
Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: the Role of the International Community in the 2015 General Elections

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Abstract

Since the end of military rule in 1999, the 2015 general elections marked the fifth quadrennial election in Nigeria. As the most populous country in Africa continent, her elections conducted was the most expensive ever to be held on the continent. The election which opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential election and the incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan conceded defeat. The first time an incumbent President loses a re-election in Nigeria. Interestingly, in the aftermath of the elections which was acclaimed as credible by Election Observer Missions (EOMs) from the African Union (AU), Commonwealth of Nations (CONs), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the European Union (EU) led by Amos Sawyer, Bakili Muluzi, John Kufuor, and Santiago Fisas. The AU EOM concluded, the elections were conducted in a "peaceful atmosphere" and met the "continental and regional principles of democratic elections". ECOWAS EOM said it met the "criteria of being free and transparent" despite "pockets of incidents and logistical challenges." For the Commonwealth EOM, the conduct was "generally peaceful and transparent." Also, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon congratulated the citizens and the government for conducting a peaceful and orderly election. Hence, with the credible elections in Nigeria as testified and acclaimed by EOMs, the questions are how does a credible election in Nigeria translate to democratic consolidation? What are the roles of the international community in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria? In answering these questions this paper interrogates the roles of the international community in Nigeria's 2015 general elections and using secondary data argued among other that the credible 2015 general elections in Nigeria helps in strengthening democratic values which are keys to good governance which are directly proportional to peace and stability which translate to democratic consolidation in the Country. However, to sustain this peace and stability, the lessons learned from the credible elections must be replicated in future elections in Nigeria. This paper concludes that the international community must increasingly show interest in national elections particularly in Africa in order to strengthen public accountability, transparency and good governance.

Keywords: Credible elections, Democracy Consolidation, Good governance, International Community, Nigeria, Peace and Stability

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Background to the Study

Election has been described as a viable mechanism for consummating representative government (Agbaje and Adejumobi 2006). In this sense, elections facilitates leadership succession, promote political accountability, citizen participation, and gives voice and power to the people. Elections in themselves do not consolidate democracy, yet they are critical for instituting democratic government and necessary for giving legitimacy to government and sustenance of democracy (Bratton 1998).

The history of elections in Nigeria has been replete with the tales of fraud, maladministration, violence and sharp practices. This trends did not change much even with the return to democracy in 1999. Thus, elections are high-stakes affairs as manifested in the tensions, cynicisms and fears that characterized the atmosphere before and during the 2015 general elections. The reason is partly because elections in Nigeria have never been about issues or the need to address the many challenges faced by the country and its struggling population. Issues like corruption, recurrent non-availability of petroleum products and questionable subsidy regime, privatization of key sectors like power, telecommunication, etc rarely featured in campaign speeches or party manifestos. Most politicians often make passing comments about improving electricity output and sometimes admit the threat posed by corruption. Many Nigerians have come to regard such comments as a usual jingle politicians employ to deceive the people in order to gain access to power.

The failure by successive civil government to address the pressing socio-economic needs of the citizens in spite of the many appealing campaign promises made by politicians to the electorates is an indication that politics in Nigeria is not about the people. Elections have always been about the struggle for access and control of the state and its resources for primitive accumulation and prebendalism among elite groups. Since the state is the most important source of patronage, the struggle for the control of the state is fierce and considered a matter of life and death. In this context, violence, corruption, fraud and sharp practices are prominent features of elections. In the case of the 2015 general elections, these stakes were further heightened by hate campaigns, elections postponement and general insecurity posed by the activities of *Boko Haram* (a terrorist group). This situation suggested that *the country was heading toward a very volatile and vicious electoral contest, that is, at best a violent electoral process, at worst breakdown of law and order, and even war* (*Vanguard*; May 28, 2015).

In spite of the tremendous tension, fears and anxieties that preceded the 2015 general elections, the exercise ended on a relatively peaceful note. The maturity exhibited by former President Goodluck Jonathan in conceding defeat to President Muhammadu Buhari before the official announcement of the results (Nation; May 29, 2015) was significant in calming frill nerves. Of particular note is the roles played by the international community before, during and after the elections which contributed greatly in the reduction of post-election violence with all its attendant consequences. It is against this background that this paper examines the role of international community in the success of the 2015 general elections.

Brief History of Elections in Nigeria

Nigeria, which gained its independence from Britain in 1960, is a federal republic composed of 36 states; its political structure is similar to that of the United States. The country has a bicameral legislature with a 109-member Senate and a 360-member House of Representatives. Its president, legislators, and governors are elected on four year terms. The country was ruled by the military for almost three decades after independence before making the transition to civilian rule in 1999. Elections since the transition have been deemed flawed by both Nigerians and the international community, with each poll progressively worse than the last, according to many domestic and international observers.

