democratization in a society. (Heywood: 27) observed that electoral systems are often

classified as either majoritarian systems or proportional systems. In majoritarian systems, large parties typically win a higher proportion of seats than votes thereby increasing the chances of single-party government. In proportional system, there is an equal, or at least more equal, relationship between the percentages of seats and votes won, increasing the livelihood of coalition government. He further listed different electoral systems, which includes: Single-Member Plurality System (SMP) or First Past the Post, Second Ballot System, Alternative Ballot System, Additional Member System, Single-Transferable-Vote System, Party List System, and Nigeria practices the Proportional Representative Voting System.

Restructuring: It has a vague and contentious meaning, it means different things to different people, and its meaning is dependent on one's vocation, ethnic affiliation, philosophical disposition and political lining. Restructuring means to change the way in which something such as government, business or system is organized. This paper thus conceptualises restructuring to mean re-arranging, amending, revising, correcting, modifying a structure so as to maximize output. In the context of this paper, it entails modifying, amending, revisiting electoral voting system and practices for excellent or maximum output.

National Growth and Development: Obi (1980) posits that economic growth is usually referred to the quantitative increase in the total or per capita output of goods and services in an economy, whereas economic development implies a positive change in the social, institutional and other structural relationships within which growth takes place. Tadoro (1977) observes that development must encompass more than the material and financial side of the people's life, and therefore should be perceived as a multi-dimensional process involving the re-organisation and re-orientation of the entire economic and social systems. In a nutshell, economic growth is a quantitative increase of wealth or economic activities in a given time within a nation, while economic development means the growth of qualitative, physical, structural and transformative changes in a given society.

Voting System: The heart of election is voting on the day of election by registered voters. The voting mechanism varies from country to country, and from very simple devices such as putting ballot papers into ballot boxes to the use of very complex voting machines, known as electronic voting (e-voting). Most societies, including Nigeria place emphasis on secrecy of electorates votes, hence the concept of secret ballot, while some societies do not. Voting systems are the way we elect our politicians. The type of system we use decides whether our government truly represents us and whether we can hold them to account if they let us down. The voting process raise a lot of issues the border on the fairness and freeness of the election. Most electoral malpractices occur during voting. They include impersonation, voting by unregistered persons, multiple voting, possession of ballot papers, unlawful possession of ballot boxes and disorderly behaviour at polling stations, and so on.

Contentious Issues in Nigeria's Electoral Voting system and Practices

In Nigeria, "politics and crime understands each other very well, forming an almost symbiotic relationship. Politics needs money to win elections and influence, and pays little attention to the sources of the said funds. On the other hand, crime needs the protection of politics to continue its enterprise. At times politics and crime fuse into a single corrupt state" (Oladele, 2007). This provides us with the compass to understand the Nigerian situation in electoral practice. Unarguably, elections in Nigeria have had ugly

experiences and have become a mockery to our democracy. The 1964 election flaw led to the collapse of the first republic and ushered in the tragedies of coup d'état and civil war. The 1979 election that followed suit was marked with election petitions, disputes and much incompetency that flawed the transition programme. As at 1983 general election, the tempo of the electoral malpractices heightened by massive rigging, political banditry, thuggery, and, out-cry of democracy lost to military dictatorship. The dividend of democracy was lost and military overthrow the government. This lingered on till June 8, 1998 when Sanni Abacha died; he was the military head of state. On his demise, Major General Abdusalami Abubakar initiated the transition programme that gave birth to the present democratic dispensation. This year 1999 was historic in the annals of Nigerian political history because it terminated the long years of military dictatorship and a transition to democratic rule.

The general elections of 1999 were conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The transition to civilian-rule which saw the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as the winner of the presidential election was marred with massive electoral rigging, wide-scale irregularities and violence.

However, the 2003 general election introduced a new dimension of violence, which is assassination. The International and local observers who monitored the election, disclosed that the election was not free and fair, rather it was a fraud and marred with all forms of electoral malpractices. Olusegun Obasanjo was declared the winner of 2003 presidential election by INEC with 61.9% of votes (Ojiakor; 2009). Subsequently, the 2007 general election that followed suit was neither free, nor credible. By and large, the years -2003 and 2007 recorded the most excruciating forms of poverty, hunger and wide-scale insecurity of lives and property in the country. During this period, people were kidnapped at will and perilous violence is the most impressive dividend of the period's democracy (Ezeigbo: 2007).

