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A Cycle of Elections without Democracy?: Nigeria's Troubled Democratisation in Perspective

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Abstract:

Elections are the lifeblood of democracy which avail voters the opportunity of choosing and legitimising a government. While the holding of elections marks a good feature of democracy, the quality of such elections determines whether they conform to acceptable standard in terms of meeting the democratic aspirations and the needs of the people. Although research on democratization in Africa has grown in recent years, democratization itself has been slow to take hold in most African countries. Countries that appeared to be making a transition to democracy in the mid-1990s have stalled or reversed their transition in recent years. In Nigeria, since 1999, with the passing of a new federal constitution, elections have become more regular as witnessed in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015. Diligent observation however, would confirm that these elections were flawed as a result of malpractices and improper electoral administration such that the political experiment is usually referred to as civil rule rather than democracy. Findings gleaned from the five rounds of elections in the country since 1999, in spite of the staggered successes, show the limitations of elections in consolidating democracy in divided societies.

Keywords: Elections, Democracy, Democratisation, Civil Rule, Government

1. Introduction

Liberal democracy has undoubtedly become the most acceptable form of political system the world all over. Central to the whole idea of democracy and democratization is the issue of elections. As Diamond (2002: 353) asserted, elections are the litmus test of a democratic political system. Elections are crucial instrument of recruiting leaders by the electorate in a democratic system. Election is generally accepted in all climes of the world as the hallmark of democracy. Elections as the 'means of filling public offices by competitive struggle for the people's vote' (Heywood, 1997:211) has become synonymous with democracy as it empowers the common citizens with the right to choose their leaders. As a result, elections have become one of the yardsticks for measuring how democratic a country is (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2011). The absence of regular and democratic elections provides an opening for increased political repression, citizen discontent, politically motivated violence and the pursuit of alternative means for selecting leaders – including regime change through coup d'états (Tomaszewski, 2016).

Another important function of elections is to build legitimacy for a government. This is mostly the case in troubled systems where elections are organised and are typically rigged to produce a pre-determined outcome, usually in favour of the incumbent party. In such cases the elections merely provide justification for the party's prolonged rule. Elections, even those that are not free and fair, are always labelled as the manifestation of the people's will. These claims are usually accompanied by slogans such as 'the people have spoken' (Letsie, 2015:85). Indeed, the proliferation of elections does not imply greater political stability. Over the past decade, electoral processes have instead crystallised tensions and formed a source of violence in several African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo (2006), Guinea-Bissau (2008), Kenya (2007 and 2008), Lesotho (2007), Nigeria (2007, 2011), Senegal (2012), Togo (2005) and Zimbabwe (2008). In each case the electoral process led to greater fragility in the political set-up, without legitimising those in power (Crouzel, 2014:5).

The primary objective of democratisation is popular participation in decisions affecting lives (Aluko, 1989 cited in Ibrahim and Hassan, 2014:6). Democratisation therefore, is appreciated by most regimes to the point that even authoritarian regimes lay claim to semblance of democratisation. In Africa, multiparty democracy swept across the continent in the early 1990s, as single-party states and authoritarian leaders bowed to pressure from outside and within. Activists hoped greater political freedoms and strong institutions would lead to more government accountability - and more effective development (Morgan, 2013). However, since the advent of democratization in Africa, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on holding regular elections (Molomo, 2006:23). The electoral process in Nigeria, for instance, as in most developing democracies, is fraught with several challenges that span operational, technological and institutional among several others. In the history of electioneering in Nigeria therefore, only two exercises have been internationally acclaimed to be patently credible -the June 1993 and March/April 2015 general elections. This underscores the onerous responsibility for conducting free and fair elections in Nigeria (Aderemi, 2015).

Electoral democracies, typified by Schumpeter's view of elections as democracy, are a common feature in some Third World countries. In these countries the role of the general public in national affairs ends at the election booths. According to Schedler (cited in Letsie, 2015:85), however, such electoral democracies 'manage to get elections right, but fail to institutionalise other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation'. Scholars agree unanimously that regular elections are an important measure of democratic governance, though they do not necessarily constitute democracy per se (see Nzongola-Ntalaja 1997). For the purposes of this essay, democracy may be taken to mean the form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and for the people. Democracy demands that the government should be open, accountable and participatory. The state is administered according to the will of the people who have delegated their sovereign political power to leaders elected by them. The people take part directly or indirectly in the formulation of policies by means of secret, free and fair elections of representatives who remain in office for a specific length of time.

