

(DRAFT: Comments are welcome)

Taking Back our Democracy? The Trials and Travails of Nigerian Elections Since 1999¹

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Introduction

In two years time, Nigerians are expected to go to the polls to elect another government in 2011. Given current political events in the country since the controversial 2007 elections (Obi 2008a), it is necessary to critically examine what the trends mean for the struggle for democracy in Africa's most populous country. If the irregularities and violence that characterized this year's re-run elections in Ekiti and Oyo states are anything to go by (Sayo and Lawal 2009; Ajayi 2009), the indications are that the coming elections in 2011 will not be fundamentally different from the 'imperfect' elections of 2003 and 2007.

The trends in Nigeria's politics are also important given growing concerns based on recent political developments in Guinea and Niger where a military coup and unconstitutional political changes have taken place, suggesting that West Africa may be experiencing some regression in the democratization process in the sub-region. This paper therefore raises critical questions about the form and depth of electoral democracy in Nigeria by interrogating the impact of the post-1999 elections in 2003 and 2007, on the transfer of power from 'unelected' military to 'elected' civilian rule, and the prospects for democracy in the country. It also conceptualises such elections not just as political processes for 'freely' choosing leaders, but as sites of struggles between forces intent on retaining power by any means at whatever costs to serve hegemonic and dominant elite interests, and those seeking popular transformation in which elections serve the broad political and welfare interests of the majority of Nigerians.

The most pertinent issues relate to the nature and content of the (military-led) transition to democracy, and the equally important question of which social forces or classes own, or are immersed in the struggle over the democratic project. It is important to analyze post-1999 elections in Nigeria in relation to the question of whether they have contributed towards democratic consolidation, or have been hijacked by the dominant governing elite, which has subverted such elections as well as the will of the people, subjecting the electoral procedure to a disembowelled act of "voting without choosing" (Agbaje and Adejumo 2006). Equally relevant is the issue of what the elections and their outcome(s) portend for the struggle for democracy, and also answering the fundamental question, whose democracy? (Beckman 1989: 84-97).

These issues are also relevant given the background of long years of military dictatorship since 1966, only broken by a 'civilian interregnum' between 1979 and 1983, before Nigeria's return to elected civilian rule in May 1999. Of note are the roles played by the military, the political parties, and civil society in either advancing or subverting the democratic project.

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These issues and actors contribute towards setting the basis for the scenarios that will likely play out before, and by 2011, when the political ‘gladiators’ will be locked in another bitterly contested election, or what a retired General and former ‘elected’ president Olusegun Obasanjo, referred to in 2007 as “do or die” elections (quoted in, Adebayo 2007), to determine who would exercise power over an oil-rich state.

Although the 1999 marked the formal end of military authoritarianism in the country’s political life, the democratic opening—after two bitterly contested and incrementally controversial elections in 2003 and 2007 suggest that Nigeria has experienced a political transition *without transformation*. It can be argued that the post-military political transition process in the country has been imposed from the top by a dominant elite fraction keen to protect its vested interests. This was to ensure that power did not slip from its hands or those of its members or allies. This transition-without-change has been instrumental to the form of elite democracy that was imposed from above in order not to threaten the power-base and interests of the hegemonic fraction of the Nigerian ruling elite. Thus, the elite has largely deprived majority of Nigerians of the freedom or right to choose by turning elections into “occasions for the subversion of democratic processes” (Ibrahim 2009a).

Central to this political trend are the roles of the political class, the political parties, the public institutions and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Alongside with this are the following: simmering identity-driven political agitation by well-armed youth militia or vigilante groups engaged in acts of violence in the Niger Delta (and other parts of the country) as responses to alienation from the state, economic decline, unemployment, elite manipulation, and the militarization of society—the legacy of decades of military rule, reports of corruption in public affairs, and the continued political violence in re-run elections and party primaries to elect political candidates. These underscore the persistence of high stakes and the militarization of politics in the context of a ‘democracy-from-above’ that seeks to subvert or block the prospects for popular political participation, dialogue and grassroots democratization.

From the foregoing, it can be suggested that post-1999 elections provide critical indicators of the nature of Nigeria democratic transition. The elections are also sites from which the nature of the struggles for democracy in Nigeria can be gleaned and explained. As sites of struggle, elections are an important aspect of the political process need to be analyzed in the context of the contestations that underpin political transitions, rather than the usual perspective of being a process of voting as an expression of choice.

What is also often ‘invisible’ are the efforts of some groups to contest and resist the political depredation and impunity of the ruling elites, and the few but significant victories where such efforts to make the “votes count”. In this regard, this paper is divided into four broad sections. The introduction sets out the main issues in the struggle for electoral democracy. It is followed by a conceptual section that deals with the linkages between elections and democratic transitions. The third section examines the ways post-1999 elections reflect the contestations which underpin electoral democracy and provides explanations for the way elections have been largely subverted by the dominant elite, even if the people have won very few, significant victories in defending their votes. The last and concluding section sums up the arguments and reflects upon the prospects for the future.

