

## **Free, Fair and Credible Election 2015 in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges**

**Dr. Linus Ugwu Odo**

*Department of Public Administration , IBB University, Lapai Niger state*

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**Abstract :** *The last time Nigeria had elections for choosing candidates into various elective offices was in 2011. The 2011 general elections wasn't a happy story before, during and after. The violence that accompanied those elections especially the presidential one was unprecedented in the political history of the country. This paper was inspired by the compelling need to identify the mistakes of those elections and proffer solutions in order to avoid a repeat of the 2011 in 2015. The politicians as the major actors in the electoral process have crucial roles to play in guaranteeing violence free elections in 2015. They must focus on issues and characters and eschew whipping up ethnic, sectional and religious sentiments that are capable of heating up the polity and endanger free, fair and credible elections. The paper argued that not insisting on the proper conduct and behavior of politicians toward the 2015 elections is not an option if we sincerely wish to grow democracy in the country. The paper concluded that if the suggested measures in the work are taken seriously and implemented, the country can have free, fair and credible elections in 2015 without another blood-letting episode of the previous elections in the country.*

**Keyword:** *Free, Fair, Credible, Election, Issue, and Challenge.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Elections were first organized and conducted in Nigeria in 1922 by the British colonial government in response to the pressures of the nationalists who were agitating for greater participation in the colonial administration (Enojo, 2010). Following the elections, Nigerians were offered the first opportunity to occupy certain political offices. Though the franchise was restricted and representation limited, it was nonetheless an achievement for the nationalists who were struggling for the enthronement of democratic order as a pre-requisite for greater participation of the people in the process of governance. After 1922, several other elections were conducted in different parts of the country to elect leaders at national, regional and local levels. However, it was the 1959 General Elections that paved way for the emergence of Nigeria as an independent state. Since then, various elections have been held either in transition from one civilian government to another or in transition from military regimes to civilian administration. Elections in Nigeria can broadly be categorized into three viz: elections organized by the colonial government in 1922, 1951 and 1959; those organized by the military regimes in 1979, 1991, 1993, 1999; and the ones organized by civilian governments in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007 and 2011. Among the three categories, the elections organized by the civilian regimes appeared to be more violent and crisis-ridden compared to the other two. The simple explanation for the paradox lies in the fact that both the military and colonial authorities wielded excessive powers in coercing citizens to operate within the bounds of the existing laws and decrees. It is pertinent to note that political violence associated with election and the electoral process in Nigeria started with the 1959 federal elections designed by the British colonial government to facilitate the transition from colonial rule to independence. The problem intensified with the 1964 general elections. The electoral process was so fragrantly abused that the results were not only rejected but the opposition especially in the western region resorted to violence to contest what they perceived as the reverse of their mandate by the ruling Nigerian Peoples Congress (NPC) (Dudley, 1982). The situation gave rise to arson, looting, killings, massive destruction of properties and total breakdown of law and order beyond the control of the central government. A state of emergency was consequently imposed on the western region following which the Prime Minister, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, declared the region as “wild-wild-west” (Dudley, 1982). The intensity of the electoral violence after the 1964 general elections affected the legitimacy of the new civilian authority, a situation which culminated in the military incursion into Nigerian politics on January, 1966 in a coup d'état. From then on, the military held on to power for over three decades barring some intermittent civilian rules. By any yard-stick, military rule was a monumental disaster for Nigeria. Despite the country's huge endowments in human and material resources, Nigeria under military rule had all the classic features of a failed state. The military transformed the essence of governance from public service to corrupt private enrichment. Under the military, Nigeria was a pariah nation in the international community. In view of the sordid record of military rule, there was a high expectation in the country that the new democratic government ushered-in in 1999 would set to work immediately to improve the living standards of the people.

In specific terms, Nigerians expected that the end of military authoritarian rule would lead to a drastic reduction in corruption, criminality and wanton violation of human rights (Agbese, 2005). They also expected that public institutions such as schools, hospitals, among others, which had been left in a state of utter disrepair by the military, would be rehabilitated to provide needed social services. In short, Nigerians were looking forward to a situation in which public resources would be used for the benefit of the people and not for the illegitimate accumulation of those with access to political power. However, the euphoria of the civilian rule has turned into a huge disappointment. After a protracted military rule that lasted for thirteen years, the military resolved to hand over power to a democratically elected government in 1979. The 1979 constitution was drafted and the ban on partisan politics was lifted, which saw the registration of five political parties namely: the National Party of Nigeria (NPN); Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN); Peoples Redemption Party (PRP); the Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP); and the Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP). The Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was established to conduct elections at various levels of government. The major issue in the 1979 elections was the controversial question of what constitutes two-third ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) of 19 states, which was resolved by the Supreme Court in favour of the NPN Presidential candidate in the election, Alhaji Shehu Aliyu Shagari. However, the 1983 elections both at national and state levels were a complete replica of the 1964 general elections. Similarly, the political violence that engulfed the 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections have posed serious challenges to democracy and good governance in Nigeria. The political climate has been very hostile, frustratingly uncertain and unstable. The paper has thus far attempted to analyze the historical and philosophical foundations of elections in Nigeria. In the proceeding discussion, issues and challenges for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria are carefully and critically analyzed and viable strategies and measures proffered for ensuring free, fair and credible elections.

