
Critical Reflections on Electoral Malpractice as a Bane on Nation Building in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Electoral malpractice has over time constituted a clog in the wheel of the democratisation process in Nigeria. Its attendant adverse effects of socio-economic and political anomalies as made manifest in the proliferation of corrupt practices, dearth of legitimacy, disregard for the democratic process, stunted socio-economic development and physicalization of politics amongst others, remain a serious threat to Nigeria's nation building. These grim developments received greater impetus by the emergence of despotic and unpopular leaders who lack the interest of the masses at heart and as such, indulge in wanton obscenities without recourse to its social implications to the downright detriment of the masses. Consequently, the main thrust of this paper centres on a critical analysis of the dynamics and trends of electoral malpractices in the body politics of Nigeria as well as its implications on the full realisation of true federalism. The study adopted the case study as well as political economy approaches in order to understand the dialectical underpinnings of the complexity of the electoral malpractices in a developing nation like Nigeria. Relying on the findings of this study, the paper therefore concludes that unless this hydra-headed monster of electoral malpractices is tackled with utmost vigour and sincerity of purpose, the quest to place Nigeria in the comity of developed nations will remain elusive.*

Keywords: *Election, Electoral Malpractice, Democratic Process, Nation Building, Independent National Electoral Commission, Sustainable Development*

INTRODUCTION

The history of Nigeria is a pry into the history of British commercial adventurism. Nigeria is a vast country in both size and population. It is an amalgam of diverse ethnic groups, large and small, with its own language, custom and culture (Oluwole, 1963: 205). The various kingdoms: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, among others, were occupied at different times, but were put together in a progressive merger which culminated in the grand amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates on 1st January, 1914 (Akinola, 2014: 1). Therefore the Nigeria of today owes its origin only to the British administration (Oluwole, 1963:205).

As a British creation, the task of nation building has been ongoing, though not without challenges. Beginning from the time of amalgamation, the political governance of these diverse groups became a problem. But Sir Frederick Lugard the Governor-General and architect of the amalgamation, located the solution in the application of indirect rule system. The territory was divided into units called provinces, each headed by a British resident. These provinces were further sub-divided into administrative divisions with a district officer. At the grassroot level, organisation was entrusted to the natural rulers and their subordinate chiefs. In the North this was a huge success. However, in most parts of Igbo land where there were no natural rulers, Lugard resorted to "manufacturing" some artificial natural rulers known as warrant chiefs from influential members of the community (Akinola, 2014: 4-5). It is on record that after an initial

success, the practice received a setback when the privilege became extended to some dubious and inconsequential characters in the society. Before Lugard left Nigeria in 1918, the system has been infested with various degrees of malpractice and readjustment which had continued in the country. The immediate pre-independence period witnessed a large magnitude of this malpractice as the various ethnically organized political parties dwelt on the existing social structures with differential status and privileges.

It is not the concern of this paper to dwell on the success or failure of indirect rule system, but what is important here is that the system provided a platform for the multiplicity of political parties that perpetuated the preservation of cultural differences. The division which colonialism has always thrived to preserve in order to realize the benefit of its economic pursuit has in itself endangered national unity or national consciousness in Nigeria (Ndoma-Egba, 2000: 81). Thus, with its attendant result of corrupt practices in all facet of life, nation- building in Nigeria has remained a hard nut to crack.

CONCEPT OF ELECTION AND ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE

Election is an integral part of a democratic process that enables the citizenry determine fairly and freely who should lead them at every level of government periodically and take decisions that shape their socio- economic and political destiny, and in case they falter, still possess the power to recall them or vote them out in the next election. This has to do with the choosing or selecting of candidates who will represent the people of a country in the parliament and in other positions in the government. In the words of Nohlen (2006), it is a form of competition in which voters have a choice between at least two options. Election therefore occupy a central place in a democratic society as it possesses the potential to bestow legitimacy, moderate dissent, promote compliance and enhance the performance of citizens' civic responsibility. It is in line with this, that Eya (2003), Onyeka (2002), Nortan (1992), Elekwa (2008) and Sofiri (2015) held the view that elections whether national, local or at organisational level, are very crucial for promoting consent from those electorates who advocate for alternative rules and policies within the political process. Election therefore becomes the most fundamental hallmark of democracy. This is so because representative and participatory democracy remains the major instrument of midwifing a viable nation building in Nigeria.

Every political system has an electoral system which according to Nnekabari (2004:92) is the network of competitive relationships in an election. It serves the purposes of a "conduct format" which the people can hold their elected representatives accountable. Given this position, an electoral system can translate the votes cast in an election into seats won in a legislative chamber and also structure the boundaries of acceptable political discourse in different ways.