Elections and Democratic Transition in Nigeria: A Conceptual Note

In order to place the discourse on democratic transitions in Nigeria in perspective, it is apposite to reflect on the centrality of elections to the democratic project. Elections form the bedrock of liberal democratic discourse as a process or procedure through which the sovereign will of the people is expressed. This places elected representatives and executives ultimately at the service of the people, who by using their votes can hold leaders accountable and sanction them when they violate or betray their trust. Thus, while the concept of democracy remains highly contested, the mainstream liberal perspective to democracy tends to focus on free, fair and competitive multiparty elections (Dahl 1971; Schumpeter 1947; Sandbrook 1988; Diamond 2002), based on universal adult suffrage and basic civil and political freedoms guaranteed by the rule of law and as laid down in the constitution. It also draws justification as a political system that best builds bulwarks against arbitrary rule, autocracy and oppression.

According to the *Freedom in the World* 2009 Report, electoral democracy is based on the existence of four conditions, “a competitive multiparty political system, universal adult suffrage for all citizens, regular elections conducted in conditions of ballot secrecy and reasonable ballot security, and in the absence of massive voter fraud that subverts the public will and significant public access of major political parties to the electorate through the media and through generally open political campaigning.” Adejumobi (2000: 60) notes that “conceptually, elections symbolize popular sovereignty and the expression of the “social pact” between the state and the people, defining the basis of political authority, legitimacy and citizens’ obligations.” He then underscores the importance of elections as “the kernel of political accountability and a means of ensuring reciprocity and exchange between governors and the governed.”

The foregoing largely represents the liberal perspective to democracy. However, this Western paradigm of democracy has been the subject of some criticism. Some scholars have argued that the electoral form of democracy has been proved to be susceptible to manipulation, abuse, false assumptions and ambiguities (Carothers 2002; Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002), while the radical critique notes that “elections constitute a system of political and ideological reification of hegemony of the dominant class.” These critical perspectives go beyond the external form, to point to the ideological and normative underpinnings of electoral democracy, which in reality conforms to western or liberal-style democracy, that has since the end of the Cold war been an object of world-wide promotion.

While not dismissing liberal democracy outright, because it offers a potential political opening, which in certain contexts can be explored by well-organized autonomous social forces, it is clear that its practice in more often than not reflects the interests of the dominant class. An important point that assumes significance in Africa, and Nigeria in particular relates to elections representing a political “opportunity for citizens to advance their economic and social rights” (Ninsin 2006: 3). The fundamental point to be made therefore is that the elections do not automatically result in democratization, even though they may potentially represent an opportunity for political change.

This is a lesson that has emerged after the notion of democratic transitions linked to the holding of multiparty elections assumed euphoric significance in the immediate post-Cold war period, in the wake of the collapse of one party communist regimes in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. Very quickly the abandonment of one party rule

(authoritarianism) for democratic governance based on the outcome of electoral democracy gained legitimacy and was adopted within the framework of globalized democracy-promotion by the world's hegemonic liberal democracies. The collapse of many one party or military regimes in Africa in the 1990s gave further credence to the view that the continent was being swept by a worldwide democratic ferment that Huntington referred to as the "third wave" (Huntington 1991). Ninsin (2006: 1-2) while noting the co-incidence in timing points out that what Africa experienced was a "second wave" of democratization, the first being at independence when the nationalist-democratic coalition gained political freedom from colonial domination.

Multiparty elections took centre stage in the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in the former Soviet Union, the East Bloc countries and Africa in the 1990s. They represented a key procedure for determining political liberalisation, as the 'new' conditions of political opening and competition, civil and political rights and the freedom to choose by the electorate formed the basis for the emergence of political transitions as a paradigm for explaining post-cold war democratisation. However, the notion of multiparty elections being the cornerstone of democratic transition with has been subjected to some criticism. McFaul (2002: 212-213), illustrates this point by noting that "the transition from communism in Europe and the former Soviet Union" has triggered a fourth wave of regime change—to democracy and dictatorship. In the same regard, Diamond (2002: 23), among other observations makes the important point about the "exhaustion of the "third wave" of democratic transitions" by underscoring "the astonishing frequency with which contemporary authoritarian regimes manifest, at least superficially, a number of democratic features."

Advancing the view that "the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness," Carothers (2002: 6-9), questions its five core assumptions, including "the belief in the determinative importance of elections." Arguing that these assumptions are largely flawed, and doubting the analytical usefulness of the array of invectives directed at states seemingly trapped between dictatorship and democracy (2002: 10), Carothers calls for a new paradigm of political change that captures the new political conditions in the so-called transition states. It can be surmised that democratic transition as a 'neo-liberal' concept has fast become a dated ideological notion that reflects less and less of the actual content and direction of politics in many countries in the world.

Of particular note in the African context is the premium that international democracy-promoters have placed on the importance of elections based on multi-partyism and constitutional rule. This view is "informed by the thinking that democracy is best expressed through periodic elections in which equal voters (in a market society) choose leaders (from competing elites), who can be held accountable for their policies, and voted out if they fail to perform well" (Obi 2008b: 73). Elections in the regard are an important cornerstone of the liberal brand of democracy being promoted across the world. However, this perspective often ignores the wide gulf between the ideology and practice of democracy. The reality that confronts us is that elections often fall within the "menu of manipulation" (Schedler 2002: 118) through which incumbents or hegemonic groups hold on to power. Ninsin (2006: 3) correctly notes that, "the ruling class has reduced elections to an intra-class contest" and observes thus, "they have ingeniously developed mechanisms for appropriating it to advance their long-standing project of political and economic domination of the majority".

