

## Challenges to Democratic Development in Nigeria 1999 -2013

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to look at some challenges impeding Nigerian democratic development. Nigerian democracy is apparently enshrouded or marred by manipulation of religion, region, ethnicity, rigging, post-election violence, and abuse of human rights etcetera. This exploitation of democracy has been growing from simple to complex in all nooks and crannies of the country since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The struggles for self-determination by Africans during the colonial period strongly and clearly aimed at a democratic system of government, where the majority could determine who gets what, when and how. Moreover, it is a known fact that the basis and beauty of any democratic dispensation lies in its ability to conduct free, fair and credible elections at all levels as well as respect human rights. This undoubtedly paves the way for other democratic dividends. Unfortunately, in Nigeria, right from the First Republic to the present-day, the opposition parties have been suppressed and manipulated a great deal; with no hope for justice and fair play from the electoral bodies and even the judiciary which is supposed to be the last resort of the common man at the grassroots. Therefore, the paper unearths and elucidates on some democratic challenges in the Fourth Republic. Finally and sanguinely, this paper concludes that the interpretations and assessments in this research will provide positive historical evaluation and paradigm shift in apprehending the realities of Nigerian democracy and proffering solutions to the impediments therein.

**Keywords:** Rivalry, Democracy, Rigging, Electoral Violence, Election and Abuse

“The worst illiterate is the political illiterate. He hears nothing, sees nothing, and takes no part in political life. He doesn’t seem to know that the cost of living, the price of beans, of flour, of rent, of medicines, all depend on political decisions. He even prides himself on his political ignorance, sticks out his chest and says he hates politics. He doesn’t know, the imbecile, that from his political non-participation comes the prostitute, the abandoned child, the robber and, worst of all, corrupt officials, the lackeys of exploitative multinational corporations”.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

There have been various challenges to democratic development in Nigeria since the return to civilian rule in 1999. These challenges are multifaceted traversing through political parties, electoral bodies, judiciary, security agencies as well as contestants, constituents and so forth.

Democratic system of governance which has numerous definitions and meanings is believed to have gained currency universally as the finest form of government. And if one may argue, the concept has been either enforced or mostly accepted as the best system of governance. Nevertheless, this system of government is pigeonholed by certain deficiencies which are either external or internal, i.e. domestic causes and or foreign influences. In this country, the concept of democracy has turned out to be problematic to express and simply for the fact that, the very element which meet the requirements a democracy (free and fair election) has been difficult to accomplish.<sup>2</sup> Monshipouri maintains that the classification of democracy is challenging in the sense that it has been the question of massive elucidations by scholars over the years. One school accentuates the presence of socio-economic egalitarianism in society as a necessary condition for the successful operational democracy; while others see it in the light of its etymological sense as the rule of the people. In principle, for that reason, a democratic system is adjudged according to the degree of its vow to the elements of democracy. Democracy prospers where people liberally stand for election and vote during election; where freedom of speech; where there are sporadic elections founded on universal suffrage; association and publication is allowed; where the government and its representatives abide by the rule of law; where majoritarian rule is maintained; where there is acceptance of opposing views; where elections conducted are free, fair and credible; where defeated leaders accept defeat freely in an election; where succession process is smooth and not problematic; where the individual is allowed to freely make his/her choice; and where the process of election is competitive among the political parties. If all these tenets, elements, and parameters are adhered to, a government can be regarded as being democratic.<sup>3</sup> In concrete terms, Nigeria may hardly be regarded as a respecter of these elements during the period of this research.