Having understood what election and electoral system is, what then is electoral malpractice? An overview of the term "electoral malpractice" will reveal that the concept is made up of two words, "electoral" and "malpractice". Electoral is a logical derivation from the word "election". Election has to do with the process of selection. It encompasses the process, procedures, methods and systems put in place to facilitate or fast-track the selection of an organisational leadership (Mackenzie, 2009: 104). Malpractice as a concept simply refers to denigration, deviation, diversion or subversion from the accepted norm. Consequently electoral malpractice refers to the deviation or diversion from the accepted norm in the conduct of elections. It involves those clandestine efforts aimed at shaping results.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's political history is replete with instances of electoral malpractices and violence. Since Nigeria became independent on October 1st 1960, the history of election has been written in violence. Obakhedo (2011: 99-110) in his follow up of post-independence events in Nigeria, described the nation's post-independence history as being overshadowed by the depredations of a series of corrupt, abusive and unaccountable governments. The description is apt because it appears that Nigerians seem to have acquired the culture of electoral malpractices and violence as most of the elections conducted since 1960 has been violence-ridden (Madu, 2009: 64).

Election in Nigeria's politics is traceable to the introduction of elective principle in the Clifford constitution of 1922. As asserted by Ogunnaet *al* (2001: 33-34), the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) which was founded by Herbert Macauley and T. H. Jackson won all the seats in the legislative council in all the elections of 1923, 1928 and 1933. Thus, in a loose sense, the NNDP was the first Nigerian political party and one could conclude that the experiment with NNDP was a good start. However, as other political parties sprang up, the initial good record began to be altered. The Lagos Youth Movement which was formed in 1934 and later changed its name to Nigerian Youth Movement in 1936, drew its membership across the country. The ethnicity question in the country led to its break up. The successor, National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon which was later renamed National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was formed in 1944 and it dominated political events until the introduction of the Macpherson's constitution in 1951. With this constitution came the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the Action Group (AG).

The Macpherson's constitution polarized regional feelings among the nationalist leaders and then the major parties, the NCNC, NPC and AG became ethnically based with the promotion of regional interests (Kunleet *al.*, 2004: 106). The Macpherson's constitution thus gave room for the formation of more political parties, setting the stage for stiff competition. From then on, in their bid to win elections and wield political power for themselves and their various ethnic groups, political elites appealed to ethnic sentiments and carried out electoral malpractices and violence.

The use of illegal methods in electoral process started in the general election of 1964 and since then has continued in greater dimension and magnitude as made manifest in the 1964/1965, 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

For 1964 election, the coalition of "strange bed fellows" as Johnson (2003: 87) described it, helped to rock the boat. In readiness for the 1964 election all the political parties polarized into two gigantic alliances. The NCNC, what was left of AG and the Northern Progressive Front (NPF) and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) joined together to form the United Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) under the leadership of Dr. M. I Okpara, while the NPC, NNDP, the Mid Western Democratic Front (MDF), the Niger Delta Congress (NDC) and the Dynamic Party formed the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA) under the leadership of Sir Ahmadu Bello. Before the election in December 1964, allegations and counter-allegations of electoral malpractices traded the political scene as all sorts of crude and obnoxious methods were employed as campaign strategies. These malpractices include irregular methods of nominating candidates, inaccessibility of electoral officers which prevented many aspirants from filling their nomination papers, arrest and imprisonment of opponents using government machinery. There were also allegations of intimidation, thuggery in Northern and Western regions. Thus, the 1964 elections marked a watershed of electoral malpractices and violence in Nigerian politics.

The 1979 and 1983 general elections were not different from the 1964 elections. These elections were rigged through compilation of fictitious names, illegal compilation of separate voters' list, illegal printing of voter's cards, and stuffing of ballot boxes with ballot papers, voting by under-aged children, deliberate refusal to supply electoral materials to some areas amongst others.

In 2003, electoral malpractices were mainly carried out by the electoral body in conjunction with candidates. As reported by Tell Magazine of 5th May, 2003, there was deliberate shortage of materials in some part of Delta State. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was accused of announcing fictitious results where elections were never conducted (Bamisaya, 2011: 17). The 2003 elections were heavily rigged especially in Edo, Delta, Enugu, Anambra, Imo, Rivers, Cross River, Bayelsa, Katsina, Benue, Kogi, Plateau and Nasarawa states. The 2007 general election was also marred by electoral malpractices. Both domestic and foreign observers succinctly described the 2007 elections as the worst in Nigeria's political history. The United states based National Democratic Institute (NDI) stated in its post-election statement that the electoral process failed the Nigerian people.

