

## Electoral Process and Peaceful Transition in Nigeria:

### The Role of the Theatre

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**Abstract:** Africa to which Nigeria belongs in all ramifications has recorded the gains and losses in all aspects of life. Having shared a common history of colonization and its attendant challenges, Nigeria is placed similar amongst other African and most nations of the world that shared similar history that are still struggling to holistically improve in its level of efficiency. But a closer juxtaposition of Nigeria and most countries that have enjoyed about five decades of independence clearly brings to the fore obvious malaise characterizing this multi-culturally rich black giant of Africa. This raises the question of what does Nigeria either do or ignore that other countries have since perfected thereby overtaking her in terms of global rating of development. The obvious answer lies in leadership style. The political leadership of Nigeria, though striving to attain improved efficiency, for so long has been adversely faced by the obvious challenge of transparent and peaceful transition from one tenure or regime to the other. This paper will analyze the existence of electoral process and regulatory electoral body in Nigeria with the view of, not just empowering the electoral body but the electorate in terms of knowledge via theatrical endeavours, with the sole aim of achieving a violent-free political transition; through the process of politics of entertainment that will ensure freedom and growth in Nigeria.

**Key words:** electoral process, theatre, Nigeria, peaceful transition

### 1. Introduction

Every human society is a product of organized leadership. Leadership in this context would be hereditary (in some cases of monarchical dynasty), selection based on certain criteria and or election in which candidates having not the required criteria contest for leadership positions.

This process of choice of leadership is as old as humanity. But for the purpose of this paper, election and the processes therein, as a system of choosing leadership would take the core attention.

Against the foregoing, it would be worthwhile to briefly understand the meaning of election; while checking if election occurs randomly or through a methodological process relative to each settlement; as regulated by a supposedly neutral umpire; voting; choice of leaders and peaceful transition if every other thing is properly done.

The essence of this work would be clearer if the key words are explained.

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## 2. What is Electoral Process?

Brooks et al. (2004, p. 313), defined election as the “process or act of choosing people for office, especially political office by taking a vote”. One would not be far from the truth then to aver, that electoral process is the methodologically arranged stages heralding the choice of the leader via election in which people directly or through a body of representative’s vote. This must have been the reason. Idowu (2010, p. 54) summed electoral process as “all the pre and post election activities without which an election is either impossible or meaningless”.

The aforementioned electoral process will be analyzed in details from the Nigerian context subsequently in the course of this piece.

### 2.1 Peaceful Transition

According to the Chambers Concise Dictionary, the term peaceful is a situation “free from war, violence, disturbance, disorder, etc” and transition as “a change or passage from one condition, state, subject, place, etc to another”.

Suffice it to say then that any interval there is formal or informally documented change from one state or condition of life to another in a manner totally devoid of all forms of war, disturbance or violence, a peaceful transition has occurred.

**Theatre:** This English word that originates from the Greek term *Theatron*, translates into “a place of seeing” with several definitions, is aptly elucidated by Eze (2011, p. 20), “Theatre takes place when one or more people consciously project himself or themselves in a creative activity by means of bodily and/ or vocal signs before an audience within a given space or time.”

This could be interpreted to mean that any mimetic and non-mimetic performance(s) before an audience in a clearly defined space and time via a medium intelligible to the audience for the purpose of entertainment and education is theatre or theatrical.

Having briefly attempted the definition of key terms in this work, more attention would be given to the crux of the paper, which is **The Nigerian Electoral Process**.

In analyzing the Nigerian electoral process, a big lacuna would be left unfilled if a brief history of the “neutral” umpire of elections in the country is not chronically traced.

The first election management body recorded in Nigeria was established in 1959 christened **Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) by the British Colonialists**. This body was tasked to conduct the 1959 elections in anticipation of the 1960 Independence.

Sequel to the 1960 Independence, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) replaced the former in preparation for the 1964 and 1965 elections. This new body under the leadership of Eyo Esua lasted till 1966 when the military dictators toppled democratic rule and abolished several existent democratic institutions in Nigeria — a fact that militated against the development of Nigeria till date.

