

# Transition and Civic Engagements in Nigeria: What does 2015 Portend?

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## Abstract

Nigeria as a country returned to civilian rule in 1999 after marathon years of military dictatorship. Since then, the country had conducted four general elections which have all been disputed as being below democratic standards. The quality and efficacy of these elections have progressively declined, thus begging the question of democratic transition and citizens' role in the electoral process. Independent international and domestic observers however noted that despite numerous challenges like violence, disenfranchisement, poor organization of the elections, etc., the 2011 general elections witnessed a slight improvement from the past elections, as results in certain parts of the country reflected the citizen's choice at the polls. However, Nigeria's general elections scheduled for March and April, 2015 will be more contentious than previous ones. There exist tensions within and between the major competing parties, claims and counter-claims between northern and Niger Delta politicians, religious/ethnic politics, the escalating attacks of Boko Haram Islamic sect and the increasing political tension in many northern and southern states, coupled with the poor preparations of the electoral commission and the likely bias nature of the security services, all allude to the fact that the country is moving toward a "grave and volatile political contest". The paper, therefore examined the causes and implications of rising tension in the nation's political system and how the current situation can be handled to avert full blown political crises during and after the elections. This study adopted archival analysis. Data for the analysis were drawn from newspapers publications, journals, workshop papers, books, as well as publications of non-governmental organizations. The primary significance of this study is that it will awaken the consciousness of the electorate on why they should play major role in the electoral process and avert the political crises that have characterized majority of the elections conducted in Nigeria. Analysis made in this paper will serve as a useful political literature for policy makers, political leaders and the reading public seeking lucid information on the subject issue. This paper thus argued that as Nigerians prepare for the 2015 general elections, serious attention should be paid to the role the electorates play in transition processes through their civic engagements. The paper therefore recommended, among others, that the electorates should be seen as the "transitory agents" as well as the electoral body conducting transparent and credible elections to increase citizens' confidence in the electoral process. The paper, however, concluded that transition and civil engagements will be meaningless in Nigeria, if the citizens' whose duty it is to accelerate the process are not fully integrated into the democratic process.

**Keywords:** Civic Engagements; Disenfranchisement; Elections; Electoral Violence; Transition

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria witnessed the inauguration of new democratic government with rising hopes of Nigerians in participating as well as benefiting from the dividends of a democratic system, on May 29, 1999. Since the return to this democratic experiment, the country has conducted four general elections, which this 2015 general elections will mark the fifth multiparty elections in series. Having successfully transited in the past elections, there are general arguments that the transitory process had remained on track as the military constituency has been giving concerted support to stabilize the democratic system. However, there have been arguments as to whether the transition process since the return to democratic system conforms to the fundamental norms, values and tenets that underlies democratic elections.

Between March 28 and April 11, 2015, Nigerians will go to the polls again to choose their political leaders who will shape the country's economic system and public policies in the next four years. Even amidst logistics problems, skirmishes and complains of electoral malpractices, the 2011 general elections were described by local and international observers as successful compared to previous ones in the country, thus raising hopes of democratic consolidation as well as institutionalizing democratic political culture in the country (*Thisday Newspaper*, June 10, 2011). Despite these improvements, violence and voter apathy characterized the elections. This was attested to by Prof. Attahiru Jega, the Chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), when he expressed serious concerns at the level of voter apathy in the 2011 general elections. According to the electoral body, only about 35 percent of the 70 million voters participated in the elections (*Thisday Newspaper*, June 10, 2011). According to the Commission's Chairman, Prof. Attahiru Jega (*Thisday Newspaper*, June 10, 2011, p.10):

... there exists voter's apathy in Nigeria and this is no longer contentious. Voters' turnout in the just concluded general elections had provided a scientific and empirical evidence of the existence of voter's apathy and nonchalance of section of the electorate in elections....

However, the hope of democratic consolidation through citizens on the ballot box as well as improved electoral process has been seriously challenged by volatile nature of the current political system leading up to the general elections (*Human Rights Watch*, 2014). The political and security situation in the country at the moment is a major source of worry and concern to both local and international observers. As a result, the European Union has ruled out the possibility of monitoring elections in the northeastern part of the country (*Daily Trust*, January 27, 2015). According to the leader of EU delegation, Santiago Fisas, "we can't be in the northeast for security reasons... the present situation does not allow us to go there..." (*Daily Trust*, January 27, 2015, p.1). The political situation is even more complicated with Nigeria's history of political violence, religious crisis, high level of unemployment, poverty, absence of party internal democracy, volatile social environment, corruption as well as personality clashes/struggle among the elite (*WANEP*, 2014).