## **II. Issues and Challenges for the 2015 Elections**

History, it is often said, repeats itself but on the contrary, it is people who refused to learn from history that repeat the past. As Nigeria prepares for another round of elections in 2015 to usher in a new government, what assurances do we have that the mistakes of the past would not be repeated? What do we need to do to avoid the damage that was unleashed on the northern parts of the country and Akwa Ibom following the release of the results of the presidential election in 2011? As Nigeria awaits 2015, the wounds from 2011 are yet to heal. According to Fearon (2014):

Hundreds of the lives lost will never be brought back and the wounds never fully healed. Thousands of businesses lost are yet to be re-started. Hundreds of residential buildings destroyed are yet to be re-built. Most places of worship that were destroyed are yet to be rebuilt due to inadequate assistance from both the state and federal governments.

The post-2011 election crisis in Nigeria, especially that of the presidency was among the worst in the country's political history. In response to the question as to how can the ugly incidences be averted in 2015, the paper argued that all the major stakeholders in the electoral process must play according to the rules of the game and avoid sharp-practices. The politicians, for instance, must focus on issues and character and restrain from whipping up ethnic, religious and sectional sentiments capable of polarizing the electorates along those divides.

There are also some variables in the country's political system whose interplay can foster or mar free, fair and credible elections depending on how they are handled. These variables are structural, environmental, and resources available to the candidates vying for elective positions (Haruna, 2014). The structural variables include the constitution and electoral laws as well as the political system, which has since 1979 been the presidential system as opposed to the parliamentary system that was inherited at independence and practiced between 1960 and 1966, when the military staged its first coup.

The environmental variables on the other hand, are the prevailing issues in the society, which include insecurity, corruption, poverty, unemployment, infrastructural deficit, amongst others. The incumbent candidates seeking re-elections should give good account of their stewardship on these environmental variables while new entrants should have convincing agenda and programmes of how they intend to tackle these problems. The resources of the political parties and the candidates in terms of leadership quality, integrity and internal democracy of the parties are no less important as they determine to a large extent the capacity and ability of a party in power to address the problems of the country. The perfect mix of these variables are essential for the establishment of a true democratic culture and good governance in the country; more especially as it is argued that since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, the country has experienced civil rule rather than true democracy.

The presidential election in 2015 will to all intents and purposes be a two horse-race between the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the mega opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). The APC was formed from a merger of three regionally based parties namely:- the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), the Congress of Progressive Change (CPC), and a faction of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) . The strength of the APC is not that it is offering anything different or new from the Peoples Democracy Party (PDP). There is no material difference between the two. The difference between the two is in fact like the difference between 12 and one dozen (Adibe, 2014). The uniqueness of the APC however, is that it is the first time in Nigeria's political history that major opposition parties merged to make a bold bid for power.

According to Adibe (2014), the glue that has held the All Progressive Party (APC) together this far could be either an alliance to "return" power to the north; the desire to save Nigerians from Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)'s "misrule"; or a shared dislike for President Jonathan and /or the PDP. To underline the close similarities between the PDP and APC, Adibe (2014) noted thus:

The APC approached a Federal High Court in Abuja asking for the seats of the six Ekiti Lawmakers who defected to PDP to be declared vacant. The same APC had vehemently opposed the moves by the PDP to declare the seats of 37 members of the House of Representatives who defected to APC vacant and opposed calls by PDP on Speaker Tambuwa to resign for defecting to APC.

Given the similarities between the two parties, the likely issues that will drive the campaigns of both parties might include the following:

**Region and Religious Divide:** The fault lines of region, ethnicity and religion run deep in Nigeria. As Adibe (2014) observed, virtually every part of the country has institutionalized memory of hurt or feelings of injustice, which they often feel will be best addressed if one of their own wields power at the centre, preferably as the President. Similarly, there is a pervasive fear that the president of the country will always use the power of his office to privilege his region, ethnicity or religion, if not to punish or deliberately disadvantage others.