The reflections of Claude Ake on elections and democracy are quite significant. Linking democratic struggles to collective historical movements, he was sceptical that the liberal

democracy being promoted by the West in Africa was suited to the historical and social realities of the continent, arguing that “African democracy in a collective social sense offered a form of political participation that was different from and superior to that offered by liberal democracy (Ake 1993: 243; Obi 2008a: 12). In his view, liberal democracy had been trivialised “to the extent that it was no longer threatening to those in power or demanding to anyone.” He goes on to argue that electoral democracy had contributed to the democratisation of the disempowerment of Africa’s people (Ake 2000: 82). In other words, in such contexts, “voting does not amount to choosing”.

The view that elections alone do not guarantee the freedom of choice is quite significant in any discussion of the election-democratic transition nexus in Nigeria. This position is reinforced by Ninsin’s observation that “an objective study of elections reveal that a number of structural, ideological and political factors impose severe limitations on the choice exercised by the electorate and thereby compromise the integrity of competitive elections as the ultimate political means employed to choose or change their leaders.” This has reduced participation to voting-without-choosing during periodic elections that are held under varying conditions, put end up placing a fraction of the elite in power, effectively making it the rule of the minority. Apart from the people operating under difficult socio-economic conditions, those they ‘elect’ (under largely manipulated elections) tend to be more accountable to global institutions particularly with regard to the adoption of anti-people economic policies (Abrahamsen 2000), effectively amounting to the people’s voting, but not choosing.

Under the conditions described in the preceding paragraph, elections have so far remained an elite project for controlling public resources and power, legitimized in the name of the people using democracy as an ideological mask. Ake (1993, 2000) notes that for the ruling elites, democracy is more of a means than an end, a strategy for power, while for the masses it could be a struggle for democratic incorporation. In all cases, the dominant elites are backed by competing regional/international interests or hegemonic powers often pursuing their economic and strategic interests, further complicating the picture with their equally ambiguous, ambivalent and contradictory positions. Thus, democracy for the elite is reduced to the business of keeping or negotiating power for narrow ends. As Cheru (2002: 41) notes, “democracy cannot take root when political parties and leadership lack a deep commitment to promote the interests of the African poor.”

Under such conditions, the level playing field that is so critical for a competitive multiparty political system has been largely absent in Nigeria, thereby blocking the transition to democracy. What the country has ended up with is a democracy-from-above imposed by a highly fractionated, but loosely united ruling elite. The dominant elite represented by the dominant party-in-power has largely hijacked and manipulated the post-1999 elections in order to hang on to power. These actions have excluded voters from freely choosing, and also blocked or dispersed popular pressures for social transformation and radical change in favour of the majority of the people.

Thus, rather than examine elections as the harbinger of a transition to democracy in Nigeria, this paper focuses on the how elections have been hijacked for the actualization of the hegemonic project of dominant elite, and the ‘real’ struggles between the dominant forces pushing a project of democracy-from-above and those seeking to push alternative project of democracy-from-below and political transformation in Nigeria. At its heart, lies the question of who ultimately has the power to define “our democracy”.

The Crisis of Democracy in Nigeria since 1999

The persistence of violence and electoral irregularities that have marked the post-1999 transition elections in Nigeria are signs of a more fundamental crisis of democracy in the country. The evidence suggests that since 1999, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) through a combination of the control, manipulation, organised violence and deployment of federal state power, political institutions and resources, has successfully hijacked and subverted the electoral institutions and processes to consolidate its hold on to power and public resources.

Its hold on to power has been further consolidated through deft, but fragile alliance politics. The PDP has been able to consolidate its lead over a few other contenders: the Action Congress (AC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), Progressive People's Alliance (PPA) and All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), and a largely weak and divided opposition. Although Nigeria has about fifty registered political parties, most of them are dormant or inactive, except, perhaps shortly before, and after elections. In Ibrahim's view (2009b), most of these parties "exist for two reasons—to collect grants from INEC or as fall back party for the godfather that might be dethroned from their current party, mostly, from the PDP".

What can be gleaned from Nigeria's post-1999 election history (within the context of the country's long electoral history), is that "the integrity of the voting process has been degraded steadily". What this implies, is the subversion of the fundamental principle of the sovereignty of the people (voters), resulting in their alienation from the political process. Thus, rather than the people participating in elections as an expression of the *sovereign will*, they are reduced to *spectators*, or worse, victims of a complex political construct that favours hegemonic fractions of the elite, and disempowers the majority. Commenting on his experience recently, Kayode Fayemi an AC gubernatorial candidate in Ekiti state whose appeal against the award of electoral victory to his PDP opponent is still pending in an election tribunal referred to "five gods that had to be appeased" to win elections in Nigeria (quoted in, Adebani 2009). These 'gods' were: INEC, the security agencies, the judiciary, money, and political 'godfathers.' Curiously, no mention was made about the people or voters, as in the warped logic of such 'managed' Nigerian elections, the people are prised out of politics (Obi 2008b), and their votes do not really count.