However, this paper examines the causes and implications of the rising tension in the country and how the current situation can be handled to avert political crises of unquantifiable magnitude. Also, the paper will analyze the roles of political actors and democratic institutions in the transition process in Nigeria, the actors and factors threatening democratic transition and how these roles and actions shape the democratic system. The research considers political transition and civic engagements in Nigeria, with particular reference to the state of readiness by INEC to conduct the country's 2015 general elections. The paper will as well proffer recommendations on how to avert the looming political crises in the country. However, study will constitute a big addition to existing body of knowledge in this area of study. Specifically, it will update existing literature in the area of preparations for general elections by the electoral commission in Nigeria, hence serve as a reservoir of such data for politicians, policy makers, academics and the general reading public.

## 2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Nigeria as a country has always been shrouded in what we referred to in this paper as "crumbling, crippling and shadow democratic practice". This is so because the political agents and actors in the democratic process, who should be contributing to stabilizing the political system, are rather busy engaging in acts that are heighten the possibility of "democratic breakdown". In Nigerian political space, politicians see elections as a zero-sum game in which contestants must win at all cost with every imaginable strategies. The former President Olusegun Obasanjo was credited with a statement in 2006 that "2007 elections is a do or die affairs". For such a statement to have emanated from a sitting political office holder calls for a serious concern about the role of Nigerian leaders in preserving the sanctity of the democratic system. To a large extent therefore, the electorates ponder if truly their vote count or if they have any role to play in a transition process. At present only less than 50% of eligible voters have accessed their permanent voters' card. This led us to a rhetoric question "Is Nigeria practicing democracy or a mere civil rule? The question then begs the answer.

### 2.1 PAPER OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generally, to achieve the focus and objectives of this paper, the study adopted the following objective questions.

- (i) Under what conditions are citizens' roles in the transition process meaningful in Nigeria?
- (ii) Under what conditions do political actors and democratic institutions contribute in strengthening democratic stability in Nigeria?
- (iii) Do the electorates have any role in stabilizing the democratic practice in Nigeria?

### 2.2 METHODOLOGY

This study involves archival analysis to examine the relevant literature of the subject issue on the aspect of transition and civic engagements and how these relate to democratic system. Data for the analysis were extracted from newspaper publications, workshop papers, journals, and publications of non-governmental organizations. Although, no robust statistical analysis was adopted, the inferences drawn given their validity and reliability are justified for properly informed policy recommendations.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

In order to direct appropriately the research focus, it is necessary to conceptually operationalize the key issues in the study. Civic engagements according to Ikpe (2004) have to do with peoples' involvement in civil life and groupings. The term refers to participation of a person in a decision considered as an obligation in the society. It is also considered as involvement of people in collective action towards addressing a societal problem. In the Nigerian context, the term has become a buzzword and merely relegated to a passive participation in political activities. This is so because most electorate in Nigeria are rather influenced by either religious, ethnic, language,

cultural and other material inducement in discharging his or her civic roles (Duru, 2002). In many cases, citizens' are paid to attend party rallies, vote at elections, register as a voter and sometimes vote under "material influence or enticement". Civic engagement therefore refers to the ways through which citizens participate in the role of their community in order to contribute in shaping its direction. The easiest means citizens can participate in shaping the direction of their community is through political participation. Another relevant term is disenfranchisement. This term refers to the revocation of the right of suffrage, that is, the right to vote, of someone or group of persons or through the practice of obstruction of someone from exercising his or her right to vote. This act could be as a consequence of wars, violence, conflicts and poor election organization. In areas where there are wars, conflicts and violence, the internally displaced people (IDP) may be indirectly disenfranchised except government takes concerted actions to accommodate them. However, records had it that with less than few weeks to the 2015 general elections, less than 50 percent of the eligible voters had accessed their PVCs while other significant number of people is displaced through crises. This has raised serious concern about the elections. What happens if people who have fulfilled all conditions to participate in the elections are not able to exercise their franchise because of dereliction on the part of the electoral body? This is a potential source of "democratic disruption". This led us to the aspect of elections.

In its most inclusive notion, International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences (1972, p.10) defined elections as, "a form of procedure, recognized by the rules of an organization, whereby all or some of the members of the organization choose a smaller number of persons or one person to hold office or authority in the organization". In a more restricted form, Okolie (2005, p.15) defines elections as, "the process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organization or group by vote of its qualified members". As a political phenomenon, elections are institutionalized procedures for selecting political office holders by the electorate of a country. Thus, how a nation conducts its elections highly transcends into successful transition and democratic stability. Elections constitute the body, soul and spirit of democracy.

