

Between ‘Ekitigate and Protest Votes: Ekiti State 2014 Governorship Election Revisited

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Abstract

The question of the credibility of the 2014 Ekiti state governorship election in Nigeria is still a subject of ongoing controversy despite the report of both local and international observers which declared the election free and fair. Temitope Aluko, the former secretary of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party that won the election had revealed how the party used the military to rig the governorship election in favour of the PDP. He provided evidence on how the PDP governorship candidate, Ayodele Fayose lobbied two government ministers; the Minister of State for Defense Musiliu Obanikoro and the Minister of Police Affairs Jelili Adesiyan--to convince the former President Goodluck Jonathan to support their rigging plot which became known as Ekitigate. A Nigerian army captain had earlier leaked an audio tape about the alleged election rigging. The secret recording, allegedly contained a discussion the Nigerian ministers had with an army General to rig the Ekiti election. This paper revisits the Ekiti governorship election to decipher whether the alleged rigging had altered the outcome of the election in which the incumbent governor lost or whether the outcome would still have been the same without the rigging. This paper is significant because it will clear the air on the impact of the alleged rigging on the outcome of that election. The paper adopts content analysis of scanty extant literatures on the subject, media reports as well as field interviews of major actors.

Keywords: Ekiti, Ekitigate, Fayose, Fayemi, Governorship election, Democracy

1. Introduction

The June 2014 governorship election in Ekiti state, southwest Nigeria, was critical for many reasons; it was one of the few governorship elections to be held before the 2015 general elections. Hence, it was a test-run for the Independent National Electoral Commission’s (INEC) preparedness to conduct a credible general election in 2015. The Ekiti election also represented an opportunity both for the PDP to gain a crucial foothold in the opposition dominant southwest before it was to face its most determined challenge in 2015 and for the All Progressive Congress (APC) to demonstrate its credibility and shore up its mandate in the heart of its traditional stronghold. The Ekiti governorship election was an ‘off term’ election because of the long judicial process that eventually brought about the declaration of the incumbent governor, Kayode Fayemi as the winner of the 2007 election three years after that election. The earlier governorship election held in Anambra state in 2013 had been fraught with all manners of election malpractices.

Governor Fayemi’s decisive loss to Ayodele Fayose of the PDP in that election was unprecedented in the political kernel of Nigeria. Fayemi lost in all the 16 Local Government Areas (LGA) of the state. The election was hailed as free and fair by both local and international observers and INEC was hailed as having organized a credible election. With the victory of the opposition in the state, and the return of Fayose, who had earlier been impeached in 2003, Nigeria’s democracy was believed to have advanced. But with the change of government at the federal level in 2015, different revelations began to surface that the election was anything but free and fair after all.

A Nigerian army captain, Sagir Koli who was deployed in the state during the election, leaked an audio recording about alleged rigging of the Ekiti State election. The audio was a secret recording of discussions by two government ministers, an Army General and the PDP candidate about how to intimidate the opposition and rig the election. The video recording revealed the connivance of General, Aliyu Momoh, the then Minister of State for Defence, Musiliu Obanikoro, then Minister of Police Affairs, Jelili Adesiyan, then PDP governorship candidate who eventually won the election, Ayodele Fayose, and two other chieftains of the PDP, Senators Andy Uba and Iyiola Omisore to rig the 2014 election in Ekiti state. The Nigerian military set up a panel of inquiry into allegations of unprofessional conduct against soldiers during the Ekiti elections. The panel recommended that three officers should lose their commands and another was recommended for prosecution for collecting financial gratification. (Ibekwe, 2016).

Even though the PDP denied allegations of rigging, its former secretary in Ekiti state, Tope Aluko who had earlier denied the claim had confessed to it in a series of TV interviews as he described how Fayose, Obanikoro, and Adesiyan agreed to enlist the help of General Aliyu Momoh to coordinate the various military units to rig the gubernatorial election, interfere with political opposition, and suppress voters. (Sahara Reporters,

2016). The objective of this paper therefore is to examine the rigging allegations and establish its impact on the outcome of the June 21, 2014 governorship elections in Ekiti state.

2. Methodology

Empirical methods adopted for the study included interview with representatives of civil servants unions, and political actors as well as semi-structured questionnaires among fifty informally employed traders and artisans in the state capital, Ado-Ekiti. Participant observation, content analysis of the available relevant primary and secondary materials were carried out.