Since 1999 Nigeria has been immersed in a non-transition to democracy (Ihonvbere 200). This is partly the result of the ambushing and subversion of the electoral core of the democratic project by the dominant fraction of the political class. In more fundamental terms, this suggests that the non-transition has amounted to the taking away of democracy from the people, through acts that deprive them of the freedom to choose, when they are denied the opportunity to vote, or when their votes are stolen. In this regard, an important part of the struggle to open up the political contest to popular participation involved winning back the democratic right to participate—and choose. In the next section, the stakes and actors involved in the travails of electoral politics in Nigeria are analyzed.

Elections without Democratic Transformation: Some Critical Issues

Nigeria as a nation-state has been through three transitions, that from pre-colonial to colonial from colonial to post-colonial, and from military to civilian rule (Obi 1999: 72-81). While the pre-colonial robbed "Nigerians" of their sovereignty and freedom, the post-colonial 'restored' them, only for them to 'partially lost' to the military, who then 'restored' them after handing

power to civilians after organising and supervising transition elections. It can be argued that the latter transitions did not really alter the character of the Nigerian state, or the power relations between the ruling elite and the masses of the people. What occurred at independence was akin to the indigenization of the colonial state by Nigerian elites, which the state largely retained its coercive and exploitative character. As argued elsewhere, these transitions were more in terms of form than of content, and focussed more on the formal and legal-rational (Obi 1999: 69). As Osaghae (1999:7) put it, democratic transitions relate to “the process of establishing, strengthening, or extending the principles, mechanisms, and institutions that define a democratic regime”.

Yet, the post-colonial transitions authored by the Nigerian military (1979, 1989, and 1999) could be hardly described as ‘democratic’ in terms of political practice, as it involved the transfer of power from military to civilian elites which would protect their vested interests. Power changed hands between the military and civilian fractions of the same dominant elite, but was not transferred from the elite to the people. This perhaps informed why transition-elections were manipulated to achieve desired (pre-determined) outcomes. Civilianization of ruling elites was often represented as democratization, even if a got number of the civilians were retired military officers as has been the case since 1999. As a former military president General Ibrahim Babangida once put it with regard to his military-authored transition, “we may not know those who will succeed us, but we know those who *will not*.”

In this regard, transition has not been synonymous with transformation. Power has remained largely centralized in the hands of a few elites, who guarded it very closely, effectively making it an object of intense struggles between competing fractions. In this context, elections—when they were allowed to hold became intense political competitions/battles which were waged to determine which fraction of the elite would control state power and public resources, and not about transferring power to the people or transforming the dominant power relations in society.

The earliest elections in the formal sense of the word took place under colonial rule. Ibrahim argues that the roots of post-colonial election rigging go back to the colonial era, citing the specific case of how the ‘British, in the 1950-1951 elections in Northern Nigeria “taught the emerging political class how to subvert the people’s mandate”. Although it has been observed that elections and democracy are inextricably mixed (Ibrahim 2007: 2), Nigeria’s electoral history has been largely marked by “electoral fraud and competitive rigging.” As Ibrahim further notes (2007: 3), “the principal forms of rigging and fraud were perfected in the elections of 1964, 1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, and 2003”. Drawing up a list of fifteen forms of electoral fraud, he notes that stolen elections resulted in the “subversion of the democratic process.” As it turned out, the 2007 elections were not fundamentally different from those of 2003 in this regard.

Rather than lead to political change, they were flawed and reinforced the subversion of the democratic process. Both local monitors and international observers were unanimous in the condemnation of the malpractices that attended both 2003 and 2007 elections (Obi 2008b; DEMG 2007; Human Rights Watch 2004; 2007a, b; EU EOM 2003, 2007; Herskovits 2007), which goes on to confirm that while elections have been manipulated to deny the people of the power to choose their leaders/representatives, democracy has nonetheless been used as a legitimizing ideology or ploy to mask the non-transfer of power to the people, resulting in the shallowness of, or lack of democratic transformation.

Military GO, Civilian COME: POWER without change

As noted on the preceding section, Nigeria's post-military transition has demonstrated the contradictions embedded in a democracy authored by military generals and their civilian political elite allies. This dictatorship that alternated power between both groups, has two faces—military and civilian, which both conspire against the will of the majority. Nigeria has a long history of military coups: January and July 1966, 1975, 1983, 1985 and 1993. Through these coups the top hierarchy of the military seized power and gained access to immense oil revenues. As a result the military institution became highly politicised and those officers that took public office rapidly transformed into part of the ruling elite, working together with civilian bureaucrats and business men to establish a politico-economic base for the dominant politicized military faction. When governments were changed in military-to-military 'transitions', this often involved the use of force or coups d'état.

Thus, a culture of violence—coups was further reinforced as a way of capturing state power, preserving it, and imposing the will of the rules on the ruled. Even when this was dressed in the robes of 'democracy', it did not detract from the authoritarian ethos that pervaded the politics of the Nigerian military. As such the democracy authored by the custodians of the coercive apparatus of the state, and nurtured on a command-and-obey structure is a paradox in itself and point to some of the problems that underpin political transitions in Nigeria.

It should be noted that the military rule—and its political succession, has been the outcome of a complex political network driven by three logics: the centralised control of power over national resources, the protection of the departing military rulers from prosecution by the new democratic government, and the control of state power by a small group led by the Commander in Chief. These logics were antithetical to the notions of sharing power and popular consent. By intervening in politics and determining the character of political succession, the hegemonic faction of the military elite has militarised Nigerian politics and society and drained politics of any substantive democratic content.

