

A Retrospective Overview of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria: Lessons for the Future

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Abstract

Elections have globally become the most legitimate means of leadership recruitment in democratic nations and Nigeria in its quest for democratic consolidation had its latest general elections in March, 2015. This paper retrospectively examined Nigeria's 2015 general elections with a view to gleaning on possible lessons for the future. The paper looked at the build – up to the conduct of the elections examining events before, during and the immediate post election period. The paper discovered among others the use of hate speeches which served as a bedrock for electoral violence. The paper also discovered that the use of the Electronic Card Readers, Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and especially the disposition of the former president, Goodluck Jonathan in conceding to defeat were factors that contributed to the success of the elections. The paper therefore recommended among others the All Progressive Congress (APC) learning a lesson from the fall of the Peoples Democratic Party(PDP), the PDP learning to carry its members along, the improvement and use of the Smart Card Readers in future elections, the youth channeling their collective energies towards positive networking and nation building.

Keywords: Election, Hate Speeches, Smart Card Readers, Permanent Voter Card (PVC), Franchise, Electoral Violence, Electoral Malpractice.

Introduction

In modern democratic systems, elections have become the most popular and most legitimate means of recruiting political leaders for national governments. During elections, the electorate is given the opportunity to choose between alternative programme of contestants [1]. At the end of Nigeria's 2015 general elections, the issues that took centre stage in the build - up to the elections and the eventual outcome of the elections offer very tangible lessons for all and sundry [2].

Equally, the roles played by various actors in an attempt to further their chances at the polls leaves much to be desired especially with the array of hate speeches and campaigns of calumny that pervaded the political atmosphere especially in the build-up to the elections [3,4]. In the light of all these, the deployment of the Smart Card Readers in the conduct of the elections marked a great milestone in the conduct of elections in Nigeria especially as many believed that it provided a watershed for the conduct of future elections in Nigeria [5,6].

Conceptual clarification

According to [7,8] Election refers to the formal process under a democratic system of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting. In a similar vein, the Cambridge dictionaries Online defines election as a time when people vote in order to

choose someone for a political or official job. From the above, we can infer that election has to do with the choosing or selecting of a person or persons through the vote to fill a public office or to perform an official job. Elections are very central to democracy. In fact, elections sit at the heart of democracy and this makes possible the act of self - determination envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations [9]. This is equally why the United Nations has come to be involved in giving electoral assistance to nations for several decades.

During the process of election, the people vote for their representative(s) out of an array of contestants for the same office. The people elect their representatives to speak on their behalf trusting that the representatives when elected into office will say what the people would say, and do what the people would do and this is why the proper conduct of elections of these representatives is vital to the democratic process. In the conduct of elections, there are no hard and fast rules governing the proper conduct of elections. Any models that have been traditionally and successfully used by other nations can be and have been adapted to suit the need of other nations. The key word is democracy. If the rights of citizen are respected, allowing equal and fair opportunity for each person to vote, then elections will be successful [10].

Types of Elections

The process of electing a political candidate can involve different types of elections. Equally, different types of elections exist. For the purpose of this write - up, we shall limit ourselves to the following

i. Primary Election

This is a preliminary election used to determine which candidate will represent a political party during the general election. Typically, according to [11], the goal of the primaries is to narrow the candidates down to one candidate by political party. Though the primary elections don't determine the final result, they are one of the most important parts of an election.

ii. General Election

A general election is an election in which citizens of a country vote to choose the government. In order words, it is the election held to choose among candidates nominated in primary election. The purpose of a general election is to make a final choice among the various candidates who have been nominated by parties or who are running as independents (not affiliated with a major political party).

iii. Special Election

This is an election held in order to fill a position that became vacant between regular elections. This is to say special election is held to fill vacancies created by death, resignation or removal from office.

Historical Foundation of Elections In Nigeria

The earliest record of elections in Nigeria was in September 1923 when the then colonial governor of Nigeria, Sir High Clifford introduced the electric principle which brought about the franchise in 1922 [12]. The 1922 Clifford constitution had provided among other things for the election of few

indigenes from Lagos and Calabar into the colonial legislative council known as the Nigerian council. In fact, this council became the first elected legislature in black Africa. The franchise which the Clifford constitution brought was a limited franchise and so it excluded a lot of people from voting. It was limited to males with a residency of at least 12 months prior to the election and an annual income of not less than 100 Pounds [13].