Meanwhile, it is worthy of note that even before Nigeria got her independence there were elements of suppression and manipulation of opposition or minority parties which were glaring. During the colonial period, regional politics was the order of the day, such that each region in the Nigerian area had its major/strong political party along with other minor parties whose voices were not heard or were less noticed.<sup>4</sup> Alkassum Abba argues

that the colonial administration in Nigeria strongly supported Sir Ahmadu Bello (Sardaunan Sokoto) in his constituency, such that he was returned unopposed, as a winner.<sup>5</sup> In the Northern Region, Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) was the most powerful party having prominent people like Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sir Ahmadu Bello (Sardauna of Sokoto) and the like. In the South East and South West, the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC) and the Action Group (AG) were the most powerful political parties respectively. While several smaller parties like the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC), the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) and so forth were formed.<sup>6</sup> This trend of suppressing and repressing the opposition parties was similar to what transpired in the Second Republic, as Dare Babarinsa correctly pointed out that when Awolowo sent some members of the UPN to give him a hand and supervise the 1979 elections in some Northern States, they were apprehended and detained; and were not freed till after the election.<sup>7</sup>

### **Election Rigging in Nigeria**

How free, fair and credible were Nigerian elections? Is there idle democracy where voters' choice does not count? The answers to these challenging questions lie in the below discussion.

Ever since independence, the Nigeria's democratization developments had seen colossal electoral fraud followed by violence which has conceded the very moral principles of liberal democracy in spite of numerous electoral reforms that have no positive consequence. This quandary to democratization process in Nigeria has somewhat been on the intensification and there is no indication of any thoughtful and honest determination made to stop it before it becomes unstoppable.<sup>8</sup> Even though, electoral processes in Nigeria have not been perfect since the 1950s as George Amale Kwanashie clearly states, and that various reforms have been put in place,<sup>9</sup> however, up to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, electoral bodies and processes are still facing serious challenges. Karl Meir contends that the 1999 election though relatively peaceful, but was marred by fraud, rigging and other irregularities. In fact, even the 1999 presidential election was viewed as predetermined or "tele-guided", fairly because none of the contenders delighted the masses, a small number of people showed much fervour in exercising their franchise. For the larger part of the society, the election was just a justification to take a day off.<sup>10</sup> AbdulHameed A. Ujo also maintains that there were cases of electoral fraud during the Local Government elections in some parts of the country, as Presiding Officers were arrested with thumb-printed ballot papers in some States of the Federation.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the 2003 general elections were not devoid of rigging and other electoral malpractices. Joseph Winter, a BBC correspondent who covered the 2003 elections in Nigeria reports that "*if the September 11 in US is referred to 911, then should Nigeria's April 19 be referred to as "419"?*"<sup>12</sup> The 2003 presidential election was massively rigged, as millions of people voted severally. The police in Lagos discovered an electoral fraud, by finding five million false votes. International Observers including European Union discovered numerous irregularities. Thus in some cases votes were pre-filled or results were later altered.<sup>13</sup>

Sulayman Dauda holds the view that the main problem debilitating Nigeria's democratic processes and political stability is essentially a problem of the nation's electoral system. The country has never witnessed a credible, free and fair election, which remains the main soul of a democratic system. Nevertheless, a number of works have relate electoral irregularities and the Nigerian faulty democracy to the nationality question, a minor but very essential part of the national question involving elites interest, religious and ethnic sentiments, while others look at it from the struggle for political authority and competition for the accumulation of wealth. It has never been taken from the position of the national question, which is developmental away from ethnic question.<sup>14</sup> Dauda further maintains that 2007-2011 are the most expensive and worst elections ever conducted in Nigerian history. While the late Yar'adua confessed a (high) degree of fraud in an election that ushered him to power in 2007, even Morris Iwu, the Chairman of the electoral body in the 2007 General Elections, questioned the credibility of the 2011 General Elections.<sup>15</sup> Clearly therefore, with over 60 years election experience in Nigeria, rigging and other electoral fraud remained deeply rooted and enshrined.