The political game is therefore seen as a "do or die" contest, in which the players deploy everything at their disposal to defeat their political opponent. Thus, those backed by the incumbent state, or are able to mobilize state resources, and state-sanctioned violence are more likely to win electoral contests displaying "zero-tolerance for opposition or competition" in what Omotola (2009: 197) has aptly called "garrison democracy". So, while the military leave office, the elections are managed to ensure that their civilian allies take over. This is to ensure that the dominant power relations are not altered in any fundamental manner.

The Nigerian Political Elite: militarized civilian alliance-building?

Although the Nigerian political elite is a product of Nigeria's tumultuous political history, more recently it has become an ally of a highly politicized fraction of retired brass-hats that has been incorporated into the dominant ruling elite fraction. Thus, the political elite is both made up of ex-military officers that have now been civilianized, and civilians that have imbibed some of the aspects of militarized politics, particularly the use of force in politics. The result has been a partial militarization of the elite's political practices, opportunism, the

resort to coercion or violence to pursue political projects, intolerance of opposition, and the wilful manipulation of political structures and processes to promote selfish and narrow ends. These tendencies can be gleaned from the ways in the former brass hats have become political and economic elites.

This militarization of elites has found expression in the premium on the use of violent, rather than violent methods in political transactions. This is illustrated by the situation where these elites have funded and mobilized armed thugs to unleash violence on opponents during party primaries, and voters during elections. In the run up to the 2007 elections, over a hundred people were killed in politically-motivated circumstances, including the assassination of two governorship aspirants (in Lagos and Ekiti states) on the platform of the ruling of the ruling PDP.

Also in the Nigeria's restive Niger Delta, some of the thugs used for the elections in 2003, later graduated into armed militia leaders that rode on grassroots anger and alienation as a result of the inequities of the state-oil company alliance in the impoverished oil-rich region, becoming the nemesis of their former sponsors and oil companies, through their attacks on oil installations and kidnapping of foreign oil workers. Thus, it can be argued that with regard to the Niger Delta, the elite lost control over some of the violent gangs that it helped bring to life in pursuit of its political ambitions, and has had to pay a high price in its attempts to bring re-co-opt or neutralize these groups. Thus, while the alliance between the military and civilian elites have given both groups the opportunity to pursue their common political and economic interests, they have also incurred some costs that have further complicated politics with wider ramifications for Nigerian society.

In a recent article, Suleiman (2009) rightly notes that the 1999 elections returned a former military general, and head of state to power as president. In the same regard, some of those that emerged as elected governors and legislators at the federal and state levels are people with military or security backgrounds. In particular, the current president of the Nigerian Senate is a retired army officer (who was a state governor, and later a minister while still serving in the army), while the Speaker of the House of Representatives had a stint with the British army. Several legislators and state governors are also retired military officers.

Even after he failed to alter the constitution to get an unprecedented third term, the former president and retired general Obasanjo influenced the party primaries using a combination of strong persuasion and the anti-corruption Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to 'convince' all candidates, except the one he favoured, to step down at the last minute, paving the way for Umaru Yar 'Adua, his anointed choice—and brother of his friend and late general, Shehu Yar 'Adua, to claim the presidential ticket of the party. The same EFCC had been unleashed by the President against his deputy, who was accused of disloyalty and corruption, and it was confirmed that he nursed presidential ambitions and had decided to pursue his presidential aspirations under the platform of another party, while remaining the Vice President, Atiku Abubakar. He was indicted by the EFCC and a specially-convened committee and barred from the elections by INEC, until the Supreme Court ruled five days before the election on April 21, that INEC had no such powers to exclude the Atiku Abubakar from the ballot (Obi 2007b: 78). The manipulation of political and electoral institutions in the effort to exclude Atiku from the 2007 elections was symptomatic of how the political elite played politics.

While some retired generals went into politics, others chose to go into business. They have also become exceedingly wealthy businessmen and an important source of support, or opposition to some of their former colleagues occupying elective political offices. Suleiman also goes further to note some instances of the retired military becoming traditional rulers, thus pointing to how former military officers have become part and parcel of the dominant elite in the country. It is interesting that in the run to the 2007 elections, some retired military-turned-business men whose were not candidates in the elections, took opposing positions with regard to those of their former politically active colleagues.

What the foregoing underscores is that while formerly handing over to civilian successors, the military top brass has by its integration into the dominant elite retained considerable access to power and resources. Their entry into politics has not been without its negative consequences. Although Nigerian elections have had a history of violence, the levels of violence, intimidation and impunity witnessed since 1999, have been unprecedented. Post-1999 elections have witnessed the elevation of thuggery into a political instrument for intimidating political opponents during elections, including sponsoring the physical snatching of ballot boxes from polling stations (DEMG 2007). The complete disregard for the rules of the game underscores both the desperation to cling on to power at any cost and the lack of a social and developmental vision by an elite completely obsessed with its survival in power.