In any democratic setting, the term transition is inevitably used to connote periodic change of political leadership which is one of the major components of a democratic society. In political context, it is a process of changing from one government to another. To Gambo (2006, p.88). "...any political leadership which emerges from a free and fair electoral process enjoys consistent and considerable support of the citizenry and is scarcely questioned in terms of legitimacy". The last aspect of the conceptual review has to do with electoral violence.

Fisher (2012) in Adesote and Abimbola (2014, p.141) posits that "electoral violence is an organized act that seek to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, forced protection, blackmail, destruction of property or assassination". In the Nigerian context, electoral violence is used by politicians to score cheap political points as well as gain political recognition. This is evidenced in certain inflammatory statements credited to certain politicians especially during elections. This will be discussed in details in the main body of this paper.

#### **4. POLITICAL ACTORS AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria's 2015 general elections have been termed by analysts as a critical turning point for the country's corporate existence as well as democratic experiment because of the volatile nature of the political system. This assumption borders on the determination of the north to reclaim power and the incumbent President, Jonathan from South to seek another term in office. According to Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar, a former head of state cited in *Punch Newspaper* (2014, p.5) "the arrangement around these positions portends danger and will determine the unity of the country". Assessing the current political situation in the country, one could see that the political actors tend to speak along ethnic lines over political leadership of the country. This ethno-religious political atmosphere championed by "political jobbers and religions bigots" is further strained by the volatile social, political and near-breakdown of security apparatuses as well as seemingly weak democratic institutions in the country (*WANEP*, 2014).

Historically, Nigeria's electoral processes have always been riddled with fraud and violence orchestrated by politicians who regard politics as zero-sum game (Ikpe, 2004). The 2011 general elections ushered in unprecedented violence which left more than 800 people dead and more than 65,000 homeless, with more than 350 churches burnt (*Human Rights Watch*, 2014). The violence began with protests by supporters of the main opposition Presidential Candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), following the election of the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the South, who was candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). It soon degenerated into sectarian killings (*Human Rights Watch*, 2014). The conflict showed the strong correlation and linkage between politics, religion and ethnicity in Nigeria. From the Nigeria's independence to the present day political system, most political riots could be said to be "localized and confined" to a particular zone.

Therefore, the major concern for this 2015 is the possibility or likelihood of "confined" riots metamorphosing into national crisis, considering the volatile, complicated and deeply divided political

environment in the country. However, some citizens repose confidence in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to conduct “all inclusive” and credible elections, but the electoral body is seriously challenged by logistic-related problems, sabotage, corrupt electoral officials, timey registration and distribution of voters’ cards, among others. In addition to above, some citizens have accused the security agencies of likely bias and aiding electoral malpractices (WANEP, 2014). The tension generated by the concept of zoning political power in the country between north and south has assumed unprecedented dimension. The volatile and security crescendos in the country are further complicated and reinforced by the desire of the sitting President to re-contest this years’ Presidential elections against northern presumption that political power should be “returned” to them (WANEP, 2014).

Presently, Nigeria could be likened a county, setting on “volcanic eruption or gunpowder”, and this has even attracted the concern of the international community. The UN Secretary, Ban Ki-Moon was quoted in *The Guardian Newspaper* (2015, p.1) to have described the contest between the incumbent President, Jonathan and the main opposition leader, Muhammadu Buhari as a “Grave Test”. According to him, “we face another grave test as Nigeria readies for its elections next month...” At the same time his Special Representative in West Africa, Mohamed Ibn Chambas also explained to the Security Council on the same day that Nigerian general election is taking place in an increasing tense pre-electoral environment” (*The Guardian Newspaper*, 2015, p.1). Even as these speculations continue, politically related violence has began emerging in the country with the campaign convoy of the incumbent President being petted with stones in about four states. This was in addition to mayhem in Jos and Niger State where the Presidents’ campaign vehicles were burnt by rival political groups (*Pointblanknews*, 2015). This tense political environment coupled with increasing Boko Haram onslaught in northern Nigeria which has culminated in displacement of large number of eligible voters in the coming elections is a serious source of worry. The implication is that these displaced people might not exercise their franchise (voting) during the elections. This has posed a serious challenge to INEC in conducting free and credible elections this year. The democratic institutions like INEC and National Orientation Agency (NOA) saddled with the responsibility of voter education are relatively weak to withstand the influences exerted by the political system in a deeply tensed environment (WANEP, 2014). This led us to the aspect of legitimacy and disenfranchisement. In a situation where large sections of people are disenfranchised, will such process through which political leaders will emerge be considered democratic? At present, it is quite difficult to distribute the PVCs in the northeast parts of Nigeria because of the insurgent’s serial callous attacks on the zone. This will inevitably deprive large number of voting population from discharging their civic rights.