Election process refers to activities which give the electorate the opportunity to choose those who will govern it. These activities are guided by the political system enshrined in the laws and are dependent on the general political and economic atmosphere within which elections take place. However, recent elections worldwide, as noted by Qadah, (2005), have seen a gradual decline in the overall percentage of the electorate exercising their right to vote. This is worrying from a democratic point of view in that, if the reasons of the decline are left unchecked, the mandate of those elected to hold the positions might eventually be questionable (Qadah, 2005). The Nigerian experience has shown that many of its citizens do not classify the country's status as democratic but rather refer to it as civil rule. It is an indisputable fact that elections play a crucial role in the consolidation of democracy but democracy cannot be reduced purely to elections. Various other political processes play an equally important role for democracy to be sustained. It is within this context that this essay examines electoral democracy in Nigeria particularly in the last seventeen uninterrupted years of democratisation.

The essay includes historical and descriptive analyses. The information was drawn from secondary sources, including academic journals; textbooks; official documents from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and other government agencies; and newspapers. The remainder of the essay proceeds as follows: The next section provides historical background to democracy in Nigeria. This leads specifically to the emergence of the fourth republic and its attendant expectations. The fourth section examines electioneering in the country and the gap between elections and democracy. Discussion in section five focuses on how to bridge this observable gap while the last section provides some closing remarks.

2. Historicising Democratisation Process in Nigeria

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, democracy became the dominant and most preferred system of government across the globe. That global transition has been aptly captured as the triumph of democracy and the 'most pre-eminent political idea of our time' (Buhari, 2015). It is a common knowledge that democracy provides the opportunities for the people to freely exercise their voting rights in the selection of representatives who govern them. For Nigeria, the country is now enjoying the longest period of civilian rule since independence in 1960. The first civilian republic ended in a military coup in 1966, ushering in a devastating civil war and several more military governments. In fact, during the 33-year period from 1966 until the fourth republic came into being in 1999, civilians only governed for four short years.

Nigeria, which gained its independence from Britain in 1960, is a federal republic composed of 36 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 much of the three decades after independence before making the transition to civilian rule in 1999. In the wake of independence of the Nigeria in 1960, hopes and expectations were high that the project Nigeria was on the threshold of good governance. Within a few years however, these high hopes and lofty expectations of independence were dashed and frustrated. Good governance has since become a mirage. At the federal, state and local government levels, governance crisis of frightening proportion, has become entrenched (Popoola, 2011:211).

Nigeria's democratic experience has truncated as military incursion cut short civilian politics in 1966. Nigeria's young army officers, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, overthrew the government of Balewa on January 15, 1966, barely two years after the country had attained a republican status in 1963. As a result, the late Maj Gen Aguiyi Ironsi became the first military head of state after the coup. The Ironsi administration was, however, overthrown in another military coup led by Gen Yakubu Gowon on July 15, 1966. Gowon ruled till 1975 when he was overthrown by another group of soldiers in a bloodless coup d'état. That brought Gen Murtala Muhammad to power, even though he was not directly involved in the coup. Two days after assuming power, the new regime decided, inter alia, to 'review the political programme'. In October 1975, General Murtala Mohammed announced a five-stage, four-year transition programme to 'hand over power to a democratically elected government of the people by October 1979', promising that 'the present military leadership does not intend to stay in office a day longer than necessary, certainly not beyond this date'. In 1976, Murtala was assassinated in another coup. Gen Olusegun Obasanjo succeeded him.

The military administration, headed by General Olusegun Obasanjo, initiated a transitional process to end military rule in 1979. The Obasanjo administration set up a mechanism which drafted a new constitution for the country. The new constitution, which came to be known as the 1979 constitution, suspended the Westminster system of government which was operated in the First Republic. In place of it, a presidential system of government, styled after the American system was adopted. In the build-up to the 1979 hand-over date, political parties were formed and required to be registered in at least two-thirds of the states. In keeping faith with the transition programme, the Obasanjo government set up a

constituent assembly in 1977 to prepare a new constitution. The constitution was published on September 21, 1978 at the lift of ban on political activities.