Many forms of electoral malpractices and violence were recorded across the states in the 2011 general elections. The 2011 election which brought Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to power was considered the most violent especially, in the northern region. Violence claimed about 500 lives in three days in northern Nigeria and about sixty five thousand (65,000) people were displaced (Sunday Punch, 17th April 2011). In Bauchi state, youths in Migan Local Government Area burnt down part of the INEC building.

The elections in Nigeria keep getting worse as politicians become more power hungry and daring, wanting to remain on seat at all cost. Thus, the 2015 and 2019 general elections were never different from the previous ones. These elections witnessed massive rigging, wanting destruction of properties, kidnapping and indiscriminate killing of both candidates and electorates. This, of course, implies that if no adequate measure is taking, election in Nigeria will remain a "do or die affair".

MANIFESTATIONS OF ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE

Electoral malpractices in Nigeria's politics has grown steadily worse and more daring, coming in diverse forms. It is usually carried out by what Bello (2015:20) referred to as "Stake holders of electoral malpractices". Electoral malpractices take place before, during and after election. The outcomes of Nigerian elections since independence have been marred with electoral malpractices, fraud and violence, and have been fiercely contested that the survival of the democratic order has been compromised in many respects (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2016: 36). Following the occurrence of electoral malpractices in our elections, it is obvious that this fraud occurs in three categories namely;

- a. Pre-election malpractices or manipulations
- b. Electoral malpractices during the course of the election
- c. Post electoral malpractices.

PRE-ELECTION MALPRACTICES/MANIPULATIONS

Pre-election malpractices as the name suggests are those malpractices and manipulations carried out before the actual election. This is to ensure that election turns out to be in favour of a particular candidate or party. This category of malpractices are usually carried out by the

electoral commission, political parties and their candidates, party loyalists, political godfathers, security agents and armed-men.

Pre-election malpractices include;

- i. Tailoring of electoral regulations to de-enfranchise candidates or group of people.
- ii. Compilation of fictitious names in the voters' registers in order to get more advantage. This type is usually carried out by the electoral commission. For instance, Bamisaye (2013) argued that Punch of August 12, 2011 revealed how the electoral body-Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) compiled so many non-existent names of voters in the North. In collaborating Bamisaye's view, Ojoet *al* (2013) opined that the electoral commission (FEDCO) during the 1983 election, compiled so many fictitious names in order to ensure that election went in favour of the desired candidates or parties.
- iii. Monetization of the electoral procedure. In this case, political parties, candidates and Godfathers or sponsors including party loyalists induce the electoral staff and proposed ad-hoc staff so as to make election go in their favour. This induced-electoral staff, release sensitive electoral document such as the ad-hoc staff list to the favoured candidates and parties.
- iv. Appointment of partisan electoral officials; The electoral commission in Nigeria relies on ad-hoc staff to carryout election exercise. These ad-hoc staff are expected to be impartial in the discharge of their duties. But this is not so in Nigeria. Often times, political parties strive to push in their loyalists by paying the electoral officers heavily so as to make election be in their favour
- v. Registration of under-aged children is another form of pre-election malpractice. In 2015 general election, the Independent National Electoral Commission was accused by the Independent observers, as having registered under-aged children in the North (Vanguard, March 30th, 2015).
- vi. Deliberate with-holding of voter's cards is also prominent in pre-election malpractices. The permanent voter's card is the only method of identification. Without it, one cannot vote and thus stand disqualified. This is one strategy employed by the electoral commission to deliberately disqualify some aspirants.

MALPRACTICE DURING COURSE OF ELECTION

Malpractices here are carried out on the actual Election Day by induced electoral commission staff, ad-hoc staff, political parties and their candidates, party loyalists, sympathisers, observers and even the electorates. These malpractices manifest in various ways such as;

- i. Deliberate refusal to distribute election materials to some areas or supply of fake electoral materials. This form of electoral malpractice is perpetrated by the electoral commission and the induced supervisory presiding officers.
- ii. Vote buying or multiple voting.
- iii. Using of thugs to disrupt voting in polling units.
- iv. Snatching of ballot boxes.
- v. Destruction or invalidation of ballots by ad-hoc staff
- vi. Falsification of election results

POST ELECTION MANIPULATIONS

This malpractice which is usually carried out after election take the following forms:

- i. Outright cancellation of election results or total annulment of election results. The June 12, 1993 annulment of the presidential election is a case in point.
- ii. Political killings, murder, arson by parties who think they were maltreated during the election features prominently in this category. The general election of 1964, 2003, 2007, 2015 and 2019 were said to have been characterized by such killings.