3. Conceptual Clarification

3.1 *Ekitigate*

This is the alleged plot masterminded by the PDP governorship candidate, Ayodele Fayose, former Minister of State for Defence, Musiliu Obanikoro and former Minister of Police Affairs, Jelili Adesiyan to convince the former President Goodluck Jonathan to support the rigging of the Ekiti state June 21, 2014 governorship election, and the use of the military personnel in the state to intimidate, oppress and suppress voters and the opposition all in the bid to favor the PDP in that election.

3.2 *Protest Vote*

According to Collins dictionary, protest vote is a vote cast for someone other than the candidate who might have expected it, in order to show the voter's discontent.

Protest vote find theoretical underpin in loss aversion theory. Loss aversion theory states that voters are more likely to use their vote to avoid the impact of an unfavorable policy rather than supporting a favorable policy. (Kahneman/ Tversky (1991).

As our field research revealed later in this paper, not a few believe that there were protest votes against the All Progressive Congress (APC) government during the 2014 governorship election.(Nairaland, 2014)

Durotoye (2014a) attributed the outcome of the 2014 Ekiti governorship election in part to protest vote as a result of "Use and Dump Politics", "Failed Political Promises and insensitive Policies" of the APC government. p.62

"Some of the artisans interviewed seemed to agree on this factor they call 'use and dump'. They claimed they worked assiduously for Fayemi's victory in 2007 and also for the party in 2011 legislative elections. Fayemi became inaccessible as soon as he reclaimed his mandate at the Appeal court in 2010...Fayemi embarked on civil service re-organization as soon as he became governor in 2010. This did not go down well with the state civil servants.... Fayemi tried to compel teachers to sit for examinations thrice, but thrice he failed because the Teachers' Union embarked on industrial action each time a date was fixed for the test....Fayemi committed political suicide by antagonizing a core constituency – students.With the broken promise to reduce tuition...the students overwhelmingly voted against Fayemi" p.63

4. Elections and Electoral Politics in Nigeria

Free and fair election is the benchmark of democracy. Elections allow the people to decide who governs them. Election is therefore a post mortem that investigates the record of office holders to ascertain whether they have kept faith with their election promises or not.

Durotoye (2015), Osinachukwu and Jawan (2011), Kwasau (2013) have asserted that election rigging has been a constant factor in Nigeria's democratic process since independence.

Electoral frauds include illegal printing of voters' cards, illegal possession of ballot boxes, stuffing of ballot boxes, falsification of election results, illegal thumb-printing of ballot papers, infant voting, compilation of fictitious names on voters' lists, illegal compilation of separate voters' lists, illegal printing of forms used for collection and declaration of election results, deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas, announcing results in places where no elections were held, switching and unauthorized announcement of results, harassment of candidates, agents and voters, change of list of electoral officials, as well as box- inflation of figures, use of police and security operatives to terrorize opponents and rival party agents, among others.

Unfortunately, politicians and electoral officials who perpetrated election manipulation have always gone scot free.

The perennial problem of lack of credible and democratic electoral process has been linked with the phenomenon of "failed, uncaring and unresponsive governance" in Nigeria. (Inokoba and Kumokor, 2011:139).

Nigeria's electoral institutions and processes have not typically been celebrated for spectacular probity. A more usual characterization is found in Suberu (2010) who laments the 'monumental electoral shenanigans' that have come to be associated with political contests at all levels in Nigeria. Because of their enormous (and inordinate) influence on political dynamics in Nigeria, federal-level presidential elections have more often inspired such dire evaluations by scholars and observers of electoral politics in Nigeria. State-level contests in

Nigeria, when they have received scholarly attention, have often been considered a reflection if not an intensification of the ills of the federal-level—except this time under conditions of even less scrutiny and increased impunity (Hoffmann 2011). The era coinciding with the tenure of PDP President Olusegun Obasanjo in particular, which began with Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 is remembered for elections which in Obasanjo's own infamous words were generally understood to be a 'do or die affair'. In fact, so marred with violence and misconduct were the 2007 elections which saw a term-limited Obasanjo hand over power to a PDP governor Umaru Musa Yar'adua, generally understood to be Obasanjo's hand-picked successor that President Umaru Musa Yar'adua after his resumption of office was reported to have himself publicly condemned the elections that brought him to power (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