In 1979, five political parties participated in the general elections. In the presidential election, the candidate of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Alhaji Shehu Usman Shagari, emerged winner. On October 1, 1979, the Obasanjo administration handed over power to the new president and Commander-in-Chief of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (The other parties that contested elections in the 1979 elections were the Great Nigeria People's Party (GNPP), Nigeria Advance Party (NAP), Nigerian People's Party (NPP) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN)). Obasanjo then became the first head of state, in Nigeria's political history, who voluntarily handed over power to a civilian government.

Also, in August 1983, Shagari and his party, the NPN, had a land-slide victory in another round of general elections, with majority seats in the National Assembly. The elections saw a return to the intimidation, rigging and outright elimination of opponents that had emerged as the defining features of those in the mid-1960s. The election administrators and law enforcement agencies were loyal to politicians, not the nation. The fraud and violence that attended the 1983 elections as in 1966 provided the basis for the return of the military in December that year (Crisis Group; Africa Report 2007).

The military government under Babangida stayed in office for eight years (from 1985 to 1993). In 1993, after several cancellations of transition programmes announced by the Babangida administration, he came under intense pressure to relinquish power. The administration began a transition to civil rule programme with a goal to hand over in 1992. Subsequently, on July 28, 1987, the Babangida regime promulgated the Transition to Civil Rule (Political Programme) Decree 57, announcing a five-year transition programme to terminate in the fourth quarter of 1992 with the inauguration of an elected civilian president and the final disappearance of military from politics. The transition programme was to progress in different stages (Chiama, 2015). Presidential elections of June 1993, which were to represent the finalization of the country's move to the civilian rule, were won by the SDP's candidate Moshood Abiola. After Babangida nullified Abiola's victory, the country was engulfed in civil disobedience, protests and strikes, which also affected the economy. Despite army interventions, the uproar continued. Babangida merely formally handed the power to Ernest Shonekan. Within months, another coup, headed by General Sani Abacha, restored the military rule. Abiola's attempt to claim the presidential post in 1984 resulted in his imprisonment by the Abacha regime on the charges of treason. Abiola died under questionable circumstances in 1998, while still in detention. The Abacha transition programme, like the Babangida episode, was a political fraud designed to entrench General Abacha in power and was inconclusive due to his death in June 1998.

Following Abacha's sudden and somewhat mysterious death in 1998, Major General Abdulsalami Abubakar was sworn into office. He soon pronounced the return to civilian rule, and upon promulgation of the new Constitution in May 1999, Nigeria experienced its first free elections in decades. However, the elections were not fair. Serious irregularities were reported, including buying of the votes and false ballots. Nevertheless, on 29 May 1999, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the Nigerian military head of state, handed over power to Olusegun Obasanjo, a retired General, who twenty years before, as a military head of state, had similarly handed over power to the elected civilian government of Shehu Shagari. With this transfer of power, Nigeria, which has spent most of its independent life under military rule, entered the period of the Fourth Republic. General Abubakar's transition programme was the second successful transition to civil rule programme witnessed in the political history of Nigeria.

3. The Fourth Republic and its Attendant High Democratic Expectations

It can deduced from the above historical background that Nigeria's march to constitutional civilian rule has so far been a tortuous adventure, characterized by moments of hope raised and hope dashed. The democratization processes that ushered in the fledgling fourth republic were particularly daunting (Omotola, 2007). In particular, the 1998-1999 transition programme was against the background of two successive military authored political transition programmes, which were dubious to start and ended up in fiasco. The first was the lengthy political transition programme of the Babangida regime (1985-1993) and the second by the Abacha regime (1995-1998). So, the present dispensation is the first time Nigeria has had five general elections in a row with an elected government transferring power to another (and a ruling party being defeated in a presidential election) during the period.