### **Ethnic Flag-waving in Nigerian Democracy**

Ethnic rivalry, from independence, has lingered to be encumbering the process of nation building in Nigeria. Right from the "divide and rule" tactics brought about by the British colonialists, it has led to the advent of regional and ethnic leaders and this led to a circumstance whereby parties at the time of independence were ethnically founded. The Action Group (AG) controlled the West and led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, NPC in the North was led by Sir Ahmadu Bello and the National Council of Nigerians Citizens (NCNC) controlled the East and led by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe. At this point, one can argue that regional leaders employed ethnic connexions due to ethnic nationalism. This has brought about political unsteadiness as a result of the fashion that Nigeria is a heterogeneous society with a high population running over 150 million people, whereby inter-ethnic jealousy has at all times heated the political entity. Just like how it has been maintained that the first military coup of 1966 was ethnically designed to affect a particular region and among the reasons indicated to this was

the fact that the majority of those that were eliminated were Northerners.<sup>16</sup>

Ethnicity is thus a pestilence that is dominant over democratic consolidation in Nigeria as there were calls by the Christians and other socio-cultural groupings in the Nigerian polity threatening to shun the census if ethnicity and religion were omitted from the list of questions. This is as a result of the fact that census figures have been a pillar for the hegemonic outlook of a particular group in the Nigerian federation over the rest, so in the race for the control of state power and resources, ethnic gushes have always been engaged by both minority and majority ethnic groups in the quest for national resources. The amplified ethnic strain that this has brought has in no small measure affected political and economic development of the country.<sup>17</sup> As noted above, ethnicity is apparently one of the bases of conflict in Nigeria and it stands to be a critical factor to our political liberation. The 1999 General Elections in Nigeria were relatively not marred by ethnicity; this is proven on the outlook of the presidential candidates where both the two contestants (Olu Falaye and Olusegun Obasanjo) were from the same ethnic group and religious belief.<sup>18</sup> The Northerners and Easterners collectively and politically suppressed themselves to give the South Western region of the country to present a president. Conversely, the 2011 presidential election was ethnically and religiously inclined. The Nigerian voters overtly and covertly supported their kinsmen. Before the end of Obasanjo's first term, ethnic bigotry which was enshrouded by economic and political motives has engulfed Plateau State. The Hausa nationalities and Birom since the year 2001 have been in ethno-religious conflict which has led to the loss of lives and properties worth billions of naira.<sup>19</sup>

In the same vein, during the electioneering campaigns of the presidential election in 2011, crisis which was religiously and ethically motivated sprang up in the country and caused a clear divide between the two major religions and regions. Most Southerners apparently supported Goodluck Ebele Jonathan not because he was the credible and competent presidential candidate, but because he was their kinsman; while the Northerners supported General Muhammad Buhari for obvious reasons. The announcement of the former as the "winner" of the 2011 presidential election led to serious political upheaval. In summary, 2011 elections at all levels were greatly manipulated along ethnic line.<sup>20</sup> In fact, as the 2015 election is coming closer day in and out, so is the tension growing from simple to complex, which, if care is not taken, may engulf Nigeria into yet another political calamity. On 15<sup>th</sup>, February, 2014, the Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC), had to call the attention of Alhaji Dokubo Asari, for his unguarded utterances. Asari stated that "*no Northerner should contest 2015 elections against Goodluck Ebele Jonathan in 2015*".<sup>21</sup>

Right from independence, efforts to bring together different ethnic groups have continuously yielded little success. As at today, what we have as States instead of Regions came as a result of measures to curb ethnic virus and bring about national unity. But rather than resolving inter-ethnic dissonance, its potential was heightened. The consequences of ethnic cacophony are so overwhelming that it messes up economic growth by scaring away foreign investors. Some oil companies have been shut down due to ethnic uprisings in the oil producing areas and this has been a huge economic loss. The values of justice and equity have always been threatened by ethnicity at instances whereby ethnic eruptions were highly prevalent. Nnoli, in Ngarka and Wuam opined that, "*Ethnicity promotes hypocrisy on the question of moral values such as justice and equity*".<sup>22</sup> This paper strongly agrees with Nnoli's submission.

### **Religious Rivalry in Nigerian Democracy**

At this point, this paper intends to look at religious rivalry between the two major Nigerian religions-Christianity and Islam. It is imperative to quote Ahmad Deedat, who maintains that "*millions and millions of Christians don't know the Bible; millions and millions of Muslims don't know the Qur'an*".<sup>23</sup> This paper further emphasises that a good number of Christians and Muslims deliberately condone the idle practices of their respective religions for political benefits. Some Pastors and Imams are more materialistic than God-fearing; they prefer the mundane world than the hereafter. The Holy Qur'an says "*Oh Ye who believe! Stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealings, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety...*"<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, the Holy Bible says "*But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also*".<sup>25</sup> Therefore, going by the revelations of these Holy Books, justice, fairness and tolerance are enshrined therein. But adherents of these religions turn away their faces from absolute obedience.