Even though this brought limited franchise, it was an important milestone in the development of political activities in Nigeria. Through this, four seats were contestable—three in Lagos and one in Calabar [13]. This also set the tone for the formation of and contest in elections by political parties, and so the first political party in Nigeria which was founded by Herbert Macaulay in 1922, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) won all the elections of 1923, 1928 and 1933. The predominance of the NNDP was later challenged at the 1938 General Elections by the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) which was initially known as Lagos Youth Movement. This party was led by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe until 1941. However, the Second World War (1939 - 1945) had its own impact on political and electoral development in the colonies. Meanwhile, Nigerians continued to agitate for greater representation in their own affairs as well as an improvement in the electoral system. On a gradual basis, the number of people who could be elected increased from the initial four in 1923 [14].

The next major election in the country was the general elections of 1959 which ushered in Nigeria's first set of indigenous leaders though not without some bickering and political permutations and alignments. After this, there was the 1965 General election which was held at a time when tension owing to unsettled political issues raged. The fall out of the existing crises including electoral violence eventually led to the military takeover of power on January 15th, 1966 [15].

The military remained in government for the next thirteen years and Nigeria made another attempt at elections in 1979 and 1983 respectively, and in both elections, Alhaji Shehu Shagari emerged as winner. Each of the elections equally had its own share of wranglings and disagreements among parties. In August, 1983 another military coup led by General Muhammadu Buhari swept aside the democratically elected government of Shehu Shagari and threw Nigeria once again into military dictatorship. This was followed by other coups, counter - coups, palace coups, failed coups to mention a few which brought in such military leaders as General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, General Abdulsalami Abubakar and General Sani Abacha respectively [16].

It is important to note at this juncture that after the 1979 and 1983 General elections, the next general election was the famous June, 12th election of 1993 whose result was annulled by the then military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida leading a coup against the Interim National Government (ING) of Ernest Shonkan. Other general elections were held in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011.

In almost all of the elections mentioned above, the problems have almost always been the same. An array of problems has always characterized the elections. Those arrays of problems include bribery, thuggery, godfatherism, assassinations [17]. Others include rigging, wide spread ballot snatching /

stuffing and general electoral malpractices [18]. All the above were hitherto further compounded by a widespread culture of electoral violence which often took place before, during and after the elections. In this regard, the violence that characterized the 2011 general elections in which hundreds of Nigerians were sent to their early graves has continued to remain fresh in the minds of Nigerians [19]. Little wonder then that many were apprehensive in the build-up to the 2015 General Elections leading to mass movements of people back to their places of origin, all in anticipation and fear of election violence as witnessed in 2011 in which even corps members became objects of attacks.

Issues Before, During and after the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

The months preceding the 2015 general elections witnessed a massive build - up and threw up many issues that would for some time to come in the history of Nigeria remain fresh in the minds of Nigerians. It will not be out of place to say that the build - up to the 2015 general elections increased the level of political awareness among ordinary Nigerians. More than ever before, young people participated in the build - up to the elections by attending rallies and engaging in debates. The major parties also focused on mobilizing the youth population for campaign and voting process. The impact of young people in the build - up to the 2015 elections was mostly felt on social media platforms such as facebook. As ordinary Nigerians debated in the public space, the battle was also being fought on the social media by supporters of the two dominant parties, the All Peoples Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). However, a worrisome trend was that instead of using the social media to engage on issues of national development, the platform was deployed as a tool to haul personal, ethnic and religious slurs at one another and groups, and as [20] observed, ethnic politics, xenophobia and hate mongering dominated the cyberspace.

In the build up to the elections, the campaigns were dominated by ethnic and religious rhetoric and this reflected the deep divisions that still exist among Nigerians. Sadly, politicians exploited these cleavages to shore up their political chances without minding the danger to our peaceful co - existence as a nation. While the line between religion and politics has often been blurred, [22] averred that the 2015 elections deepened the relationship between the two separate lines. He observed that for the first time, political positions were determined by religious considerations. He added that the political parties made so much fuss about how a Muslim candidate must not be paired with another Muslim candidate and a Christian candidate not being paired with another Christian candidate, thus the terms Muslim - Muslim ticket, Christians - Muslim ticket to mention but two became the criteria for elective positions. At a point during the campaign, one party was labeled a Muslim party [21].