Although the military regime that mid-wived the process could not significantly convince the generality of the citizens on its success, a huge section of the populace still believed it could herald the dawn of good governance in the country (Yagboyaju, 2011:93). Put differently, the people had expected with great enthusiasm that the new political leadership and democratic governance would bring about rapid development in all facets of the Nigerian society. This, as observed by Ogundiya and Baba (2007: 245), implies that the political class in Nigeria would come under public scrutiny in governance and to provide solutions to most of the nagging issues in the socio-economic and political arena. The political class either elected or appointed, owes a duty to the citizenry to uphold the socio-economic objectives/directive principles of state and maintain rectitude in governance.

The 1998/99 transition elections are best seen in the context of the broader impetus to end military rule. Nigerian and international observers viewed them as the beginning of a process of democratization and the rebuilding of a civilian-led political infrastructure. Nigeria's painful transition from military dictatorship into fitful civilian democracy mirrors Africa's wider struggle for good governance (Thompson, 2007). The governing objectives of the Fourth Republic and 1999 constitution include recognizing Nigeria's ethnic diversity while maintaining a national character, reducing the possibility of future coups, and limiting the ability of a centrally-led dictatorship to form.

As rightly noted by Fayemi (2009), the long years of political misrule and bad governance exemplified by civilian administrations and military dictatorships since the country's political independence have left the nation politically demobilized, humanly underdeveloped and economically sterile with an ample population ravaged by poverty. Thus, with the return to democratic rule in the country in 1999, Nigerians had expected that the new wave of political leadership and democratic governance would accelerate the tide of development in the nation. The political leadership was expected to grapple with the socio-economic and political problems of the country, which border on poverty, corruption, lack of good governance, corrupt electoral system, unemployment, and insecurity, among others.

Many Nigerians were of the belief that the undemocratic, autocratic, authoritative, illegitimate, repressive and the absence of equity and justice in governance relationship with the people will be replaced by constitutionality, legitimacy, justice, fair play, freedom, in one word, a democratic form of government (Egbe, 2014:31). To many Nigerians, the emergence of the republic provided the opportunity to overturn widespread developmental and political problems associated with prolonged military rule and at the same time a hope of great expectations of improved quality of wellbeing and governance. Over the years, failed development visions, abandoned development programmes and policy summersault are common problems that continually militate against development in Nigeria. They are indeed, products of corruption and political leadership ineptitude that characterize the country.

However, nearly two decades into the democratic rule, the huge expectations of most Nigerians have been largely undermined by poor governance, with its attendant socio-economic and political challenges. For example, the Nigerian economy is overwhelmed by the problems of poverty, widening income inequality between the rich and the poor, disinvestment, inflation, deindustrialisation, mass unemployment and debt crisis. Moreover, the crises of widespread collapse of social values, and infrastructure, illiteracy, insecurity of lives and property, political corruption, authoritarianism, electoral malpractices, politically motivated violence, and weak governance institutions continue to undermine the socio-political realm in Nigeria (Seteolu, 2004; Egwemi and Aliu, 2010). The failure of democratic governance to meet the yearnings of most Nigerians in the fourth republic has degenerated into crisis of legitimacy. The problem of mutual distrusts among Nigerians is aggravated by the decline in public trust in the ability of government to provide security and improve their wellbeing (Omodia and Aliu, 2013).

Suffice it to say that the political landscape is yet to show clear evidences of good governance. The rule of law is merely pronounced, elections and electoral processes are subverted and political parties and other important public institutions are manipulated in favour of the privileged few (Yagboyaju, 2011:93). Since the return of democratic rule in 1999, the tide of development in the country has not accelerated to any higher height. As observed by Fayemi (2009), money laundry, political godfatherism, economic wastage, misplaced priorities, insecurity of lives and property, insensitivity to the plight and welfare of the masses, and lack of vision have remained permanent features of the present democratic leadership. It is even more disturbing that elections which could have served as platform to correct deviations and a veritable mechanism for the realization of the objectives of democratization have been reduced to a charade, thus, making democratic process/practice in Nigeria, a political liability, a source of multiple societal problems and decay (Ogundiya and Baba, 2007: 245).