John Odey published a work titled "The Madness Called Election" in 2003 and another "Madness Called Election in 2007. In the book, he captured the mass failures of Nigeria's electoral system. However, some of the features of these elections that negate the principles of free and fair elections were stated by (Odife: 2009) which includes:

- a. The use of members of the armed forces and other security operatives to have a stronghold
- b. The use of party thugs
- c. Denial of the opposition parties access to the media for information dissemination and enlightenment of the electorate on their manifesto
- d. Doctoring and mutilation of official election result documents
- e. Issuing certificate of return to the persons who did not actually contest elections.

Consequently, these already existing electoral issues and malpractices over the years tickled its way to the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria, attempts to curtail the already existing electoral malpractices led to the discovery of new practice that threaten the country's democracy. Although in the last two elections, there was reduction of electoral violence, thuggery, political banditry and assassination, but issues like under-age voting, falsification and bribery of electoral officials remained unresolved. Recently, of great worry is the problem of financial inducement or vote-buying.

Vote-buying is a challenge to the electoral process in Nigeria. The last 2017 concluded gubernatorial elections in Edo, Ondo, Anambra, Ekiti and Osun States were observed that voters were grossly induced either financially or with other materials. The two types of vote-buying that occurred during that election were the “prepaid buying” and “see and buy”. The International and local observers decried the high rate of vote-buying and monetary inducement by politicians and political parties. Political parties and politicians enticed voters with cash ranging from four thousand Naira (#4,000) to five thousand Naira (#5,000) after proving their identities with their permanent voters cards (PVCs) (Tribune: 14 July 2018). This act has lingered on up to the 2023 general election with an increase in the amount used for voter's inducement. Vote-buying is illegal and against the Electoral Act, and should not be condoned in any way. Apart from the caution of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) against campaigning, directly or indirectly, and inducement of voters within or outside the polling zone and its implementation into the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended), Section 130, and stringent majors should be taken to bring defaulters to book. The Electoral Act 2010 reads in part:

A person who corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time (a) after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly, gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing the person or any other person to vote at such election, or an account of such person or any other person to vote at such election, or an account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election: or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a) of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine #100,000:00 or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or both.

However, politicians behaviour in Nigeria could be likened to the words of an epigrammatic New York writer- Christian Nestell Bovee, “Political aspirants make too much of the people (sic) before election, and, if successful, too much of themselves after it. They use the people when they want to rise, as we treat a spirited horse when we want to mount him: for a time we pat the animal upon the neck, and speak to him softly; but once in the saddle, then come the whip and spur”.

It is of great importance that efforts should be made to extricate all manner of electoral malpractices and irregularities in Nigeria's electoral system, so as to achieve and sustain democracy which is bedrock for national growth and development.

Electoral Reforms and Restructuring: As Impingement to National Growth and Development

It is necessary to restructure Nigeria's electoral system so as to enjoy the dividend of democracy and tremendously achieve in her quest for development. The failures of 1964, 1979, and 1983 electoral processes were later reformed and many recommendations were made by the Babalakin Panel, a committee set up by Mohammed Buhari and led by B. Babalakin was the first most pronounced electoral reformation in Nigeria's electoral system (Mbaebie; 2009). Its faithful result was seen in the 1993 general elections, which

was declared the most free and fair election in the democratic experience of Nigeria, although this was scuttled by annulling the election. Subsequently, not much electoral reforms were done until 2007 when the government of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua initiated a reform by setting up a panel led by retired Justice Mohammed Uwais of which some of its recommendation were rejected like the recommendation of the INEC Chairman to be appointed by National Judicial Council, and accepting some recommendations like election disputes to concluded within six (6) months of the conduct of elections: and was implemented in the 2011 general elections over electoral disputes. (Oyekami: 2013).

Furthermore, the 2015 general election in Nigeria saw to the introduction of electronic vote (E- Voting System) through the use of "card reader" machine simultaneously with the use of voters register in the electoral voting process. Thus, before voting, prospective voters are to pass through identification, verification and authentication. The electronic device would enhance the transparency of the electoral system (This Day: 14th August, 2018). Although, the e-voting has a lot of deficiencies attached to its usage in Nigeria during elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has sort ways to curb and minimize the challenges of electronic machine during elections.