Before the emergence of the opposition All Peoples Congress (APC), the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) ruled unchallenged for sixteen years and Nigeria, in the words of [22] was almost becoming a one-party state. In fact, it was on record that on 18th December 2008, barely nine years into Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the then National Chairman of the PDP vehemently stated that the party would rule Nigeria for not ten, not twenty, but for sixty years [23] and so all efforts were mobilized to make that declaration come true. Of course the outcome of the election put to rest that declaration.

Equally, in the build-up to the elections, while a number of religious leaders urged for peace, many others seemed to become emergency prophets predicting the outcome of the elections. [5], averred that these left their original calling to dance in the mud of politics, adding that they made declarations as though they just got out of a board meeting with God, and that there were spiritual endorsements, which eventually had no physical value or manifestations after 28th March and 11th April 2015 in spite of the “God told me” bubbles.

As part of the build-up to the elections also, there were threats of violence, war and bloodshed should one candidate lose to the other in the elections [8]. Also, there were rampant cases of pre - electoral violence to the effect that the chairman of the National Human Rights Commission (NHCR), Prof. Chidi Odinkalu revealed that from records, the pre - election violence incident in 2015 were more than those of 2011 explaining that as at February 14th 2015, pre - election violence had been recorded in 22 states out of 36 and that in all these cases, 58 people were confirmed dead [15].

All these and the Boko Haram insurgency which had ravaged certain areas of the country with the North East being worst affected also heightened the political tension that already existed. This was more so in view of the fact that the leader of the group, Abubakar Shekau had threatened to disrupt the polls warning people to stay away from participating [20]. In fact, the Nigerian authorities cited the need to deal with the Boko Haram insurgents and to secure the Boko Haram ravaged areas in the North East as the primary reason behind the postponement of the 2015 general elections by six weeks [21].

All the aforementioned factors together with the general elections campaigns that could best be described as a theatre of hate speeches and campaigns of calumny further increased the fear and apprehension in the minds of the citizenry. Various politically motivated hate speeches about various candidates and especially the two leading presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) were bandied by party members, their supporters as well as their sympathizers. A few of the instances of hate speeches before and during the presidential campaigns would suffice here:

- Ayo Fayose (Governor of Ekiti state) placed obituary adverts on Muhammadu Buhari (Presidential candidate of the APC) in some national dailies.
- Patience Jonathan (wife of the then incumbent President) called Muhammadu Buhari, ‘brain dead’.
- Goodluck Jonathan (the then incumbent president) was called clueless president.
- Oba Akiolu of Lagos (Monarch of Lagos) ordered the Igbo ethnic group in Lagos to vote for the APC Governorship candidate in the state (Akinwunmi Ambode) or perish in the Lagoon.
- Alhaji Lai Mohammed’s (then APC spokesman) declaration that if the 2015 election were rigged, the APC would form a parallel government to mention a few [1,2,3].

Hate speeches before and during the 2015 electioneering campaigns actually cut across party lines, ethnic lines as well as the length and breadth of the nation. In the midst of all these, the media was

blamed in many quarters for failing to apply caution in their reportage of hate speeches and inciting comments made by politicians, their supporters as well as party supporters [13].

Thus, the political climate was intensely charged before the elections. Even though the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan assured Nigerians of his commitment to conduct a free and fair election with adequate security measures to forestall any breakdown of law and order, many Nigerians who had been conversant with the antecedents of elections in Nigeria were not ready to take the president by his word [5]. This was due to previous experiences which had always resulted in loss of lives and destruction of property. As a result of these apprehensions, fear and feeling of insecurity, some notable Nigerians including Bishop Mathew Hassan Kukah, Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, Sa'ad Abubakar (Sultan of Sokoto) and other members of the National Committee on Peaceful Election got the candidates of the two leading political parties (PDP and APC) on two occasions to sign a peace accord with a pledge by both of them to work toward the conduct of a peaceful 2015 general elections [11].