4. Why Elections do not Locate Democracy: Navigating the Electoral Contours

In much of the political science debate today (most notably perhaps in the field of party politics), there is a growing concern over the state of representative democracy (Farrell, 2012). Despite the notorious difficulties in capturing the essence of democracy, scholars have been engaged in certain strategies for defining it in dynamic motion: that is, viewing democracy itself as it unfolds in actual reality and as a function of several other societal contradictions. The most successful of these is the concept of polyarchy as enunciated by Dahl (cited in Tinubu, 2009). This is not a mode of governance but a sustained attempt to situate the democratic process within an overarching architecture of several key features.

There are objective criteria to gauge where a country stands on the democracy continuum. For democracy scholars, however, it is a six-way test. It is from this six-way test that I propose to discuss how our country has fared on the democracy continuum. This six-point test is as follows: (1) Holding of periodic elections, which are adjudged free and fair and representative of the will of the people (2) Respect for freedom of association (3) Freedom of the press and the right to disseminate information (4) Effective separation of the duties and functions of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary (5) Respect for the rule of law and (6) Accountability and transparency in governance.

Under this scheme of things, a country is described as democratic if it combines most of the features, semi-democratic if it combines some of them and non-democratic if most or virtually all of these features are missing in the polity. The whole idea of democracy among many Nigerians, according to Osabiya (2014:59), seems to have been equated with the holding of election at regular intervals, irrespective of how these are organized and their outcome. As Andreas Schedler (cited in *ibid*) points out, elections have historically been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance. Most post-1990 elections in Nigeria appear to have been organized to merely give some semblance of democratic legitimacy.

From a minimalist perspective, elections are the first and most basic indicator of democracy. In Nigeria, however, elections have been one of the main problems of the democratization process. The country's struggles for sustainable democracy, good governance, and development have been so daunting that all previous attempts at democratic transition have been futile (Eghosa, 1999 cited in Omotola, 2010:2). Since its attainment of independence in 1960, Nigeria has been tormented by political instability fuelled largely by an electoral process in crisis. Over the years, the electorates and politicians alike have continued to perpetuate the worst forms of our political processes characterized by ugly incidents of

political thuggery and violence, electoral malpractices both at political party level and general elections, unending law suits, crisis of legitimacy, instability and chaos (Abubakar, 2015).

Over the period of Nigeria's existence as an independent nation-state, all these negative attributes of her political processes have often provided compelling reasons for military adventurists to seize power from its civilian collaborators (Abubakar, 2015). It is therefore, of little surprise that past efforts at democratization has collapsed at the altar of perverted elections and electoral process. So bad was the situation that elections period has come to be associated with violence and politically motivated crises (Luqman, 2009:59). As a matter of fact, the collapse of the First (1960-6) and Second (1979-83) republics, and the abortion of the Third Republic through the criminal annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, are clear indicators of the failure of previous attempts at democratization. After prolonged military rule spanning close to two decades (1983-99), characterized by the wanton violation and repression of the political, economic, and social rights of the people, the re-democratization process begun in 1999 elicited renewed expectations for the consolidation of democracy in the country (Eghosa, 1999 cited in Omotola, 2010:2).

The history of elections in Nigeria generally can thus be divided into two epochs. That is, elections that were held when Nigeria was under colonial governance and those after independence (Osabiya, 2014:60). This essay will mainly focus on elections that took place (at least consecutively without any interregnum) in the present fourth republic for assessment. Elections in Nigeria since the return of democracy have been a sad tale. Bedevilled by inefficiently structured electoral process, quick-witted and desperate politicians go a length further to manipulate the process. In the end, there is never a possibility of free and fair elections. Consequently elections have been characterised by rigging, multiple registration, ballot box snatching, thuggery and incomprehensible violence. The implication is that free and fair elections become impossible, which means that the submissive population would continue to be tortured by the quick-witted politicians, and real development remains a distant hope (digitallagos.tv, 2014).