The year 1978 saw the establishment of a new **Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO)** under the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo in preparation for a democratic dispensation come 1979. This body was chaired by Michael Ani. Then came another election of 1983, the same body now headed by Justice Victor Ovie-Whiskey as appointed by the then civilian President Alhaji Shehuae Shagari conducted the scandalously controversial election that ushered in a new government. But this government was toppled by a coup d’état in December 1983. A new **National Electoral Commission (NEC)** was established by General Ibrahim Badamasi

Babangida's military regime in 1987. This new body conducted the 1987, 1990, 1991 and 1993 elections. This body was chaired thus: Professor Eme Awa (1987–1989), Humphrey Nwosu who conducted the annulled June 12 1993 election (1989–1993) and Professor Okon Uya (1993–1994). Professor Okon Uya was appointed to conduct a new presidential election between the NRC and SDP — a feat he was unable to achieve before leaving office due to the crisis that rocked the electoral injustice of that era.

The year 1995 saw the establishment of National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), led by Sumner Dagogo-Jack which conducted some elections between 1994–1998 before the regime of General Sani Abacha was replaced by that of Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar who dissolved NECON and established the Independent **National Electoral Commission** (INEC) in August 1998 chaired by Hon. Justice Ephraim Akpata (1998–1999). The Doctor Abel Guobadia-led INEC, conducted the 2003 general elections. His tenure lasted till 2005 when Professor Maurice Iwu who conducted what observers judged the most controversial 2007 general election succeeded him. His tenure ended in 2010 when Professor Attahiru Jega assumed office as the new INEC chairman till present (2010–date).

Now, a closer look at this brief analysis would no doubt reveal a common similarity amongst almost all the electoral bodies tasked with the conduct of elections in Nigeria — corruption charges!

Almost all the electoral bodies presumed to be neutral in umpiring these delicate elections, through their actions and inactions aggravated by a heterogeneously ethnic-suspicious citizenry in Nigeria, led to the abysmal performance in the past general elections. For the purpose of clarity, a major factor that has caused Nigeria peaceful transitions after election in the past will be analyzed.

Preceding each election in Nigeria are usually a series of stages termed **Electoral Process**, Idowu (2010, p. 54) defined as “all the pre and post election activities without which an election is either impossible or meaningless.” For the purpose of this essay, it could best be divided into pre-election, election and post election stages.

## 2.2 Pre-election Stage

In the Nigerian context, this stage involves the registration of political parties that would contest delimitation of areas into constituencies to avoid gerrymandering, registration of voters, issuance of temporary voter's registration card after capturing the biometrics of all eligible voters, voter education, supervision of party primaries and conventions, screening of party flag bearers and the release of election timetable. Listing these stages is not alien to Nigerians neither is the role of the INEC since they organize this stage strictly for transitory purposes.

But worthy of note is the question of how efficient has this stage, especially the voter education perspective, been in the past since it is major deciding factor of the others?

## 2.3 Electoral Stage

Normally in this stage, voting is the most essential thing. But for voting to occur, two important factors are critically provided, the sensitive and non-sensitive materials.

They are classified as sensitive, those materials that are of immense value to the election which if not properly handled in secrecy before being legally issued to eligible voters in strict adherence to election timetable as set by INEC can lead to investigation. These materials by their nature are mostly stored in the Central Bank of Nigeria. These include ballot papers and forms EC8 depending on the election at hand.

Non-sensitive materials though not necessarily trivialized or left in the hands of the electorates are the ones

that augment the role of the sensitive ones. They are stored in most cases at the INEC offices. These include ballot boxes, cubicle (for voting), consumables, e.g., biro, stamps and pads, INEC posters, etc.

Once the availability of these materials are confirmed, the voters register is opened as accreditation ensues while all eligible accredited voters queue up for voting which could last for several hours depending on the population. This is presided over by Area Officer (AOs) as the case may be.

At the end of the voting, all votes cast are counted and the results collated and documented in the specified forms as the case may be. This starts at the unit level through the wards collation to the local government level where the electoral officers in-charge are returning officers reporting to the Resident Electoral Commission (REC) or whoever empowered by law to eventually report to the headquarters depending on the vote cast. This stage is usually climaxed by the announcement of election results verifiable by party agents who sign the results and forms at all stages thereby authenticating such documents.

## **2.4 Post Electoral Stage**

This stage involves the issuance of certificates of return, to the winners, swearing in and litigation at the election petition tribunals for all the posts contested for people dissatisfied by the outcome of the elections.

Having briefly examined the electoral process in Nigeria as broadly categorized into pre-election, election and post election stages respectively, one thing in common which remains the participation of the citizenry (electorates and the elected), how does the election managing body (INEC) involve the electorates in this whole process?