A survey of the history of elections in Nigeria shows that it has been characterized by massive frauds, intimidation and even assassination of political opponents (Okoye, 2011:3). In many ways, elections in Nigeria have been classified as similar to war. As explained by Jega (2012), the massive mobilization by the election commission is akin to preparations for a major war. Using the 2011 elections, he explained that it required the assemblage of close to a million poll workers, party workers, security personnel and election observers. The election entailed the acquisition of over 120,000 ballot boxes, printing of about 400 million ballot papers and managing a voter's roll of over 73 million entries. He also said that in the registration of voters that preceded the 2015 elections, the machines used in the exercise would have formed a chain of over eighty kilometers if placed end to end and the over 400,000 staff used in the exercise outnumbered the collective strength of the entire armed forces of the West African sub-region.

Unlike the 1999 general elections, the April 2003 elections were marred by serious irregularities, fraud and maladministration as reported by both domestic and international observers. Incidence of electoral malfeasance or rigging, ballot box stuffing, falsification of election result forms, and threats of violence were widely reported.

The 2007 elections was significant to the extent that it was third successive general elections ever and the first elections that led to a successive transition of power from one civilian regime to another. In spite of the historic nature of the 2007 general elections, it was held amidst widespread allegations of electoral mismanagement and fraud. Earlier in 2006, the Nigerian Senate had rejected a bid by President Obasanjo and his supporters in the National Assembly to amend the constitution in order to allow him to run for a third-term. The president after failing to secure the third term ticket declared that the elections was "a do-or-die affairs" implying that his party the People's Democratic Party (PDP) must win the election by whatever means and cost.

As expected, the outcomes of the elections witnessed highest rate of post-election litigations. Consequently, the results of almost a third of the gubernatorial elections were annulled and re-run were ordered. Although, these re-run did not at the end change the results of the elections in favour of the challengers, but the high number of post-elections legal tussles shows that the elections were not free and fair. Domestic and international observer groups were highly critical of the 2007 elections, and many of them questioned

the credibility of the election results. Violations and irregularities reported by election observers included polling locations opening late, closing early, or not opening at all; errors on the ballots; underage voting; vote buying; ballot box stuffing and theft; and falsified results sheets. Media reports also documented widespread incidents of thuggery and coercion at polling places.

According to the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) delegation, led by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and several former world leaders, "in many places, and in a number of ways, the electoral process failed the Nigerian people. The cumulative effect ... substantially compromised the integrity of the electoral process." The European Union delegation declared that the elections "have not lived up to the hopes and expectations of the Nigerian people and the process cannot be considered to have been credible." The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) delegation was similarly critical suggesting that "irregularities and the sporadic violence characterized and challenged the validity of the elections." The U.S.-based International Republican Institute (IRI) described the elections "below acceptable standards," noting that the resolution of election disputes would be "critical" to restoring the credibility of the country's democratic process.

President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua who "won" the 2007 presidential elections conceded in his inaugural speech that elections which brought him to power were flawed and subsequently appointed a panel of government officials, former judges, and civil society representatives to recommend changes to the country's electoral institutions. The Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) issued its findings in December 2008, but the government was slow in implementing the recommendations. In mid-2010, the National Assembly passed the first of several amendments to the country's electoral laws which incorporate some of the ERC's recommendations.

Among the most significant of the reforms were those to increase the National Electoral Commission's (INEC) independence and fiscal autonomy. INEC's credibility had been badly damaged by the 2003 and 2007 elections, and President Goodluck Jonathan (who became president following the demise of President Yar'Adua) appointed the Uwais Committee to review the electoral process and make recommendations. The Jonathan government partially implemented the Uwais committee report and appointed Professor Attahiru Jega (a respected academic and civil society activist) as the INEC Chairman preparatory to the 2011 general elections. These moves were widely applauded by Nigerian and the international community.

With over 73 million registered voters, almost 120,000 polling stations, and more than 50 parties competed in the 2011 polls, the challenges of administering the 2011 elections in Nigeria were daunting. The elections suffered initial setbacks in logistics such as delays in the delivery of materials to polling stations across the country. These delays raised doubts on the capacity of the new INEC chairman to deliver a credible polls. The 2011 elections also witnessed isolated cases of irregularities and breaches of the electoral Acts, however, it was considered as a great improvement on previous elections and a major departure from mal-administration and impunity of the past.