It is apposite to note however that rather than being a coherent group, the elite is riven by divisions and rivalries. This incoherence of the elite leads it to engage in acrimonious internal conflict, marked by horse-trading, political opportunism, lack of principles and poor leadership. These explain why it is difficult to differentiate between levels of violence and manipulation of elections within a single party, particularly the PDP, as well as multiparty elections. It is not unusual for competing factions within the same party to resort to violence during party primaries to elect party candidates, as the recent cases of Anambra and Bayelsa show. The ambivalent nature of the political class: divided and fragile, yet powerful and determined to monopolize power and control of resources, further complicate its inability to effectively govern, and reach a consensus on a progressive equitable social basis and national vision for Nigeria's democratic project.

The party machine, the godfather, and the godson: unholy trinity

Nothing perhaps explains the perversion of the party, and the electoral democratic process in post-1999 Nigeria more than the increase in the phenomenon of the 'political godfather' and the instrumentalization of political parties for "mafia style gangsterism" by "political entrepreneurs" (Ibrahim 2009a). The trend towards "party machine politics" has means that rather than play the roles of aggregating the views and demands of the electorate, campaigning on the basis of providing viable alternatives, clear ideologies and visions of social transformation, the mainstream political parties tend to have one mission—becoming political machines for ensuring victory at the polls, using whatever means, at whatever costs. In essence, the essence of the politics of the dominant party is never to lose any election.

This usually involves more of the "appeasement" of the "five gods" identified by Fayemi, and mentioned earlier in this essay, and less of enabling the people, even the rank and file party members making informed choices. With mainstream parties transformed from democratic players to political machines run by a few powerful individuals and cliques (claiming to represent certain identities or groups), for ensuring electoral victory at any cost, mainly through the use of brawn, the electoral process was effectively reduced to a contest in

which the candidate or party that could mobilize the greater amount of state resources (support), money and violence won. For those that lose out, the price of defeat was complete exclusion from power or the demand to hand over their (defeated) political machine to the victorious party in exchange for promises of co-optation.

Although top government politicians or personalities linked to them at the federal and state level lie at the heart of ‘machine politics’, a critical player in this network of party power is the godfather. The political godfather essentially has the impact of robbing the electorate of the power to choose their leaders. This is inherent in the concept of godfatherism “which is constructed on the belief that certain individuals possess considerable means to unilaterally determine who gets a party’s ticket to run for an election and who wins in the electoral contest” (Gambo 2007). The elements of manipulation, the use of violence, money and grassroots connections also feature in the discussion of the phenomenon by Omotola (2007, 2009) and Albert (2005).

Most godfathers have a past that connects them as friends, contractors and protégés to powerful individuals in government—past and present, but they also with some considerable following in their localities and states based on philanthropic or populist gestures. The links with government assures them of resources, official ‘protection’ and getting away with sponsoring acts of violence, while their grassroots profile, lubricated through acts of patronage assures them of some following and a reserve of aggressive young men to act as enforcers and thugs during rallies and elections.

Ibrahim (2003) opines that godfathers “are defined as men who have the power personally to determine both who gets nominated to contest elections and who wins in a state”. Within the same logic, the godson is defined as the political protégé of the godfather whose adoption is predicated upon an agreement to return the favour in terms of resources, cash and doing the will of his ‘benefactor’ once installed in power. Ibrahim (2003) describes godsons as “people with unlimited greed and avarice...an expression that suggests mistrust - and indeed - disdain for democracy”. Supporting his position on godfatherism, Ibrahim quotes Chris Uba, a one-time political godfather in Nigeria’s (South east) Anambra state, who in a moment of post-election victory-induced hubris noted, “I am the greatest godfather in Nigeria because this is the first time an individual single-handedly put in position every politician in the state”.

Nothing perhaps underscores the perversion of the democratic process that the sad reality that a single individual can hijack the political party, and illegally and forcefully subject the will of the people to his whim and calculations of personal gain. The reality that godfathers operated between 1999 and 2007 in several states: Oyo, Edo, Rivers, Delta, Anambra, Kwara, and Borno, and in some cases, godsons—once ensconced in state house tried to turn their backs on their benefactors led to crisis and instability in the states concerned. This partly explains the crisis in some political parties, and why they have been unable to act as purveyors of democratic politics, while the people have been excluded from the political process. It also creates several problems, as the ‘unholy trinity’ for all intents and purposes, constitutes an important actor within the anti-democratic forces that have hijacked the political process, and portend some danger as Nigeria moves towards the next round of elections in 2011.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and Nigeria's Elections

An analysis of the role and politics of INEC in the trials and travails of electoral democracy is critical to an understanding of how the democratic project has been hijacked and subverted in Nigeria. This relates to the role, level of autonomy and neutrality of the electoral management institution in ensuring the orderly, fair and efficient conduct of elections that would facilitate the process whereby those freely chosen by voters become their representatives and leaders. Although INEC has the constitutional role of supervising and conducting elections at the federal and state levels there are certain structural characteristics that impinge upon its ability to act as a neutral arbiter and manager of the electoral process. These relate to the level of its autonomy (from the executive), its capacity to conduct elections, and its neutrality.

Two aspects of the 1999 constitutions contained 'booby traps' for the autonomy of INEC. According to Section 14 of the Nigerian 1999 constitution, the president has the power to appoint the Chairman of INEC and the Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) of the 36 states of the federation. In the same regard, INEC is funded through the Federal Ministry of Finance, whose minister is an appointee of the President. These two factors made INEC susceptible to the influence of the Executive arm of government, as the former depended on the latter for their appointments and funding. It also gave the president the space to use his discretion to appoint party sympathizers or loyalists as electoral officials. The Executive could also use its control of the resource flow to INEC as a considerable leverage over the electoral body. In spite of the enactment of the 2006 Electoral Act, the power relations between the Executive arm of the federal government and INEC have continued to favour the government.