It has become a monotonously dry routine in Nigeria that INEC, at the pre-electoral stage attempts educating the electorates on what they should know before, during and after elections. This explains the reason for series of advertisements on the electronic and print media educating the targeted age range mostly in the official language of Nigeria, which is English. In few cases Pidgin English or Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and most recently Izon languages are employed in a bid to cut across the diverse cultural settings in Nigeria. A good step in the right direction. But is this means sufficient? For recurring violence to characterize the entire electoral process of Nigeria's fourteen year old democracy in the past transitions, that leaves much to be desired of a country that claims to have attempted educating her voters at the pre-electoral stage. This is a bitter fact the incumbent INEC chairman-Professor Jega (2012, p. 50), expressed when he publicly admits, "there is the challenge of voter education and public enlightenment. Personally, after some reflection and public enlightenment preceding the election".

If this assertion should be contended for any reason, a critical analysis of the violent characterizing our elections should be done. Upon the conclusion of such analysis, one would not be astonished to discover that ignorance remains the source of regrettable ritual of shame.

For a country heavily populated by poor illiterates, brainwashing would be an easy venture. The selfish politicians that instigate and sponsor these cycles of violence have discovered the obvious inadequacy of information on the part of the people of the grassroots especially the youths.

These morally depraved politicians in pursuit of underserved victory at the polls start by brainwashing the youth wing of their political parties into seeing the opposition parties as outright enemies. This allegation they often substantiate by creating smokescreen conflicts in which the opposition party and their candidates are blamed for everything that has ever gone wrong in the past four years of nearly zero achievement. This ritual in some cases are substantiated with outright arson and in some extreme cases, murder without the youthful executioners

knowing why they perpetrate the dastardly acts commissioned by their beloved party godfathers under the guise that youths are adventurous. The evidence to this assertion lies lucidly in the senseless and seemingly uncurtailed murders, burglary and arson cases that echoed through the six geo-political zones of the country upon the announcement of winners of the various elections in the 2011 general elections.

Assuming adequate direct education were communicated to these gallant grassroots-dwelling youths through a very local means familiar to them, would this have been the case? The answer is obvious. The impact of this singular fact of indirect education through a locally unfamiliar means explains why Jega (2012, p. 50), further opines about the voter education:

“Regrettably, a large proportion of it was done either in radio or on TV and whereas you may reach many people on the radio, how many people can you reach on TV. Besides, the medium that was used was primarily, language, English Language or a few of the indigenous languages”.

This view expressed above simply summarizes what could best be the source of the seemingly intractable ritual of political violence characterizing the intra and inter-party electoral contests in pursuit of genuine leaders capable of dedicated governance.

Having established the problem and its causative agent of inadequate education of the citizenry during the preparative stage of electoral process, possible solution are not really far from us. Having attempted several electronic and print media-driven form of voter education, with obvious limited success, it is high time a direct form of education through participatory entertainment be tried at the grassroots where unsuspecting youths come handy for easy recruitment into thuggery.

### 3. The Roles of Theatre

Considering the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria as evident in her arts, which the theatrical aspect constitutes a major sphere, one would not be too wrong to suggest the use of theatrical performances.

The direct system of voter education which theatre performances support, though meant for the entire grassroots consumptive participation, targets the youths who are not just the executors but as well direct victims of this violence. As Gidado (2010, p. 24) clearly observes “The nature, extent of youth involvement in electoral violence, and magnitude of violence associated with elections and rigging in Nigeria are posing threats to the national quest for a stable democratic transition, as well as to the attainment of consolidated democracy. A view Bamgbose (2012, p. 215) supports in his analysis of the violence that rocked the 2011 elections as he aptly observes, “Those who lost their lives were the youth that took to the streets in the town over the alleged manipulation of the presidential election.”

If the youths are not the highest victims of their obvious manifestation of ignorance, what explains the swift and bold *modus operandi* of the arson, burglary, assassination, etc incited by selfish politicians under the guise of protest against stolen mandate? Besides, how else does one explain their gruesome deaths in large numbers at the end of the electoral season?

But assuming INEC through other concerned agencies partner with these youths directly at the grassroots via direct form of participatory education as provided by the theatre experience, not just will they see the evil of their acts. But they suggest what could best be termed unified panacea to the violence characterizing the Nigerian electoral process thereby repeating the cycle of chaotic manifestation during what ought to be peaceful transition.