Theophilus Danjuma once lamented that "religious fanaticism and favouritism have also been politically employed to polarize the people and sustain unhealthy tension of Nigeria".<sup>26</sup> As Matthew Hassan Kukah pointed out, religion has been enshrined in Nigerian politics since the 1979 elections. Matthew sees the emergence of Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the President of the Nigerian Second Republic, through the use and manipulation of religion.<sup>27</sup> However, Terna Afella, unlike Matthew Kukah, holds the view that religion and politics, by feature of their purposes, have a very close tie, and can operate together for the well-being of the society. That notwithstanding, Terna Afella also laments that Nigerian politicians end up manipulating the religion in their own interest, when it comes to power struggle.<sup>28</sup> Jennifer Emejulu-Okeke views that the quest for political power and wealth has led many Christians to abandon their faith. "Many Christians today sell their

faith. Many Churches have thwarted the Christian message.”<sup>29</sup>

As already noted, this manipulation of religion in power struggle is not circumscribed to the Christians alone, it also applies appropriately on the Muslims, as Sheikh Adamu Muhammad Dokoro once challenged the former Governor of Gombe State, Alhaji Muhammad Danjuma Goje, and other politicians not to manipulate Qur’anic verses to suit their political interest.<sup>30</sup> Yusufu Bala Usman, holds the opinion that Nigerian politics has been marred by manipulation of religion in various faces for a number of years.<sup>31</sup> Sa’ad Abubakar views Jos crisis as a result of politics shrouded by religion. He further maintains that crises may ensue in a situation where the Hausa supports an opposition party as an alternative of the governing party.<sup>32</sup> This paper holds the view that religion has obscured Nigerian democracy in an unprecedented manner since 1999.

#### **Post-Election Violence and its Consequences in Nigeria**

Remi Anifowose, in his book “Violence and Politics in Nigeria” offers a variety of facts on the history of post-election violence in Nigeria. This dates back to colonial period through post-independence era.<sup>33</sup> In the same vein, Alkassum Abba traces electoral violence in Nigeria to 1951 elections.<sup>34</sup> Akwen and Gever expressed that a disordered environment is undoubtedly a threat to democracy and development, at this point; people live in unending fear and have no thought of a genuinely democratic way of life. It is everyone for himself and God for all. This in no small measure impedes development struggles.<sup>35</sup> J.D Agaba contends that as violence and chaos rock the Nigerian state, the consequential effect of this is the snowballing rate of youth’s unemployment and intensifying crime rates in the country.<sup>36</sup> Benedict Michael states that violence disrupts the harmony of Jos, Kano, Kaduna States in the North and some states in Southern Nigeria, thereby underdevelopment came to play.<sup>37</sup>

In 1999, General Abubakar AbdulSalam conducted yet another election which General Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as the president under the platform of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), a party which many Nigerians view as a “cancer”, particularly after its first term, as a result of its violence on the Nigerian land from 1999 to 2011. Nevertheless, the said 1999 election did not face serious disapproval as it was regarded as moderately “fair” election despite its challenge in the Election Tribunal by Alliance for Democracy presidential candidate, Chief Olu Falaye. As Nigerians agitated for a democratically elected government, 1999 election did not call for serious political violence in Nigeria. Of course people were of the view that the nascent democracy should be nurtured to fruition. As 2003 elections approached, many if not all the States of the Federation were engulfed in one form of political violence or the other. Uneducated and unemployed youths were now turned to what some scholars termed as “foot soldiers” of political violence. This led to the consolidation of political thugs known as “Yan Daba”, “ECOMOG”, “Yan Kalare”, “Area Boys”, “Sara Suka” etc in Kano, Borno, Gombe, Lagos and Bauchi States respectively. Since then, violence at Local, State and Federal constituencies became the order of the day, such that hardly could any election hold without victims.<sup>38</sup>