According to the Director General of National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) Muhammed Sani-Sidi, about 981,416 people in the country as of 21st January, 2015 are internally displaced as a result of conflicts, mostly from the Boko Haram onslaught on the northern Nigeria (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2015). The implication of this is that these displaced people will not exercise their civic duties during the elections because the government has made no provisions for them to vote in their respective camps. The questions now begging answers are; how legitimate are elections that exclude large number of people from choosing their political leaders? Will the transition process be considered democratic under the prevailing situation? Or does it mean that general elections do not necessarily need bonafide and qualified citizens to exercise their civic duties? These questions are left for the stakeholders and the agents of the democratic institutions to answer. This is even so as less than 50 percent of the eligible voters have so far collected their voters’ cards (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2015).

According to Hon (2015) cited in *Punch Newspaper*, few weeks to the general elections, less than 50 percent of eligible voters have so far collected their PVCs. According to him, unnecessary calls for the postponement of the polls could spark violence in the country. He averred thus;

*There is no single doubt that much disputation has been visited on Nigerian political landscape following the calls for and against shifting of the February general elections.... This may snowball into a political violence of unquantifiable proportions.... one sure way out of this is for the various governments to individually designate some days as public holidays for this all-important exercise to be carried out by Nigerians wishing to exercise their civic responsibilities... The powers to do this is supported by section 2(2) of the Public Holidays Acts, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004 (cited in Punch Newspaper, 2015, p.1).*

## **5. ACTORS AND FACTORS THREATENING DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN NIGERIA**

The ethno-religious nature of Nigerian politics further exacerbates the current political tension in the country. The northern political bloc perceive Jonathan’s emergence in 2011 as President and in 2015 as ruling party’s Presidential Candidate as “robbery” and breach of a gentlemen agreement in the party to rotate the position of president between north and south. As a result of this, certain northern elements were credited with inflammatory statements that the country will be made ungovernable by the north for Jonathan who they claimed surcharged

them (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2012). The bitter political competition between the north and south in the buildup to the 2015 presidential election continues to increase tension. Threats and counter threats have been issued by the northern and southern political leaders about the elections. A prominent northern leader, Lawal Kaita was quoted to have said that “the only way Nigeria can remain as one is for the Presidency to return to the North this 2015” (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2015, p.3). However, an ex-militant in the Niger Delta region, Tompolo on January 29, 2015 declared. “... I remain resolute on my earlier position that President Jonathan “must” win this election for Nigeria to continue to stay together” (*The Nation Newspaper*, 2015, p.1). Another ex-militant, Mujahid Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta Peoples’ Volunteer Force (NDPVF) stated that “there will be no peace in the whole country if Goodluck Jonathan is not President by this 2015” (*Premium Times*, 2013). The All Progressive Congress (APC) National Chairman John Odigie Oyejuna was also quoted to have said, “...as a party, we wish to reiterate that we will not hesitate to consider forming a parallel government if this 2015 elections are rigged either by the use of security agencies (police and military), to harass, intimidate and cajole voters or through the compromised Independent National Electoral Commission” (*Thisday Newspaper*, 2015, p.2). Internal party wrangling is also a factor that could threaten the transition process. The ruling and the opposition parties are currently riddled with internal party crises. This constitutes one of the major threats to the democratic stability. The power contention is however, between the ruling party and the opposition APC (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2013).