Wanyande (1987:80) posits that elections represent a way of making a choice that is fair to all- one that leaves each member of the electorate with the reasonable hope of having his alternative re-elected. An election is therefore an empirical demonstration of a citizen's liberty and political choice. It is for this that it serves to legitimize government. Properly managed, elections provide a veritable platform for conflict resolution and transformation outside the battlefield and without bloodshed. Hence the requirement of elections to be free and fair. Ironically, Elections in Nigeria which should have been a prelude for achieving a stabilize government accompanied with people's consent have contradicted these standards because of election rigging. Thus, there is a disconnect between periodic elections and consolidating the practice of democracy as succinctly captured by Buhari (2015):

While you can't have representative democracy without elections, it is equally important to look at the quality of the elections and to remember that mere elections do not make democracy. It is globally agreed that democracy is not an event, but a journey. And that the destination of that journey is democratic consolidation – that state where democracy has become so rooted and so routine and widely accepted by all actors. With this important destination in mind, it is clear that though many African countries now hold regular elections, very few of them have consolidated the practice of democracy. It is important to also state at this point that just as with elections, a consolidated democracy cannot be an end by itself.

A brief assessment of selected three elections under the present republic will surface here: 1999 elections (being the beginning of the republic); 2007 elections (being transfer of power from one administration to another) and 2015 (being the last conducted general elections as at the time of writing this essay). The significance of the elections is that each has an eight-year interval to the other.

4.1. The 1999 Elections

Following demise of Gen. Abacha in 1998, Nigeria witnessed the legalization and creation of political parties, vast improvements in the level of press freedom and political competition, and the completion of four rounds of elections. The initial transition toward civilian rule, completed with Gen. Obasanjo's swearing in as president on May 29, took less than a year from when the transition began. Despite these and other generally positive developments, several issues surfaced during the transition process that caused serious concern and add to the challenges of building a democratic future in Nigeria (The Carter Centre and NDI, 1999:15).

The only parties to qualify from the local elections – the AD, APP, and PDP – scrambled to absorb unsuccessful parties or co-opt their leaders and financial backers. Voters, already trying to decide among parties without clearly stated platforms, also were confronted with an INEC timetable that required parties to submit their candidates' names less than three weeks before each election. Party primaries often occurred just days before the deadlines, so the selection of candidates, campaign period, and process of voting was often frenzied and confused (ibid: 17). Ihonvbere (1999) wrote of the 1999 general election thus: 'One can say with certainty that all the contradictions that had bedevilled previous democratic experiments in Nigeria were present and magnified in the February 27, 1999 election: divided loyalties, manipulation of primordial identities and loyalties, corruption and other election malpractices, lack of political discipline and limited attention to serious structural questions.'

4.2. The 2007 Elections

Nigeria's third national elections since the return to civilian rule were held in April 2007, amid widespread allegations of electoral mismanagement and fraud. Elections observers could not hide their unpalatable experience, wondering if such elections were to usher in a democracy. They described the elections as the worst in Nigeria's history ranking among the worst conducted anywhere in the world. For instance, Madeleine K. Albright, the former secretary of state, who observed the election for the National Democratic Institute, said that "in a number of places and in a number of

ways, the election process failed the Nigerian people.' The International Republican Institute said that the election fell "below acceptable standards' (Polygreen, 2007). Also, the US-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) stated in its post-election statement that the electoral process "failed the Nigerian people'. The Human Rights Watch (2007) which monitored the election in its report said the Nigeria's failed April 2007 polls cast a harsh and very public light on patterns of violence, corruption and outright criminality that have come to characterize Nigeria's political system-and on the extent to which officials and institutions at all levels of government accept, encourage and participate in those abuses.

Elections in Nigeria can appear as a ceremonial façade for the reshuffling of elites' power. Elite factions dominate government everywhere. At the national level, political party 'Godfathers' use their vast social and economic connections to select candidates and win them seats as an investment for which they expect to be repaid with cabinet positions or financial wealth. At the local level, traditional rulers play a prominent role in the survival of the hierarchy and the concentration of power and influence in the hands of the few. It is against this un-promising backdrop that the 2007 elections were held. Widespread malpractice occurred throughout all stages of the elections, with failures in the late delivery of voting materials, late commencement of polls in most of the states, ballot box stuffing, allocation of votes where voting did not take place, falsification of votes, deliberate denial of election materials to perceived strong-holds of the opposition, and other such actions (DFID, 2008:2).