However, more recent federal and state elections have provided citizens, scholars, and observers with slightly more cause for optimistic evaluations of the trajectory of electoral politics in Nigeria. The Presidential election in 2011 which brought Goodluck Jonathan to power featured a significantly lessened degree of outright chicanery and even received the (perhaps exaggerated) commendation from the American Ambassador to Nigeria at the time of having been "arguably the most credible and transparent elections in the country's history as an independent nation". (McCulley 2011). Key factors which contributed to the credibility of these polls and have remained a central part of subsequent electoral outings in Nigeria include increased scrutiny by local civil society and international observer groups, particularly employing traditional and online media, the (by and large) helpful presence of military and state-security service officials, and vibrant participation by the general electorate (Akhaine, 2011).

But perhaps most crucial to the incremental improvements in electoral landscape in 2011 and beyond have been institutional developments, particularly relating to INEC's electoral management, which have reduced some of the more overt and previously characteristic instances of misconduct. As Akhaine (2011) rightly emphasizes, the appointment of well-regarded president of the radical Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Professor Attahiru Jega, as head of INEC marked a critical injection of independence and credibility into Nigeria's most important and previously most disavowed electoral institution. The unilateral vote of confidence Jega received from the National Council of State in 2011 further affirmed his impeccable credentials.

But beyond the appointment of a reputable INEC chairman, this moment also underscored other critical interventions made to the institutional architecture of Nigeria's electoral system with former Vice-president Goodluck Jonathan's assumption of the Presidency shortly after the death of incumbent President Yar'adua. Such key reforms to which the relative success of the 2011 elections were attributed include INEC's overhaul of the existing but highly distrusted national voter register with its national drive to reregister voters collecting biometric data launched in 2011. Equally of note was INEC's introduction of a new 'hybrid collation' procedure whereby voting returns would first be counted and declared at each polling unit (PU) in order to add a further layer of accountability by decreasing the chance that results from individual Polling Units (PUs) would be altered when aggregated at central collation points. Yet another key introduction in this period, which, as we further discuss, bore a notable if overlooked significance in the 2014 Ekiti polls, was INEC's introduction of what it termed the Re-modified Open Ballot System. This new system featuring a two-stage process in which voters are first accredited before individual balloting in concealed booths commences was praised for contributing both to increasing the discretion of the voting process and reduced opportunities for multiple voting in 2011 general elections.

Subsequent state-level polls after 2011 presented INEC with the opportunity to both reaffirm the strides it had made and demonstrate key lessons learned from the 2011 elections. Despite recorded hiccups in the area of logistics at several PUs and worryingly low turnouts, off-term governorship elections in Ondo and Edo states held in 2012 were celebrated as indicative of INEC's generally improved managerial acumen. Yet the Anambra state election in 2013 proved a worrying reminder of existing pitfalls in INEC's structure and capacity. Usual logistical snags of ballot papers and polling officials arriving several hours behind schedule were widely reported. But even more distressing was the revelation that an INEC official conniving with a political party had deliberately withheld election materials across a significant number of PUs in Idemili North Local Government Area of Anambra. The official was ultimately surrendered to the police, INEC issued a partial apology for its underperformance, and polls were shortly rescheduled in the areas affected by the sabotage, but the incident, the broader logistical shortcomings, and the controversy these issues generated drew into doubt INEC's apparent improvements and set an unsteady tone for INEC's subsequent challenge, the 2014 governorship Election in Ekiti.

Beyond issues of electoral management, a number of key developments related to the broader political context in Nigeria, which served as a backdrop for the Ekiti polls are worth highlighting. The APC, which was formed as a national coalition of opposition parties not long before the Ekiti election in anticipation of the approaching 2015 presidential election, drew much of its support base from Nigeria's northern and southwestern regions where opposition parties maintained control over a significant proportion of governorship seats. Its