The 2015 General Elections in Nigeria marked a milestone in the history of elections in the country as they were different both in conduct and the outcome but in preparing for 2015 elections NHRC's Report and Advisory (2015: 5) noted that:

In Nigeria, however, the records suggest that voting has always been dangerous and the laws that govern its conduct have not always been respected or obeyed by those who should. There is a well-established habit of tolerating election violence in Nigeria and granting impunity to those who orchestrate, perpetrate or benefit from it because it can guarantee a pre-determined outcome. The result is that the exercise of voting on a national scale has increasingly become a periodic test for coexistence in and the stability of Nigeria, around which fears of violence are rife and death and displacement are commonplace. This frightens citizens, residents, neighbours and friends of Nigeria everywhere. It also perpetuates an unfortunate caricature of a country incapable of governing itself. A country endowed with Nigeria's wealth of human and natural resources as well as talent must find the will to call time on this.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is system theory as popularized by David Easton. Easton (1973) argue that political system is system of interactions in any society through which binding or authoritative decisions are made and implemented, to him political system exist within an environment of other system which affect it and are affected by the political system through continuous transactions and exchanges.

The fundamental theoretical assumption of system theory is that political system functions by getting inputs from its environment. This inputs are evens in the environment (such the postponement of the general elections in Nigeria) which evoke response from it (such as the reactions of Nigerians and the international community to the postponement of the general elections). System theory also holds that inputs could also be demands that values be allocated in a particular way or could be in the form of supports that expresses the approval of some particular decisions. So the inputs from the environment undergoes a conversion process within the political system and come out as outputs, which are usually authoritative decisions such as government policies, judicial decisions, acts of parliament. These authoritative outputs usually affect the environment as outcomes and in turn excite some form of feedback which is changes in the intensity and volume of demands and support from the environment.

For analytical purposes the political system is considered to be the nation-state, and the environment is composed of the interactions of economic, social, and political variables and events, both domestic and external. The idea is that there are a number of actors in the national political system (political parties, bureaucracies, the military, etc.) and that the actions of all these actors affect each other as well as the system (including the international community which Nigeria also belong). The political analyst must determine the importance of these actors in a particular political system. This is done by analyzing the functions performed by the various actors. Any changes in the system also affect all the actors. The feedback mechanisms allow for constantly changing inputs, as actors react to outputs.

The Role of International Community before the Elections

The political atmosphere preceding the dates of the elections was characterized by tensions and incidence of violence in a number of States particularly in the northeast parts of the country. Although the elections were initially scheduled for 14th and 28th February 2015 but was later postponed to 28th March and 11th April 2015, respectively. The postponement was made on the grounds of inadequate security personnel to guarantee the protection of over 700,000 election officers, electoral materials, polling units, as well as voters.

Even though, the postponement of the elections was receive with mixed reactions by Nigerians and members of the international community, “it turned out to be a blessing in disguise” (to borrow the words of the INEC Chairman, Professor Attahiru Jega) because it gave the INEC more time to prepare for the polls, especially with respect to printing and distribution of the Permanent Voters Card (PVC), which was at 66.8% on the day the polls were officially postponed.

The international community reacted to the abrupt postponement of the February general election in Nigeria and the content of the reactions indicate general displeasure with the shift, although a few see it as a better option than organizing a poorly-prepared polls. For Instance, the United States Government expressed great disappointment over the shifting of the election dates, but reaffirmed its support for a free, transparent and credible electoral process in Nigeria and call on all candidates, their supporters, and Nigerian citizens to maintain calm and reject election-related violence just as Mr. John Kerry (the United States Secretary of State) stated when he visited Nigeria earlier before the postponement. The United Kingdom (UK), on its part said that the security situation should not be an excuse to deny Nigerians the chance to exercise their democratic rights. The UK's Foreign Secretary, Phillip Hammond stressed that the decision to postpone the elections was a cause for concern and that the Nigerian people have the right to credible, peaceful and transparent elections. There should be no further delay in delivering democracy and he urge all to remain calm during this period of frustration. Similarly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), appealed to all the political actors to respect the decision of INEC and accept it in good faith. The ECOWAS Commission also urged all the political actors to refrain from utterances or speeches that are capable of inciting violence, rather Nigerians should braced up to the challenge and proved to the world that they are capable of taking wise decisions as regards who leads them.

Despite the widespread disappointment expressed by the international community over the postponement of the general elections in February 2015, the near unanimous calls by the different sections of the international community on Nigerians to be patient and cautious was significant in calming the tensed political atmosphere prior to the 2015 general elections in March 28th and April 11th respectively.