To allay fears of domination, most of the political parties have written and unwritten zoning and power rotation arrangements. But as it often happens in life, solutions thrown at problems sometimes result into bigger problems than the original problems they were meant to address. This has been the experience with the PDP's zoning and power rotation arrangements in the country. There are deep seated feelings among some northerners that Good Luck Jonathan's candidacy in the April 2011 elections cheated the north of its turn of producing the president of the country for a two-term of eight years. This is a powerful sentiment among some voters in the region, which will play a crucial role in the 2015 elections. Similarly, among Jonathan's supporters, there exists the contrarian sentiments that in the 39 years from Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999, the north ruled the country for about 36 years of those years. They argued therefore, that the north should be patient for the historical injustice to be redressed. According to Adibe (2014), this is another way of saying that the north should be patient for president Good Luck Jonathan, who is from the south-south geo-political zone to complete two terms of eight years, especially given that this is the area that produces the oil on which Nigeria depends for her revenue.

Nigeria is sometimes described as a country that runs on two unequal wheels. The south is believed to have economic advantage, a rising income, lower unemployment, and better educated citizens compared to the largely poverty stricken and less educated north. Based on this economic imbalance, the north's dominance of power prior to 1999 was justified as a lever to balance the south's assumed economic advantage. Based on this scenario, the shift of political power to the south meant that the north has lost its leverage in the north-south balance of power. Another issue that will play out in the 2015 elections is President Good Luck Jonathan's performance in office. However, measuring an administration's performance in a highly polarized country like Nigeria is at best a subjective venture. Jonathan's supporters are quick to point out that he has grown the country's economy by an average of 6% per year, despite the challenges of Boko Haram insurgency. They will also argue that Jonathan's administration has led the Nigerian economy into becoming the largest economy in Africa and the 26<sup>th</sup> largest in the world (Adibe, 2014). Jonathan's supporters will further mention the regime's success in containing the Ebola's epidemic, which has become more or less the template for controlling the Ebola challenge across the West African sub-region.

On the contrary, President Jonathan's critics will argue that his "incompetence" is reflected in the high unemployment rate, pervasive poverty, generalized insecurity in the country and the deepening suspicions among the different ethnic groups and religion in the country. The critics will point to Boko Haram as evidence of Jonathan's incompetence while for his supporters it is evidence of the siege laid on his government by powerful politicians from the Muslim-north for the government to fail.

Yet, another issue that will play out at the 2015 general elections is money and the power of incumbency. Money plays important role in Nigerian politics especially in campaigns, media reach and vote buying. In this regard, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) commands clear advantage in terms of its control of federal resources to use as patronage and other material inducements. This is quite important in influencing the outcome of elections in Nigeria due to the prevalence of mass poverty and illiteracy.

More fundamentally, there are other decisive reasons why excessive influence of money in the electoral process is a source of concern in the effort to ensure free, fair and credible elections. An excessive influence of money in the electoral process abridges the political space as it means that only the wealthy or those who are supported or sponsored by the wealthy will be able to present themselves as candidates for political offices. It also encourages systemic corruption. For example, while the APC Presidential nomination and expression of interest form costs as much as ₦27 million, that of the PDP is about ₦22 million.

Those who support candidates to either purchase nomination and expression of interest forms or in other aspects of political campaign consider themselves as investors who are hoping to recoup their investments with profit. According to Leadership Newspaper Report (November, 2014) cited in Adibe (2014):

With the exorbitant cost of the forms, buying forms for aspirants seem to have become the new name of the game as the country heads towards the 2015 general elections. But let no one be deceived. Those who buy the forms are merely impressing it on a candidate that they are investing in his or her candidacy or as our pastors would put it "sowing seeds in the candidate's vineyard"

The high nomination and expression of interest fee is a clear evidence that corruption in Nigeria is no doubt systemic. Corruption in Nigeria has grown exponentially to the point that the world has come to stigmatize Nigeria and Nigerians as synonymous with corruption (Alkassin, 2014).

Furthermore, too much money spent in running for office increases the anarchic character of politics. This is because where so much money is spent in running campaign, elections become a do-or-die affair as loosing has serious economic consequences both for the loser and those that invested in his or her candidacy. The excessive influence of money in the electoral process would as well encourage the proliferation of brief-case political parties, all hoping to benefit from the monetization of nomination forms. As Adibe (2014) noted, given the Nigerian peculiar environment with its embedded "big-man syndrome", there will always be people willing to pay for their egos to be massaged. Indeed, if some Nigerians are willing to pay for bogus honours and awards including chieftaincy titles, they will even be more willing to pay to be introduced as former presidential candidate or governorship candidate. The PDP government controls key institutions like the police, the army and anti-graft agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, the Independent Crimes and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), which could be deployed to intimidate perceived political enemies. The PDP also controls 21 states compared to 14 APC states; and majority seats in both Senate and House of Representatives. Given the centrality of the issues raised in the forgoing discussions and the challenges they pose for the 2015 general elections, there is no doubt that the outcome of the elections will be contentious. This calls for concerted efforts on the part of all the stakeholders in the electoral process to eschew politics of bitterness and avert the experiences of previous elections in the country marked by deadly carnages and wanton destructions.