The ruling PDP won the majority of the state and federal elections. Opposition gubernatorial candidates won in seven states, including the two most populous states, Lagos and Kano. Many election results were challenged in the courts, based on allegations of fraud, threats of violence, or the inability of voters to cast their ballots. Ultimately, the results of almost a third of the gubernatorial races were annulled, although many of the candidates who won in the first round won again when elections were rerun (Congressional Research Service, 2012:2). In fact, the extent of the failure of the 2007 elections was embarrassing to Nigeria and the then President, Musa Yar'Adua appointed an Electoral Reform Commission (ERC) to consider changes in the system.

4.3. The 2015 Elections

Nigeria's 2015 general elections marked a historic triumph for democracy in Africa's most populous country and largest economy, despite concerns over violence and the credibility of the polls leading up to the vote (IFES, 2015). The 2015 general elections were the fifth and most competitive elections since the transition from military rule in 1999. The elections were historic, with the opposition winning for the first time since 1999, and with the incumbent presidential candidate, Goodluck Jonathan, conceding defeat and thus paving the way for a peaceful handover of power. However these highly competitive elections were marred by incidents of violence, abuse of incumbency at state and federal levels, and attempts at manipulation. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) made commendable attempts to strengthen electoral arrangements, however systemic weaknesses leave the process vulnerable to abuse by political contenders (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015:4).

Procedural shortcomings were evident, in particular during collation and from analysis of polling unit results, however no centralised systemic fraud was observed. Excessive deference to judicial mechanisms for enforcement and corrective action risks protracted resolution to grievances. Media outlets gave a variety of views, however government-controlled media failed to provide legally-required equal coverage, clearly advantaging incumbents. The security situation, the large population, infrastructure challenges, and the fierce political competition, made for an extremely challenging election environment (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015:4). Prior to the elections there was widespread anxiety about the elections holding and the risk of violence and the consequent threat to the stability of the state.

The March 2015 presidential and legislative elections were regarded as competitive and generally well conducted by local and international observer organizations. Although the voting had been postponed by approximately six weeks, with officials citing insecurity in the northeast, the delay did not adversely affect the integrity of the process. Instead it appeared to have given the Independent National Electoral Commission more time to improve the distribution of permanent voter cards, pilot a new electronic voter-identification system, and fine-tune its election machinery. However, hundreds of thousands of Nigerians were still prevented from voting, either because they were internally displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency, or because they failed to receive their permanent voter cards in time. Election-related deaths were far less numerous than the roughly 1,200 reported during the 2011 election cycle, but more than 160 people were killed in election-related violence between January and April (Freedom House, 2016).

The sudden improvement as experienced in the 2015 elections, as posited by Sakariyau et al (2016:6141), was a product of internal and external factors. Internally, Nigeria was faced with many challenges ranging from security, economic depression, infrastructural decay and high level of impunity. All these, coupled with some other scenarios awakened the intervention of foreign powerful states and organisations in mounting pressure on Nigeria's government to play to the rules of free and fair elections. Based on this, there was limited political interference and this enabled the electoral umpire (INEC) to strengthen the electoral process via introduction of certain mechanisms which improved the conduct of the elections. Perhaps, Nigeria was saved from violence by the fact that the results were overwhelming in favour of the Muslim candidate, Major Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, who beat the incumbent Goodluck Jonathan. If the results had been close, accusations of cheating by both sides could have resulted in violence. In addition, Jonathan had the grace to concede as soon as the results were clear and to congratulate the winner and acknowledge him as the new president (Reese, 2015). Despite the improved elections and peaceful rotation of power, citizens' political choices remained impaired or undermined to some degree in 2015 by vote buying and intimidation, the influence of powerful domestic and international economic interests on policymaking, and the local domination of either the Nigerian military or Boko Haram militants in regions affected by the insurgency (Freedom House, 2016).