More so, with the 2019 electoral reform which made Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) the sole permissive card for accreditation and voting, (Aiyede: 2020) thereby disregarding the use of Temporal Voters Card (TVC). Consequently, before the 2023 general election, Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) was introduced into the electoral process after it was first introduced in the 2020 Nasarawa Central bye-election (Ekwuribe: 2025). BVAS and IReV were technological innovations aimed at enhancing the electoral process and had become key components of Nigeria's election process. BVAS verifies voters PVCs through finger print and facial recognition, ensuring that only accredited voters cast their ballots, while IReV is an online portal that allows the public to view scanned polling unit results for transparency (African Union: 2023), it does not count votes or collate results. Lawrence Bayode (Punch: 30th March, 2023) highlighted BVAS role in reducing electoral fraud, stating that voter impersonation and multiple voting had been significantly curbed since its introduction. IReV has also enhanced transparency by allowing citizens to verify polling unit results in real time.

On the other hand, it is pertinent to note that despite these electoral reforms stated above, there are areas of lapses in Nigeria's electoral process. According to the International Observers, (European Union: 2023) during the 2023 general election, it was marred with lack of transparency and operational failures which reduced trust in the process and challenged the necessity to vote, therefore, increasing the rate of apathy among the citizens. Below are some of the key areas that require reforming or restructuring, to properly enhance the nation's election process includes:

- a. The abuse of the power of incumbency
- b. Financial and logistic constraints of the electronic bodies
- c. Unreliability of BVAS due to technical issues
- d. Electronic violence and intimidation of voters with security officials
- e. Result falsification or manipulation
- f. Voter's inducement

There is urgent need to address these electoral challenges in Nigeria, so as to have credible elections devoid of international condemnation; otherwise, it impedes

the nation from enjoying the dividend of democracy, good governance, selection of competent and accountable leaders, and good financial, educational, agricultural, economic, security, socio-political, infra-structural and judicial policies that will usher in the needed growth and development of the nation; thereby, bringing the nation at par with the developed countries.

Recommendations

This paper calls for a total review or restructuring of the electoral system, to be devoid of electoral malpractices, condemnation and consequences. (Ojiakor: 2009) observed that these consequences could include: election of mediocre candidates, national security, corruption, voter apathy, and adverse effect on national development. The paper further recommends the following as a genuine way of restructuring Nigeria's electoral voting system; as a necessity for national growth and development. This includes;

- a. Further review of the Electoral Act by the National Assembly so that result collation and transmission can be done electronically, not just manually as it is today, also that the subsequent general elections will be devoid of any electoral malpractices, violence, and faulty Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and failure in uploading recorded results to IReV due to technical issues.
- b. There should be strict implementation and enforcement of punishment to anyone including politicians who violate the electoral law. Evidence of such prosecutions must be made public so as to serve as a warning to the citizen and curb impunity in the nation's electoral process.
- c. Increased public enlightenment and awareness programmes to guarantee people of their inalienable rights to vote, and to restore people's confidence in elections.
- d. Economic, political, psychological and legal measures should be taken to eradicate vote-buying in Nigeria's electoral process.
- e. INEC should have a database of all adhoc-staff utilised during elections, for easy recall and subsequent trainings during future elections for effective and efficient management of the electoral process.
- f. A separate tribunal should be set up to try electoral offenders with a time-frame to end all electoral matters.
- g. The Electoral Commission should be financially independent, to avoid the influence of the incumbent government.
- h. There should be a comprehensive restructuring and reorganisation of the Electoral Commission to eliminate duplications and overlaps in roles and responsibilities of the electoral officials.
- i. There should be an inclusion of diaspora voting in our Electoral Act, as there has been high level of migration trends among the Nigerian youths in this 21st century.
- j. The inclusion of upload and transmission of the ward collation results (Form EC8B) sheet on the IReV portal at the close of collation at the ward level, so as to deepen the transparency of the collation process. Uploading the collated results sheet will facilitate monitoring and tracking of the results collation process by citizens and stakeholders.

Nevertheless, it has been difficult to find an alternative to elections; all that is left is to reform them or to revolutionalise them.

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