cross-national spread, the combined governorship seats it controlled at the onset and its early success at courting disgruntled PDP powerbroker cast the APC as the first potentially overpowering challenge the ruling PDP would have faced in its 15 years at the helm. Significantly, all but one of the six governors in the southwest including Fayemi belonged to the southwest bloc of the APC coalition, which prior to the merger was known as the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). Given this configuration, the Ekiti election represented an opportunity both for the PDP to gain a crucial foothold in the opposition dominant southwest before it was to face its most determined challenge in 2015 and for the APC to demonstrate its credibility and shore up its mandate in the heart of its traditional stronghold. In addition to these dynamics, the fact that this was an off-term election—since the legal ruling that brought Fayemi to power had set the electoral schedule in Ekiti off from the usually coinciding state and federal elections—served to center the national focus on Ekiti polls, further elevating the stakes for the competing parties. For activists and observers around the country and beyond following on online media, the unique tag “Ekiti Decides” was created to track events in Ekiti immediately as they unfolded. The stage was set for a hotly contested showdown.

5. Citizens’ Responses from Empirical Work

The authors’ empirical work did reveal interesting rationales for voting and a significant level of confidence among a number of key constituencies regarding the importance of their votes in the final electoral outcome. The authors’ interviews with representatives of civil servants unions and semi-structured questionnaires among fifty informally employed traders and artisans in the state capital, Ado-Ekiti were particularly useful in shedding light on broad voting patterns which played a decisive role in the Ekiti election and might provide opportunities for further study in state-level electoral contests elsewhere. Similar to the conclusions of Resnick’s (2014) study of urban populism in Zambia, Senegal, and Kenya, it appeared that candidates’ abilities to both demonstrate congruence between their policies and the priorities of key constituencies and to exhibit differentiation from the other candidates in competition increased their chances of winning electoral support. Crucially, it was evident that among both key constituencies, personality, patronage and broad policy positions were the key axes upon which electoral decisions, largely in favour of Fayose, had turned.

Civil servants were a particularly important group to interview, not only because they had been courted by all the major candidates throughout the campaign but, relatedly, because the civil service is generally understood to be the primary employer of labor in the state. Given their demographic importance in states like Ekiti and many others in Nigeria, civil servants can exact a significant effect on electoral outcomes dependent on their relationship with the incumbent governor. As earlier discussed, Fayemi’s reform initiatives in the area of teacher testing, but also in regulating the payroll system to limit opportunities for fraud, were viewed with suspicion within the civil service. This distrust was partially stoked by Fayose and the PDP as an electoral tactic. But, as several civil servants confessed in interviews, the level of distrust also had much to do with a prevailing feeling that Fayemi’s reform efforts were drastic and impersonal. These were often justified both with reference to Fayemi’s perceived personality traits and with reference to personal style. Frequently mentioned were accusations of personal arrogance and his style of refined diction or ‘speaking grammar’. Interestingly, for many civil servants interviewed, the latter trait was paradoxically both a source of pride in an erudite ‘son of Ekiti’ —a state with the motto ‘the fountain of knowledge’ which is often referred to as one of the most highly educated states in Nigeria—and a sign of his alienation from the lives of ‘ordinary people’. Given this distrust, Fayose’s frequent mobilization of local idioms of authenticity and his outright denunciation of many of Fayemi’s reform initiatives allowed him exhibit both differentiation from his key opponent, and congruence with key priorities of this demographic.

Likewise, the perspectives of informally employed workers in Ado-Ekiti also provided a useful lens into the relative strengths of the forms of mobilization employed by both candidates. As Resnick (2014) interestingly points out, the urban poor and informally employed in major cities across Africa is an increasingly powerful electoral constituency due to the staggering rates of population growth among this demographic. Though Resnick’s study observes this trend in larger cities such as Dakar and Lusaka, the increasing electoral influence of the urban poor is an even more pertinent dynamic in cities such as Ado-Ekiti where opportunities for formal employment are even less present and where, according to the UN 2014 urbanization report, the next wave of urban population growth will occur in the coming decade. This will therefore be a key demographic to observe as state-level electoral politics evolve in Nigeria.