The aspect of money politics is also a matter of serious concern in Nigerian politics. According to the Chairman of INEC cited in *WANEP* (2014), the November, 2013 governorship election in Anambra State was sabotaged by desperate politicians who induced the electoral officials to derail the process. The desperation of Nigeria politicians to occupy public office at all cost with every imaginable strategies are already manifesting in the buildup to the 2015 elections. The opposition party has accused the ruling party of enticing their members with public funds ranging from \$1m to \$10m to cross carpet to the ruling party (*Punch Newspaper*, 2014). Some analysts have thus concluded that Nigerian politicians rely more on vote buying and inducement of electoral officials to sabotage the electoral process. It was reported that dollars rained at the last APC Presidential primaries, as a Presidential Aspirant, Atiku Abubakar was said to have paid each delegate between \$5,000 to \$10,000 to vote for him (*Punch Newspapers*, 2014). The above was further affirmed by the President Goodluck Jonathan’s statement in Ebonyi State during his campaigns that “... nobody should deceive you, no body should buy your votes. Since 1960, we have been buying and selling votes...” (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2015, p. 1). This aspect of money politics is also linked to charade political parties primaries in the country. However, the proliferation of ethno-religious and sectarian groups particularly Boko Haram is a source of worry. The volatile nature of the nation at the time, Boko Haram sectarian attacks in the northeastern zone, killings by the Fulani herdsmen even in the middle belt states as well as other organized armed gangs have raised doubts about the issue of smooth democratic transition in 2015. The emergency rule imposed on the northeastern states of Yobe, Adamawa and Borno by the Federal Government had not curtailed the insurgents’ audacious attacks on towns and cities and the security situation remained devastating and deteriorating. The sect is rumored to have the support of some northern leaders who are said to be displeased with the President over the issue of power rotation agreement within the ruling party. The porous nature of the Nigeria’s borders to some extent aided the sustenance of the sectarian activities. The alleged regrouping of the Niger Delta militants and their alleged unfettered access to arms procured from the proceeds from crude oil theft is a serious security threat to the nation’s corporate existence.

## **6. WHAT DOES NIGERIA’S 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS REALLY PORTEND?**

In view of the above analysis, it could be seen that Nigeria is sitting on a keg of “gunpowder” which is a threat to smooth transition process. Majority of the electorates are likely to be highly disenfranchised as a result of not getting their PVCs on time and this may snowball into violence before and after the elections. The war of words from conventional and unconventional participants in the political system has continued unabated. *Pointblanknews* of January 31, 2015 reportedly quoted an ex-militant affirming his threat to violence if Goodluck Jonathan loses the election. According to Tonjo-West “...if our son is not good enough to be president, then our oil cannot be available for other regions...” (p.1). The fundamental questions as they relate to the elections are: what happens if Jonathan loses the elections in oil producing states? Is it democratic to intimidate the electorate into voting a certain candidate? The questions now beg the answers. With the current situation, if any of the two presidential candidates wins, there is likely to be violence from opposing groups and it will lead to international community’s intervention to salvage the situation. However, the country’s electoral commission is weak and the politicians’ perversion of the electoral process had continued to threaten the deepening of democratic norms and smooth transition process. The poor organization of the elections and the negative effects of unnecessary tensions and violence have heightened the fear of possible “democratic breakdown”. To curb any unpleasant scenario, useful recommendations are proffered.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- INEC should conduct free, fair, credible and acceptable elections that enjoy electorate's support. This could be done through the commission ensuring that all registered voters get their PVC before the election days.
- The security agencies should try to be unbiased as much as possible to avert violence as well as sanctioning any officer who fails to comply.
- The civil society groups should engage actively with youth leaders especially in rural areas to strengthen their participation as well as raise timely alerts of possible violence.
- The media should ensure factual and balance reportage of all election issues as well as avoid publishing inflammatory comments.
- The international observers should monitor the elections comprehensively.
- The election petition tribunals just inaugurated should handle election litigations with utmost transparency and not to dismiss election petitions on technical grounds.
- The political leaders in the north and south should caution their followers to be peaceful during and after the elections.
- Electorate should be seen as transitory agents, that is, the major stakeholders in the electoral process
- ECOWAS, AU and International Community and Development partners should support local and national non-governmental groups to initiate means of dealing with potential election related violence.
- INEC should ensure all parties and actors play the game according to the rules within the provisions of the constitution and the Electoral Act.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Apart from the identified electoral violence Nigeria's elections have recorded; there has been steady improvement in terms of periodic conduct. The violence that has always characterized the country's elections had considerably undermined the slight improvement in electoral systems; raising concerns of transition process and civic engagements of citizens in the political process. Conducting election is one thing, but putting apparatuses or mechanisms to checkmate democratic threats or stability in power transition is another crucial issue. Particular attention needs to be paid to the impending election considering the tensed nature of the current political system, with issues of terrorism on the increase. The country has conducted four consecutive general elections since the return to democracy in 1999, which shows some level of democratic stability. Transition and civic engagements in Nigeria will be meaningless if the electorates are not fully integrated into the democratic process. With the support and encouragement of the international community and partners and the conduct of transparent elections, Nigeria will surmount the impending and looming danger in the political system.

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