With these, therefore, the presidential and National Assembly elections held on 28th March, 2015 with the presidential candidate of the APC Muhammadu Buhari defeating the incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan. Equally, APC had a majority in the National Assembly Elections. Two weeks after this, the 11th April witnessed the election of governors and members of State Houses of Assembly and at the end of the elections, it became clear that the APC had become the new ruling party having defeated the PDP in virtually all the elections except for a few states which were retained by the PDP. Nigerians have attributed a number of factors as being responsible for the successful and peaceful conduct of the elections contrary to the general expectations of massive rigging and post election violence. Some of the reasons Nigerians believe helped to minimize rigging thereby preventing post election violence included the use of the Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs), the use of Smart Card Readers, provision of adequate security, the commitment of the Chairman of the independent National Electoral Commission, Attahiru Jega as well as the Prompt acceptance of defeat by the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan and his reaching out through a phone call to the presidential candidate of the APC to congratulate him. Equally, the various observer missions appraised the 2015 general elections as exemplary. Also Goodluck Jonathan's concession of defeat prior to the announcement of the elections result was acclaimed by the European Union's (EU) observers mission as "an extra-ordinary example to the world" [13].

Lessons for the Future

From the foregoing so far, a number of lessons can be gleaned by all and sundry from the conduct of the 2015 general elections. Top among these lessons is the fact that the emergence of a strong opposition party to checkmate the PDP was a development in the right direction as it curbed the tendency of the PDP to lead Nigeria as a one-party state which in the long run would degenerate into dictatorship. Embedded in this lesson is also a signal to the APC that if it takes Nigerians for granted, they would be waiting at the next polls to vote it out of power, and so rather than basking in the euphoria of victory and towing the path of the PDP, it had better settled down to provide good governance. Also, the PDP's assumption of opposition role is good for Nigerian democracy as it would

afford them the chance of looking at governance from another angle. Therefore, the APC has no other alternative than to deliver on its campaign promises [17].

The next lesson for Nigerians is that the use of the Smart Card Readers and the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) are a good innovation for the Nigerian electoral system and if their usage is improved upon, they can help to minimize election malpractices in future elections. Another important lesson is the fact that from all indications, hate speeches do not contribute to electoral victory, rather, they expose the champions of hate speeches as being inefficient and having nothing to offer. This is because people often fall back on primordial sentiments when they are bereft of ideas. The youths of the nation need to realize that politicians will stop at nothing, including fueling hate speeches just to achieve their aim which is the acquisition of power.

Also, the importance of team work and national interest becomes very pertinent in the lessons from the 2015 general elections. The PDP which prided itself as the largest party in Africa and had ruled the country for sixteen years apparently had been used, misused and abused that the chances of some credible candidates under the party's umbrella had been almost completely eroded. Some candidates who contested under the umbrella of the PDP and lost, suffered defeat solely because of their political affiliation. Due to some actions of the party's leadership which did not go down well with a number of members, many left, joined the opposition and worked against the party. The lesson therefore is for the various political parties to learn how to carry their members along [11].

On the part of the media, it is important to point out that if the Press submits itself to the whims and caprices of the politicians and their antics, they could be used to promote hate, thereby promoting division rather than unity in the country. Finally therefore, Nigerians must resolve out of the experiences before, during and the immediate aftermath of the elections to avoid politicians who whip up ethnic and religious sentiments as that in the long run will do no good to the nation, but instead help to perpetuate self seeking politicians in power [19].

Conclusion

This paper attempted a retrospective overview of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Beginning with conceptual clarifications as well as examining the historical foundations of elections in Nigeria, the paper looked at the issues before, during and the immediate aftermath of the 2015 general elections. As a fallout of the elections, the paper posits certain lessons for Nigerians, the PDP, the youths, the new ruling party to mention a few [20].

Recommendations

- The All Progressive Congress (APC) should learn from the fall of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and therefore not take Nigerians for granted but be resolved to provide good governance.
- The Peoples Democratic Party should learn first and foremost to carry its members along, build a strong conflict resolution mechanism within the party to be able to reconcile aggrieved members as well as developing strong internal party democracy.
- Nigerians should beware of religious leaders who abandon their calling to instigate fear in the minds of the people through false prophecies and predictions having known which prophecies were fulfilled and which were not at the end of the 2015 general elections.

- The youth rather than dissipating their energies to serve as foot soldiers for selfish politicians using the social media as a platform should channel their collective energies towards positive networking and building a virile nation.
- The use of the Smart Card Readers should be upheld and sustained in future elections. There should be proper evaluation of its performance during the 2015 elections and areas where their performance was not satisfactory should be reviewed with a view to achieving greater improvement in their usage in future elections.

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