Several studies and reports have shown that INEC has been largely inept in preparing for, and conducting elections particularly in 2003 and 2007. Indeed some have alleged that INEC was part of a plan for programming the 2007 elections for failure (Ibrahim 2007: 4; DEMG 2007; Ikubaje 2009). In the run-up to the 2007 elections, INEC could not properly manage the voter registration exercise. Just as the process of registration for the 2007 elections were under way; there were reports of the discovery of a number of INEC data capture equipment in the private residence of a known political godfather in Ibadan. Although the reports were not denied, the issue of how he came by the possession of INEC voter registration materials and what they were doing in the house did not lead to his prosecution. In some parts of the country, some people could not be registered in spite of the extension of the period for the exercise.

The evidence pointing to INEC's shoddy handling of the 2007 elections is well known and will not be repeated here. What it suggests however is that in 2003 and 2007, the electoral institution was not been able to conduct free and fair elections in Nigeria. This has had a deleterious impact on the quality, credibility and legitimacy of the post-1999 elections. On its part, the electoral body has rejected the blame for the electoral malpractices that characterised the 2007 elections. According to the INEC spokesperson Andy Ezeani, partly in defence of his boss and in response to a question about the solution to the problem of electoral malpractices, "so much depends on the attitude and decision of the Nigerian politicians and candidates in elections. As long as they see elections as a do-or-die affair, with loads of money to subvert the system on the one hand and weapons on another (sic) to destroy those who share different views, the chances are that election malpractices will continue" (Quoted by Ajakaye 2009). It is instructive that the INEC spokesperson did not deny that electoral malpractices were taking place, his focus was on absolving INEC—the electoral umpire of

blame, while placing full responsibility at the doorstep of the Nigerian politicians, much like a referee blaming unruly soccer players trading rough tackles, and ignoring the rules, for the umpire's loss of control of the game. But the relevant question is: why has the 'helpless' referee not quit in spite of the fact that 'unruly' players have continued to ignore his calls?

What the foregoing suggests is that INEC operates in a political context in which its leadership has been 'helpless', and its ability to conduct free and fair elections is severely constrained and hobbled by structural, political and personal factors. In spite of the change of leadership of INEC between 1999 and 2007, its capacity to conduct and supervise orderly and fair elections has not radically improved. INEC continues to be a de-facto appendage of the Executive. It is likely to remain largely so despite the recent attempt at electoral reform in 2009, it is unlikely that the Executive will willingly give up its leverage over the electoral body, a leverage that the political machine desperately needs to place electoral victory in the now and in the future beyond the reach of the voters.

The International Democracy Promotion and Post-1999 Elections in Nigeria

Nigeria's post-1999 elections have all taken place in a global context where international support for democracy had gained wide legitimacy and attracted a lot of resources. The relevant issue is the extent to which such international support has helped the Nigerian democratic project. An analysis of the character, extent and impact of international election observer missions to Nigeria during the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections provides a good context for evaluating the impact of international democracy support on the country.

According to Kew (1999: 31), who observed the 1999 elections, both the presidential and national assembly polls "in a third of the states were massively corrupt, primarily those in the South-South, South-east, and selected states in the North-east and North-central." His views on the elections were echoed by the report from the Carter Centre and NDI (1999) and other international monitors. However, in spite of the shortcomings noticed during the elections, the international community adopted the attitude of leaving with the flawed elections in so far as this precluded the military from having an excuse not to give up power. Thus, Kew (1999: 32) observes that "criticisms were directed towards what INEC could do to improve the process for the next round of elections in the next three years." If the international observers were in a dilemma, the western governments were quite clear where their interests lay—preference for an Obasanjo presidency (Kew 1999: 33) and democratic legitimacy for a civilian elite-led democracy from above.

The situation in 2003 was not much different; the local and international monitors reached the same conclusion. The EU Observer Mission in its final report noted that the 2003 elections "were marred by serious irregularities and fraud" (EU EOM 2003). As in 1999, in spite of the flawed nature of the elections, the international community decided to suggest corrections against future recurrence of irregularities, and accept the outcome of the elections.

As the 2007 elections approached, given the high stakes involved, as this represented the first-civilian-to-civilian transfer of power at the presidential level in Nigeria's political history, pro-democracy groups and the opposition raised an alarm early enough on the plans of the incumbent dominant party to subvert the electoral process (Obi 2008b: 77-78). In spite of these, the elections were stolen in a brazen manner. The EU Observer Mission in its report echoing the same views as those of Nigerian civil society-based election monitors, concluded that "the 2007 state and federal elections fell far short of basic international and regional

standards for democratic elections” (EU EOM 2007). In spite of this the “international community stopped short of calling for a re-run of the elections or to refuse to recognise the government brought to power through the flawed process. Instead, it opted to encourage those who lost the elections to resort to legal means in seeking redress, and made recommendations for electoral reforms to guide future Nigerian elections” (Obi 2008b: 80).