The Roles of International Community during the Elections

At the invitation of the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E. Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, deployed an African Union Long-Term and Short-Term Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) to the Federal Republic of Nigeria to observe the presidential, national assembly and gubernatorial and state assembly elections that was held in 28 March and 11 April, respectively. The AUEOM derived its mandate to observe the 2015 general elections in Nigeria from relevant provisions of African Union, including the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2012), the AU/OAU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa (2002); the African Union Guidelines for Election Observation and Monitoring Missions (2002); other relevant international instruments governing election observation like the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Process. The AUEOM's mandate is further strengthened by other relevant regional and international benchmarks for election observation, such as the 2001 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance; the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and its accompanying Code of Conduct which the AU endorsed in 2005; and the national legal framework governing the conduct of elections in Nigeria and the Constitution and National Laws of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The AUEOM Mission was led by H.E. Dr. Amos Sawyer, former Interim President of the Republic of Liberia and supported by H.E, Professor Ibrahima Fall, former United Nations (UN) under Secretary-General for Political Affairs and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Senegal, and H.E. Dr. Aisha Laraba Abdullahi, African Union (AU), Commissioner for Political Affairs. The Mission comprises seventy observers drawn from the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), African Ambassadors to the African Union in Addis Ababa, Election Management Bodies, Human Right Institutions and Civil Society Organizations from various African countries. The Mission was assisted by a group of experts from the African Union Commission (AUC), Pan African Parliament and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA).

The role of the AUEOM also consisted of pre-election sensitization and orientation. For example, a three-day orientation and briefing programme for AU observation mission was held from 23-25 March 2015 by the AU Mission Coordinators, the AU Long-Term Observer (LTO) Coordinator, election experts from the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA). Other institutions and stakeholders in Nigeria also provided briefing to AU observers, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Human Rights Commission, and CSOs.

After the briefing, A total of 84 AU observers, comprising 14 long-term observers (LTOs) and 70 short-term observers (STOs) were deployed to cover 5 out of the 6 geopolitical regions, and 20 out of 36 States in Nigeria with the objective of providing a critical and impartial assessment of the preparations and conduct of the 2015 elections and the extent to which the process comply with regional, continental and international standards for democratic elections.

To achieve this, AUEOM observers closely followed the electoral process and held consultations with several stakeholders in Nigeria. The leadership of the Mission also held consultations with key stakeholders in the country. The international and citizen observers chose to be present during the polling process, which included accreditation, voting and counting which was generally transparent and took place in the presence political party agents as well security agencies. The AUEOM assessment of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria was that it substantially conform to the regional, continental and international standards governing democratic elections, as well as the national legal framework for elections in Nigeria. The report contributed in giving credibility to the 2015 general elections and affirmed the legitimacy of the new government. These reports by local and international observer groups which gave credibility to the elections may have influenced defeated incumbent to accept defeat that eventually led to peaceful transition in the aftermath of the elections at the federal and state levels.

The Role of International Community after the Elections

The 2015 general elections were as expected a critical test of the government's commitment to democracy. The previous elections were deeply flawed and some contended that Nigeria was yet to hold a free and fair general election since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The general assessment of the 2015 general elections by the International community was that the Nigerian elections as a step forward from previously flawed elections of the past. The success of the elections holds the promise of setting a new standard for elections not only in Nigeria but also Africa as a whole. The tremendous goodwill and support the new government has enjoyed so far from the international community is a testament of its commitment to at ensuring democratic stability and capitalist prosperity. These supports have been evident in the fight against Boko Haram terrorists in the northeastern parts of the country, the fight against corruption and the recovery of stolen wealth starch in Western banks, the promotion of peace and development in the Niger Delta among others.

Conclusion

The unprecedented tensions and anxieties occasioned by the irredentist postures of political actors prior and during the 2015 general elections could have turned into chaos if not for the timely interventions and follow-up actions by the international community. The keen and sustained interest shown by the international community on the Nigeria elections was a constant reminder to political gladiators in the Nigerian politics that the world was watching their activities and they could be hold accountable for their actions or inactions. Perhaps this consciousness is informed by the indictment or arrest of African presidents such as Charles Taylor of Liberia, Omar Al-Bahir of Sudan, and Laurent Gbagbo of Cote' d'Ivoire by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their local actions in the recent past. There is no gain saying the role of the international community significantly influenced the conduct of Nigeria politicians and this contributed immensely to the peaceful end of the elections and the smooth transition that followed.

Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that the international community must increasingly show interest in national elections particularly in Africa in order to strengthen public accountability, transparency and good governance which are the basic features of democratic consolidation.

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