CONSEQUENCES OF ELECTORAL MALPRACTICES ON NATION BUILDING

It is pertinent to put in proper perspectives that electoral malpractice is a democratic anomaly emanating from the faulty relations of production and manifestation of the character of the state (Ake, 1986:92). The hasty and undefined marriage of a people of divergent ancestral, linguistic, historical and topographical background by the British colonialists was a deliberate ploy to ensure that the system is in a state of perpetual limbo with violent struggle for political power. The struggle for power especially, in a multi-ethnic state generates tension of centrifugal magnitude (Nwarogu, 1999:113). To say the least, the violent power struggle amongst contending forces have adversely affected the entirety of Nigeria's body polity and has put the nation's democracy into ridicule.

Electoral malpractices have had serious adverse effects on Nigeria's quest for nation building. However, due to space constraint, a highlight of these consequences will be made. From the foregoing overview, it is obvious that electoral malpractice negates the founding principles of democracy and consequently retards national development to downright detriment of the populace.

Secondly, electoral malpractice erodes the confidence invested in the political system by the populace. This in turn whittles down the process of political differentiation and social acculturation.

Electoral malpractice leads to the emergence of unpopular, irresponsive and despotic leaders, which adversely affect political development and economic progress as well as tilting the country towards totalitarianism.

Closely related to the above, is that these electoral ill titillates and heightens the feelings of alienation, marginalisation, exploitation and subjugation of minority groups. This in turn, spurs agitation for secession for instance, the case of the Indigenous people of Biafra (IPOB) and other minority agitations that is plaguing the unity of the country.

Electoral malpractice creates a fertile medium for the emergence of political instability and national strife. This is directly attributed to the emergence of unpopular leaders representing the interest of infinitesimal section of the population.

Furthermore, electoral malpractice encourages electoral violence and wanton blood shade of both guilty and innocent and unsuspecting voters which in turn deters participation in subsequent elections which of course, is an antithesis as democracy only thrives on popular political participation. By extension, it erodes legitimacy and encourages national political inertia by the populace towards constituted authority.

Electoral malpractice is not unconnected to the polarization of the popular element making up Nigeria's body polity which in turn infuses centrifugal forces into the Nigerian political system.

It slaughters meritocracy on the slab of mediocrity thereby encouraging the emergence of never-do-wells and political dead-woods into positions of authority.

It is no gain saying the fact that electoral malpractice encourages military interventions such as those that put ends to the first, second and third republics in Nigeria. This in turn, brought about corruption, humiliation, and violation of human rights as witnessed in Nigeria during the military juntas.

CONCLUSION

The machinery of election was instituted to reflect public interest in the selection and pattern of rulership of a country's leadership. The negation of the founding principles of democracy in the aspect of election poses an overwhelming threat to the very core of democratic values and practices. The unbridled quest for power and the deployment of cruel violent means and methods towards achieving same has spewed a behemoth of political obscenities and anomalies. Notable among which are insensitive, irresponsible and poor leadership, cess-pool of corruption, marginalisation and domination of minority groups, violent agitation for secession, militarization of politics, lopsided political representation, development of under-development amongst other Systematic anomalies. These have collectively contributed in relegating the country and its citizens into a position of perpetual limbo, poverty, lack and utmost deprivation which in turn has fanned the embers of frustrations and disunity as made manifest in the series of political upheaval in the country. It is an incontrovertible fact of history that Nigeria is a political mistake. This assertion is anchored on the non-conceptual intermarriage of diverse and divergent ethnic groups, hitherto existing independently from each other with unique system of government forcefully and brutally brought together under the umbrella of a nation by the brutal forces of colonization for the ulterior motive of social subjugation and political domination for economic exploitation and administrative ease. This, no doubt, occasioned a violent struggle for control of the Centre and turned politics into a fierce battle field.

Thus, Nigeria's electioneering landscape inundated with grim instances of electoral malpractices has ultimately altered the outcome of such elections as a major determinant of who determines who get what, when and perhaps, why. Nigeria's political development is replete with instances of box snatching, multiple voting, vote buying, induced electoral officials, electoral violence and killings which has culminated into a political staccato with grim consequences on lives and properties. It is crystal clear therefore, that poor leadership which is the logical outcome of electoral malpractice remains the bane of Nigeria's unity and development.

However, to erase this electoral hydra-headed monster from the wheel of Nigeria's quest for nation building, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- a. Autonomy of the electoral commission.
- b. Independence of the judiciary is required for functional democracy.
- c. Recruitment of individuals of proven integrity and sincerity to man sensitive positions in the electoral commission.
- d. Adequate sensitization of the masses on the evils of electoral malpractices.
- e. Adequate spread of political education especially at the grassroot level.

- f. Poverty alleviation schemes and youth empowerment programmes should be put in place in order to make the electorates less susceptible to electoral malpractices by the nefarious politicians.
- g. Adequate provisions of security at the polling units to deter hoodlums.
- h. Perpetuators of electoral malpractices should be adequately dealt with by the laws of the land.

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