The international response to flawed Nigerian elections in 1999, 2003 and 2007, underscore the ambivalence of the world’s powers and buyers of Nigeria’s oil and gas towards democracy in the country. It would appear that the economic, geopolitical/strategic and security interests of the international community, have come before the rights of Nigerian citizens to freely elect their leaders and representatives. The dominant Nigerian elite has learnt that once it is able to stick a legitimizing fig-leaf of democracy on its control of power and guarantee the core interests of its transnational partners and the world’s powers, it can continue to ‘win’ elections, largely without the real votes of the people.

Conclusion and Prospects

From the foregoing, it can be summed up that since 1999, Nigerian politics has, in spite of elections, been saddled with “despots masquerading as democrats” (Roth 2008). These forces mainly domestic, but with the ambivalence, indifference and support from sections of the international community and transnational partners, have ambushed the electoral process and subverted its essence as a modality for the participation of the majority in choosing their leaders. In effect, Nigerian voters have been in most instances reduced to spectators, rather than choosers, voting, but not chosen, ruled, but not represented, in what has really been the government of a minority (dominant elite) over the majority—a ‘democracy-garbed dictatorship’.

In spite of the rather bleak picture that emerges from the post-1999 elections so far, the struggle for democracy in Nigeria is far from over. Since 1999, the incumbent party in power, the People’s Democratic Party has emerged as the sole force in what is beginning to look like a dominant party system, with victories declared in its favour during the 2007 elections at the presidential level (same as 1999, and 2003), 28 out of 36 states (2 subsequently reversed by the law courts), 85 out of 109 seats in the Senate, and 260 out of 360 seats in the House of Representatives. As the PDP party machine continues to increase the number of seats and states under its control, the other parties, are losing theirs. Although the dominant elite interests appear to have successfully stolen the vote from the people, the reality is that there has been resistance, and in a few notable cases, popular victory over the rigging party machine of the dominant forces.

For instance in 2007, Lagos, Bauchi and Kano, the people were able to defend their vote and prevent it from being stolen. In other cases such as Ondo and Edo states, stolen electoral verdicts have been reversed by court rulings in favour of those that rightly won the elections. In almost every case of such reversal of INEC electoral verdicts, the PDP had lost in the courts what it won in elections, but curiously in most cases where the courts had ordered the rerun of elections, the PDP ‘party machine’ had ensured victory, as the recent episode in Ekiti showed Sayo and Lawal 2009), using every weapon in its arsenal.

Pro-democracy groups have also been part of the struggles for democracy. Recovering from a hiatus that occurred after the country returned to civilian rule: partly the result of the euphoria of seeing the military off to the barracks, the co-optation of some activists into government,

and the shifts in the priorities of donors, these groups began to re-converge around issues of struggling for credible, free and fair elections, canvassing for electoral reforms, accountability of elected leaders to the electorate, and constitutional reforms intended to deepen democracy in the country. Before the 2003 elections, some civil society groups mobilized for an electoral reform act designed to ensure that INEC was autonomous of the Executive arm with regard to funding and the appointment of its officials. They also came together to form an alliance for the purpose of monitoring elections in 2003 and 2007, producing reports that captured the extent of rigging during federal and state elections. On the basis of such reports, they demanded the cancellation of the results from such flawed elections, and the prosecution or removal of erring INEC officials. These efforts met with very little, if any, success. The Nigerian state has continued with business as usual, and after issuing their reports, international observers have left for home, and their home governments rest assured that their economic and strategic interests will be protected by the ‘newly elected’ government learn to live with the electoral outcome, after making a few statements emphasizing the need to guide against future occurrences of such electoral infractions and offering support for such efforts.

As Nigeria moves toward elections in 2011, the prospects are all too clear. A dominant party, the PDP, acting at the behest of a hegemonic fraction of the Nigerian ruling elite remains intent, as its current chairman is quoted as have boasted, “to rule Nigeria for the next sixty years”. On the other hand the political opposition, weakened and fractionated, is equally intent of ensuring that it is not steamrolled by the PDP ‘machine’ in the coming elections. As noted earlier, the high level of violence in recent election reruns and party primaries in Ekiti, Oyo, Anambra and Bayelsa states signpost the prospects for 2011.

Already entrenched in power, with control of immense state resources and security agencies, while retaining the power to appoint INEC officials, the PDP is not likely to leave anything to chance in its quest to remain in power. While the opposition is engaged in a series of efforts towards building an alliance or ‘mega party’ to ‘fight’ the elections, it remains fractionated and tied to a few individual leaders, without a clear ideology, vision or national-democratic project beyond taking power from the PDP. It would appear that the people, the urban poor and the rural peasants who clearly constitute the majority of voters have been largely left out of the political process by the dominant elite.

In the unfolding scenario, 2011 can at best only be a new beginning of a future victory for the majority of Nigerians—to give them back the power to choose, and that is if an alternative political force with a new radical leadership with its roots in the people somehow emerges. Only the emergence of such a social force/movement can enable the people to wrest their democracy, from the stranglehold of the dominant elite minority that has hijacked it. It is a social project that transcends the holding of free and fair elections, and connects the very core of the substance of politics—people power. In 2011, Nigerian people will either lay the foundation for a new beginning, or the dominant party machine will continue to grind on, painfully, blatantly trampling their hopes, votes, and aspirations for liberation and development.

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