### **III. The way forward**

**Ethnic, sectional or religious sentiments:** Nigerians should shun ethnic or religious sentiments in making electoral decisions in 2015. The consequences of the disintegration of Nigeria are enormous and we should not contemplate it. Nigerians should critically evaluate the manifestations of candidate for elections before casting their votes in 2015 for the ones that will deliver, that will help the people. We should not vote just because of religion or ethnic considerations. We should join hands and put candidates in places who will do the will of the people. If we vote for the right people, this country will be great and our politicians should always remember that they are in office for the people.

**Party–internal Democracy:** The political parties must of necessity allow for internal democracy and avoid the imposition of candidates by party leadership. Candidates should emerge through a process that involves all card-carrying members of each political party. Also, agreed modalities for each political party membership for sharing political positions must be respected and adhered to by all members of the party. For instance, where there is an agreement on which zone is to fill which political office, such agreement should be honoured. The temptation to come to power or remain in power at all costs must be resisted. As Fearon (2014) noted, the desire to be in power at all costs brought about the deaths of 943 lives and 838 injured Nigerians following the 2011 post election crisis. Such ugly incidence must be avoided in 2015.

**Inflammatory languages:** Politicians must abstain from inflammatory languages and campaigns of calumny in which opponents are seen and considered as enemies that must be exterminated. Political campaigns must be based on issues rather than character assassination. For instance, in a newspaper advertorial, Governor Rotimi Amaechi (APC) was quoted as saying:

We have said it before and you people think we are joking. We will not go to court. If election is rigged, we will not go to court. There will be civil disobedience and we will form our own government and see what will happen... (Daily Trust, November 28, 2014).

Similarly, the Katsina state Governor Alhaji Ibrahim Shema of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was reported to have described members of the opposition, the All Progressive Congress (APC) in the state as “cockroaches and ants” and asked his supporters at a rally what they would do if they saw “cockroaches and ants”. We crush (kill) them, they roared in response (Yusuf, K. etal, 2014)

Against the backdrop of the growing tension in the polity, these inciting remarks are not helpful and only add to a climate of fear and anxiety that have been building up as the country approaches the 2015 general elections. Beyond serving as inspiration and instigation for would-be assailants of political opponents, the comments could equally be interpreted as being in pursuit of an agenda of pre-meditated violence whatever the outcome of the general elections. Some political leaders, due to the acute partisan nature of their disposition, may not appreciate the effect of the comments they make on their followers who could literally take such remarks as directives that should be implemented wholesale.

Also, it has been alleged that Boko Haram was, and remain a manifestation of the statement by some senior opposition elements that they would make the country ungovernable over loss of the 2011 presidential elections (Haruna, 2014). Nigerians must refuse to be incited and reject do-or-die politics in all ramifications. Inciting words should not be part of public speeches. Political leaders should always toe the line of peaceful campaigns in order to give room for free, fair and credible elections in 2015.

**The Role of the Media:** The media has a crucial role to play in ensuring free, fair and credible elections. Most people hear about issues, personalities and events from the media. The media has therefore, a great power to set society’s agenda because they are arguably the most important source of information and knowledge. The media must display responsible news dissemination. They must avoid false or malicious reporting and adhere to factual reporting. However, even with factual reporting, the security of the country, peace and harmonious co-existence must be their criteria before any factual reporting is made public.

**INEC:** The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be made to be wholly and truly independent, autonomous and focus. To achieve this, money meant for the Commission should be kept in a consolidated account. In addition, electronic voting should be introduced. It would make counting and recording easy, transparent and scientifically proven and testable. This process would remove stuffing of ballot papers, snatching of ballot boxes and dubious declaration of results. It will also create confidence, trust and hope among voters and politicians. Also, the number of staff required by INEC would be reduced thereby making the Commission’s task more efficient, transparent and trusted.

**The Role of the Police:** The role of the Police during elections is to maintain order and create an environment conducive to conducting free and fair elections. The police must be relied upon to provide effective policing that secures all voting and counting sites. Ahead of the elections, the Police must be given civic lessons on the electoral process and the electoral law. The goal is to ensure that people are able to come out and vote without the threat or fear of intimidation, coercion, manipulation or violence and that at the end, all the votes will be collated, counted and transported in security.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Nigeria seems to be at crossroads as the country approaches 2015 due to the growing anxiety and challenges ahead of the general elections. The paper has carefully and critically analyzed the main issues and challenges for the 2015 elections and concluded that if the measures and strategies suggested in the work are taken seriously and implemented, Nigeria can make history by conducting a free, fair and credible elections, which will fore-close all cynicisms and speculations about the country's disintegration as a result of the elections. It is hoped that Nigeria will come out of the 2015 general elections stronger and more united as a nation provided the recommendations here are given due consideration and implemented religiously.

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