

A PAPER DELIVERED

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ON THE THEME:

“THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS IN PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY”

Introduction:

It is expedient to focus on the fortunes, prospects and processes of our nation's electoral organ, the INEC in discussing the topic of the problems and challenges which electoral bodies face in a democratic social order like Nigeria. Obvious, the growth of a democratic culture is largely dependent on the quality of its electoral organs and machineries in adequately reflecting the wishes, aspirations and dictations of the electorate, through democratic elections. The perennial failure, or simply unreliability of our electoral culture in this country has been a factor of the instability of our democratic order. The confidence in our democratic bodies, both by the electorate itself and the political elite have remained dismally thin. Hence, the critical relevance of this symposium, by the Justice Akanbi Foundation, and for which I am very pleased to be asked to make this skeletal contribution.

International Responses.

The volume of concern, bothering on anxiety and support of the international community should instruct us as a nation of the centrality of electioneering to the growth of a democratic culture in Nigeria. The success of the transition project of 2007, which will ensure the transfer of power from one civilian government to another is the acid test of the survival potential of our democracy.

The European Union, in a concrete and material manifestation of its support of the electoral process in Nigeria made announced a donation of 40 Euros (about #4.6b) to the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) in support of the 2007 General Election. The interest of European Union, as declared by the President of European Parliament, Joseph Borrell Fontelles, is the stabilization of democracy in Nigeria. Voter Registration is a key

to a transparent electoral process. Mr. Fontelles links economic prosperity of a nation to the survival of democracy, which in turn is dependent on successful democratic transition through free and fair polls. It is interesting that Fontelles finds the success of Nigeria's democracy crucial to Europe. As a big country of 130 million, instability and poverty in Nigeria will fuel immigration and exodus, and Europe is a sure migration destination or migrant flow.

In a similar mode of electoral support and concern for successful elections and democratic transition in Nigeria, the United State, through the Public Affairs Division of her Embassy in Nigeria, organized a media training workshop on 'Covering the 2007 Nigeria Elections'. This is to 'enlighten' the Nigerian press on an election reportage that is objective, responsible and accurate, in terms of its representation of the concerns, and aspirations of the electorate.

One other significant issue of relevance in the American situation is the trouncing of the Republicans in the mid-term elections in the USA by the Democrats. In that election, and contrary to bookmakers' predictions of a marginal electoral victory by the opposition, the Democrats scored a landside victory in the two Houses, Senate and Representatives. But the significant issue here is not just the welcome victory. It is the sovereignty of the electorate and the supremacy of elections as the determining factor of governance in a democracy. When a people, in a working and virile democracy, detest or are dissatisfied with their rulers, they do not stage a coup. They speak through the polls. In the instance of that election in the USA, the people's disapproval of the growing dictatorship in republicanism as manifest in the Iraqi invasion through political manipulations and falsehood, had led to widespread criticism. At the first opportunity, the Americans showed their displeasure by withdrawing their votes from the ruling party and giving it to the Democrats. This is the reason why one of the challenges that face electoral bodies such as INEC is to ensure that the supremacy of the electorate is not thwarted or rubbished through irregular and mismanaged polls. The American people and government respect and repose confidence in the electioneering machinery and infrastructure, hence the outcome of plebiscite.

More recently, and buttressing the outflow of international concern is the fresh entreaty from the Deputy High Commissioner of Britain in Nigeria, James Tansley for a peaceful and orderly transfer of power following the 2007 election. Tansley spoke against the backdrop of the recent incidents of bombings in some parts of the country, which he finds as anathema to democracy. He had spoke on the occasion put together by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Presidency and the Federation of Moslem Women Association of Nigeria. On that occasion, where the former head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar also admonished politicians to ensure smooth electioneering and political transition, Tansley also declared the readiness of the British Government to assist Nigeria in the 2007 elections. This build up of international concern and support make eloquent statements about the challenges that the nation faces during the electioneering process and the essence of stability of the democratic culture in Nigeria.

ELECTIONEERING AND INSTABILITY

In this Country, Nigeria, because of the usual failure at the polls, the outcome of electioneering hardly matters and the people in power do not set much value at the electioneering process and its verdict. Hence, the growth of a culture of mutual grand deception and falsehood, by both the electorate and those who seek power. The former knows that its voted do not count and thus they subject themselves to all manner of fraudulent and corrupt manipulations through monetized politics, while the political elite

supply all the inducement, since they themselves do not intend to depend on the outcome of the votes. This, of course, yields alienation, violence and instability in the nation's body politic.