AbdulHameed Ujo terms the 2011 as “the mother of all electoral violence”<sup>39</sup> He maintains that the announcement of the result of the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria saw an unparalleled violence in the history of violence in Nigeria. This political upheaval led to the death of so many people and destruction of properties worth millions.<sup>40</sup> Nkwachuku Orji and Nkiru Nzodi elucidated on post-election violence in Nigeria, where the authors maintained a similar position with Ujo.<sup>41</sup>

#### **Abuse of Human Rights in Nigerian Democracy**

*“My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest.”*- Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), leader of India’s non-violent struggle for freedom.

A. Appadorai considers private liberty, political liberty and economic liberty as fundamental issues in any democratic system of governance.<sup>42</sup> Conversely, these liberties, largely remain as rhetoric in Nigerian democracy than practical. Fundamentally, abuses of human rights have been breeding all sorts of violent scenarios to the possible feature of a total anarchy, a situation which some consider Nigeria moving towards a failed state. The relationship between freedom and democracy is obviously complex. Some scholars interpret freedom as a crucial and necessary dimension of democracy. Thus, without freedom, a democracy cannot exist. This, however, does not automatically determine in conceptual terms, whether or not there is a need for dimensions in addition to freedom for qualifying a country or a political system as democratic. Campbell further holds that two key proportions of democracy are *freedom* and *equality*. Nigerian politics is marred by despotic tendencies where human rights abuse is seen as the order of the day.

Lemuel Ekedegwa Odeh, opines that the fundraising for presidential library project of President Obasanjo exposes how leaders use state funds to settle private political homage and scores. In addition to this was the silencing of the statutory allocation of Local Governments in Lagos state by the Obasanjo administration. On a number of occasions, the apex court had ruled in favour of Lagos State, but the President maintained that Lagos State should revert from 37 to the old 20 Local Governments as the principles for the release of the statutory allocation. In reaction to this locus of the federal government, Dr Alex Ekwueme stated thus: *“Nowhere in the constitution is the president empowered to withhold or suspend the payment of allocation from the federation account to local government councils of state government”*<sup>43</sup> This paper holds the view that



withholding of Lagos State statutory allocation by Obasanjo administration was an abuse of human right, which should not be condoned in any democratic set up. Monday Mangvwat shares the same view, that the withholding of Lagos State statutory allocation was an abuse that was so vindictive, ruthless and undemocratic.<sup>44</sup> In idle democracy, citizens should freely exercise their rights, but that has not been the case in Nigeria. In essence, human rights should be respected, protected and implemented. Disrespect to the right of the citizens under the rule of law is an abuse of human right, as Yusuf Ali Esq maintains.<sup>45</sup>

Good governance entails that all work of the State be informed by fundamental democratic principles supporting human rights. The five pillars of good governance transparency in decision-making processes, ensuring people's participation, responsibility in the exercise of power, accountability of the decision-makers and responsiveness to people's needs – support the structure of workable democracy. Anything less will result in absolutism and oppressiveness of power. A human rights lens on democracy and governance not only honours justice and equity above all, but most significantly takes the establishment for human well-being by governments from ordinary promises into the jurisdiction of defined legal responsibility.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the challenges impeding the Nigerian democracy from 1999 to 2013. It has established that rigging in Nigerian election has been so intense in the Fourth Republic, tracing its roots to the 1951 elections as Alkassum maintains. Ethnic politics, though has existed for long, but has taken an unprecedented manner in polarising Nigerian nationalities, such that people have replaced credibility with nationality. Religion, which is supposed to be used for social and political harmony, has been manipulated by both the Christians and the Muslims alike, especially in power struggle and for political gains. The rigging, ethnic politics, religious politics were occurring simultaneously with abuse of human rights in Nigeria. Leaders suppress their opponents through the use of coercive apparatus of the State, like the case of Obasanjo and Tinibu; and people are intimidated from voicing out their grievances. Put together, these impediments are in no small measure challenges to Nigerian democracy.

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