Like the civil servants, key aspects, which appeared to drive electoral choice in this demographic, were issues of policy and personality. Fayose was overwhelmingly the preferred candidate among the 50 traders randomly selected across market sites in Ado-Ekiti (47/50 expressed support for Fayose), and his perceived ‘closeness to ordinary people’ and ‘generosity’ were often the reasons why he was considered the preferred candidate. But rather than the issue of ‘stomach infrastructure’ which had preoccupied commentators around the election, what, interestingly, seemed to be the more pertinent reason for Fayose’s success among this demographic was his apparent trustworthiness in taking care of civil servants salaries and allowances which by

extension meant taking care of the informally employed who considered civil servants to be their number one customer base. The significant rate of informal workers who considered Fayemi's reform policies to be an attack on civil servant's allowances and, by extension, an attack on 'ordinary people' explained why Fayose's apparent 'generosity' was so salient. The third main candidate Opeyemi Bamidele of the Labor Party who, despite his significantly less proportion of votes in the final tally, was often a familiar name to interviewees in this demographic was also often associated with the policies and programs of the Fayemi government since Bamidele and Fayemi had initially emerged from the same party. In a sociological and demographic context in which nuanced information on policy issues is less common than political rumor, it is easy to understand how such evaluations of personality can become a central source of information regarding candidate's policy positions on important issues. Again Fayose's ability to demonstrate both congruence with the priorities of this constituency, and differentiation from his key opponents was key in his successful mobilization of their political allegiance. Another key point of interest, which emerged from conversations with these constituencies, is that, despite the shortcomings of INEC and later revelations of possible widespread rigging, the electoral outcome was still generally considered to be a fair reflection of the preferences of virtually all the individuals interviewed. This perhaps points to an increasing level of trust for INEC as it records more instances of commendable electoral management, but also potentially evinces a growing sense of political empowerment among critical state-level constituencies eager to effect political change through the ballot.

6. Conclusion

The credibility of the Ekiti 2014 governorship election came under a serious challenge after Fayose had assumed office with the release of an incriminating recording (which has earned the name 'Ekitigate') of Fayose and a number of highly placed officials in the military and federal security agencies discussing vague plans to 'settle the matter' on the eve of the elections.

However, what these triumphs and challenges revealed more clearly was the extent to which, despite INEC's improvements, electoral politics in Nigeria remained a game of significant ambiguity. The fact that even a high-ranking PDP official confessed the use of federal might to influence election outcome illustrated this lingering uncertainty in terms of both credibility and the effectiveness of various forms of mobilization, which continued to define the political terrain.

Two days to the June 21 governorship election, some leaders of the APC including the then governor of Rivers state, Rotimi Amaechi were barred by security agents who had been deployed in Ekiti state from entering Ekiti to attend the APC rally. This no doubt was an abuse of federal power to give the PDP candidate an undue advantage. The overzealousness of security officials who restricted the movement of some APC Governors into Ekiti and the arbitrary arrest of some officers of the party also prevented the APC from perfecting its last minute plans for the election. One of those plans included the distribution of money to all the 177 wards to influence voters in favor of its candidate. Even where the money got to the ward level, party officials were not able to share the money before the election due to the heavy presence of security personnel. The security personnel were said to have looked the other way when PDP was distributing money two days before the election (Durotoye, 2014a).

But as our field research revealed, internal disharmony and dictatorship with the APC, aversion to 2nd Term Syndrome, emotions & Personality Preference, youth unemployment, and capital flight, use and dump politics, insensitive policies among others were all fingered as contributing to the loss of APC in the 2014 election. (Ibid, 2014a).

Ultimately, the electorates have prevailed. Fayemi, to many, was an outsider who "should go back to Ghana".

Broadly, it has been argued that the strategies to win votes pursued by Fayemi and Fayose, the main candidates in competition, and the ultimate success of Fayose's approach reflected both particular issues of salience to voters in Ekiti and the increasingly formal yet persistently unsteady electoral institutional context in Nigeria. INEC's improving management record provided a boost of confidence to both politicians and the electorate regarding the sanctity of votes in the Ekiti election. Civil servant unions and the urban poor, critical constituencies which perceived and asserted a greater influence in the Ekiti polls given this increased political space, represent important demographic whose influence in state electoral contests across Nigeria calls for further investigation. Yet lingering ambiguities related to the deployment of federal security forces, the influence of malpractice, and the exact promise of various forms of mobilization accounted for the palpable sense of surprise across the political divide at the final electoral outcome. These responses revealed that the 2014 Ekiti election reflected a moment in the trajectory of state electoral politics in Nigeria that epitomized what may be understood as a politics of uncertainty.

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