The example of the eruption of violence as fall-out from unfair and irregular electioneering is seen recently in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the election was expected to resolve the conflict, which had claimed four million lives. Unfortunately, this was not the case with the recent Presidential election run-offs. Angry protesters and supporters of the erstwhile rebel leader and Presidential candidate, Jeane-Pierre Bemba, set the Supreme Court ablaze and black-coated judges took to their heels as police clash with the protesters. It required the 17,000 UN peace-keepers in Congo, and the largest UN peace-keeping force anywhere, to disperse the angry and violent crowd, who are convinced that the 52% win by the incumbent President, Joseph Kabila was a fluke.

The implication of the anxieties, concerns and support of the international community for Nigeria is that national stability is a product of vibrant and enduring democracy, which is largely a factor of the conduct of election according to the rule of law, freeness and fairness. Right now, there is genuine fear that the 2007 elections may run into trouble and the nation may become unstable. And this is in spite of the recent assurance given by the President of Nigeria that he is committed to the survival of democracy in the country and that the 2007 election will be hitch-free. The reality of the situation is that the electoral process and the political atmosphere in Nigeria reveals palpable problems and throw up teething challenges. The problems are not far to seek. One of the philosophical and ideological problems of electioneering that is not new to us in this country with regard to election is the nature of the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission. There is genuine fear that the INEC is not free to act freely. Discernible civil society finds INEC as too closely linked to the ruling party. The second problem, which largely derives from the first, is that commission is not economically free. There is a persistent problem of inadequate funding. The INEC chairman whose credibility is constantly being suspect by a good number of people recently took the battle to senate, with whom he pled for intervention, to ensure that its budget for 2007 is not again drastically cut as it happened to the 2006 one. He says that he suspects that the executive arm of government wishes to shrink his budget of over 31 billion Naira to 26 billion Naira. This reduction bears deleterious effect on the fortunes of the 2007 elections.

Economic and financial empowerment problem may be crucial to the business of overcoming the challenges, which INEC faces in the conduct of democratic elections, but it is, by no means the only, important, problem. Far more crucial, to my mind, are the technical and moral problems. Is the body technically competent to fulfill the task at hand? Is there a failure of vision? From its track record, is there a credibility problem with the leadership of INEC? Can the chairman in his leadership cadre muster and generate minimum level of acceptability from the electorate, such that will create adequate confidence in the commission in the electoral process. These are serious problems that may pose critical challenges to the commission as it does battle with Herculean on hand. The acid test of the technical competence raised above is the ongoing, if ongoing, compilation of a comprehensive voters register through the electronic method. This exercise is by and large heading for the dogs as there are reservations expressed in various sectors of the nation. On account of its proven inadequacy, the Northern Union, has for instance, cautioned INEC against conducting the 2007 elections with the electronic voter registration exercise. It is an open secret that at the rate at which it is going, only a miracle will make INEC complete registration of all eligible voters before April, not to talk of the target of December. This is a recipe for chaos and violence as people will be, willy-nilly, disenfranchised. There is a massive demand for a reversal to the manual system at least for the purpose of the coming

election. There are those who believe that the informing vision is to abort the abort the electoral process. This sounds cynical but cynicism is a child of experience.

The electoral process does not end with the compilation of voters register. There are other logistical issues that need to be tackled before election can take place. The voter's register, after compilation, has to be verified for accuracy. This will be followed by revalidation of the verified register. Polling stations and booths have to be put in place. Enumerators, supervisors and other election officials have to be recruited and trained. The public, especially the electorate has to be sensitized, mobilized and enlightened about the electioneering logistics and modalities. All of these take time, which INEC does not have aplenty. The importance of election for the survival of our fledgling culture of democracy cannot be over emphasized. The sovereignty of the electorate in a democratic governance must neither be jeopardized or undermined by a slip-shoddy electoral administration. Certainly, Prof. Maurice Iwu has a date with history. Not many people share his euphoric certitude with anticipated electioneering success. There is not much on ground to persuade people that the 2007 elections will be a conclusive reality. Iwu has a major task on his hand beyond vacuous chest beating.

Experience has not taught us to be abundantly optimistic over the euphoric bliss that Maurice Iwu shows. INEC has not had a totaling alluring record. If you recall, for instance, that only recently did we have a judicial finality on the Presidential elections of 2003. Take also the instance of the dismal drama that went on in Anambra until Ngige was finally shown the way out, through the courts. Before our very eyes, Chris Uba, the ubiquitous godfather of Anambra politics declared that he rigged the elections in that state. He informed the president that Ngige did not win the elections and that he held the certificate that declared him winner. Ngige knew that he was right but it was not until after nearly three years on the un-won gubernatorial seat that the illegality of his situation was revealed through the courts and he was thrown out. The INEC all through this process was in a state of total obfuscation. It was ready to conduct fresh elections after it had ruled in the contrary. In some states- Rivers state for instance, the total ballots polled in some of the elections were given to be higher than the numerical strength of the validated voter's register in that state.

There is a great challenge before INEC so that our democracy may survive come 2007, and beyond.