The use of theatre as a veritable tool for reorientation can never be overemphasized. This is evident in several

countries like Kenya where courtesy of the concept of 'edutainment' several unhealthy cultural practices are being tackled with huge positive results; Peru where it was locally used to bridge the gap language barrier caused under the guise of illiteracy, etc. The vital question is can this concept be replicated in attempt to purge the nascent Nigerian democracy of her ritual or violence? Yes!

This assertion is further consolidated by Jega (2012, p. 50), thus: "other media arts such as drama, visual arts, films and combination of these wait to be exploited for the next general election though their expense should be borne in mind."

Having established success anticipated in the use of the above-mentioned novel styles, the vital questions that follows should be costing it. No doubt, these are processes assumed fund tasking as Jega opined. But is this really the fact or a baseless assumption?

In Nigeria, there are 120,000 polling units distributed amongst the wards of the legally recognized 774 local government areas in the thirty-six states and FCT Abuja. In each of these states, there are amongst other things existent redundant theatre troupes just as is the case within INEC, councils of arts and culture or cultural troupes excluding the numerous federal parastals charged with the cultural orientation and entertainment such as Nigerian Institute of Cultural Orientation (NICO) and National troupes based in Abuja and Lagos. To achieve the desired result, while spending the least, INEC should engage these mentioned bodies for grassroots-oriented participatory theatre experience.

This type of Theatre for Development (TFD) would rely mostly on what Augusto-Boal termed Theatre of the Oppressed. This basically entails the spectators participating actively in the entire process of the theatre by telling their own story their way via theatrical formulas locally suitable to them. This way nothing is alien to them. All the wards in each local government area would be toured by the theatre troupes resident in each state on conducive days chosen by the host communities for the staging of what they need in their own way. For this type of theatre, Boal (2011, p. 132) avers:

The actors may improvise with the aid of a script prepared beforehand, as they may also compose the scene directly. In any case, the performance gains its theatricality if the person who proposed the theme is present in the audience. Having begun the scene, the actors develop it to the point at which the main problem reaches a crisis and needs a solution. Then the actors stop the performance and ask the audience for solutions, and the audience has the right to intervene, to correct the action or words of the actors who are obligated to comply strictly with these instructions from the audience. Thus, while the audience "writes" the work the actors perform it simultaneously. The spectator's thoughts are discussed theatrically on stage with the help of the actors. All the solutions, suggestions and opinions are revealed in theatrical form.

Since INEC as a neutral umpire, seeks better ways of totally reducing the violence that characterized the previous elections at the forthcoming polls without spending much as it fears, the electoral body should attempt this direct method of education several months even before embarking on registration of political parties. Since INEC wants to enthrone a culture of peaceful transition, let her partner with the professional theatre practitioners available all over the country alongside the populace to create a theatre, Boal (2011, p. 122), further described the spectator(s) thus:

He himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solution, discusses plan for change — in short trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theatre is not a revolution in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.

Bearing the above view in mind, alongside the dream of peaceful transition emanating from proper voter

education, INEC should direct voter education techniques that would be theatre-oriented to communicate positive political wisdom to the unsuspecting youths that are easily incited to act and react not knowing the essence of their actions. By this, these youths must have not just seen but live the future violence to be encountered at the polls.

This kind of theatre has to be total in its nature of entertainment. By total, it has to take cognizance of the fact that traditional masquerade, vibrant dances, stunts; etc used to embellish the average African social performance must be integrated into the educational plan. This way, the vibrance of these actions whose medium of communication is known to the people of the grassroots, would sustain their attention prior to the dramatic enactment showing the evils of violent actions and reactions characterizing the past general elections in Nigeria. A performance to be rendered strictly in local dialects, which will encourage a spectator acting at the same time (*spect-actor*), especially when the performance reaches a stage the audience, recommends solutions that would be severally weighed through acting before a unified. This is severally experimented until the best is unanimously adopted thereby inculcating into the local people the audio-visual immediacy which theatre therapy ignites that would definitely guarantee improved peaceful transition.

#### 4. Conclusion

Considering the fact that the next general elections is just few years away, Nigeria is gradually becoming the centre of world attention. This will be greatly decided by INEC in its decisions to conduct peaceful elections that would be a product of adequate direct voter education at the grassroots.

This if properly done, will likely be a major contributory factor towards the pursuit of peaceful transition, hence a departure from mundane system of violent-ridden elections in a nascent democracy.

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