5. A Reflection on These Elections

Past elections before 2015 frequently returned the ruling PDP which often used the power of incumbency, state funds, the police and the army to carry out massive rigging of polls in its favour. Such was the confidence of the PDP in its expansive rigging machinery that one of its past chairmen boasted that the party would rule for 60 years (DSM, 2015). In the aftermath of these seriously flawed elections, millions of Nigerians are left wondering whether to keep faith in the electoral process and to believe that their votes count, or to succumb to apathy and disaffection with democracy. As Nigerians lose faith in the democratic process as a means for resolving disputes, the potential for tensions and instability will inevitably grow (NDI, 2008:44). Indeed, such observations about the previous elections reflect the deep frustrations of millions of Nigerians. In 2000, in the euphoric aftermath of Nigeria's transition from a long spell of military rule to democracy, 84 percent of Nigerians said that they were satisfied with democracy as practiced in Nigeria, according to the Afrobarometer survey. By 2005 that number had plummeted to 25 percent, lower than all the countries surveyed save Zimbabwe. Almost 70 percent of Nigerians did not believe elections would allow them to remove objectionable leaders, the survey found (Polygreen, 2007).

Corruption has made public office the fast track to wealth in Nigeria, and has intensified the struggle for elected offices, making elections a do-or-die affair and creating conflicts and instability. This has scared many professionals from contesting elections and has increasingly allowed charlatans to dominate the political arena. In fact, Nigeria has become a case where money corrupts, and corrupts absolutely (Ojameruaye, 2011). Nigeria is an obvious patient for anyone aiming to eradicate the ills of inadequate governance in Africa. It is infamous for its corruption, which has been fuelled by the massive sums of money generated by oil. Corruption in Nigeria is not, most observers agree, an aspect of how the state bureaucracy works: it is in many cases the main activity of the state. Corruption and sleaze often leave the in-principle oil-rich Nigerians without basic education or health care (Khakee, 2007:2). It is also an indisputable fact that corruption has so permeated the judiciary and legislature such that the needed "checks and balances" in a democracy no longer exist.

It is contended that as a result of electoral fraud, the people lose faith in the electoral process more so in opposition politics. One of the cardinal reasons why elections are held is to enforce government responsibility and accountability but electoral fraud strips election of its essence as an instrument of holding leaders accountable to the electorate. A government who rigged itself into power will not have any moral justification to perform hence it has no interest to satisfy anyone. A government is instituted to promote fundamental human rights but where a government does not care about the welfare of her citizens but dwells in accumulation of private wealth, democratic consolidation suffers as government responsibility and her accountability to the electorates would have been rendered useless (Obia, 2006). Despite the fact that the civilian regime has been uninterrupted since 1999, elite successions, particularly within the topmost executive government offices, have been marked by intrigues, violent dispositions and use of force spreading through general elections. Party primaries are reported to be the outcome of manipulation and co-optation by powerful Nigerian personalities mostly linked to the office of the chief political executive (Kifordu, 2011). Generally, it is observable that a combination of identity-based politics, fragmented polity and the first-past-the-post system of elections has always created conditions where narrow voting allegiances are cultivated through patronage dispensation.

6. Elections and Democratic Consolidation: Closing the Gaps

The importance of fostering democracy in Nigeria cannot be overstated. The most populous country in Africa, a dominant regional military and economic power, and one of the largest exporters of petroleum in the world, Nigeria is a nation of vast natural and human resources. It is also a nation of greatly unrealized potential, plagued for decades by financial mismanagement, widespread corruption, and explosive ethnic tensions. Successive military and civilian governments have plundered the public coffers and allowed the nation's infrastructure and productive capacity to fall apart (Carter and Wollack, 2000:9). How to key into the democratic experiment with a view to consolidating it therefore, becomes imperative.

Originally, the term "Democratic Consolidation" was meant to describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression. This normalization requires the expansion of citizen access, development of democratic citizenship and culture, broadening of leadership recruitment and training, the functioning of a mature civil society and political institutionalization.

In other words, democratic Consolidation refers to the sustenance of the practice of democracy and the preservation of those institutions through which the ideals of democracy are formulated, expressed and realized. Kaur (2007) states that democracy become sustainable when there is credible opposition capable of replacing an incumbent government by offering an alternative outline of politics and strategies that is likely to appeal to the electorate. By the concept of democratic consolidation, it connotes a deliberate political process in a polity by which democracy is "so broadly and profoundly legitimized among its citizens that it is very unlikely to break down". To consolidate democracy, it needs behavioural and institutional changes that normalize democratic politics and narrow its uncertainty (Eyinla, 2000: 22).

For Huntington (1991), democracy is consolidated after a second peaceful transfer of power – although of course a democratic reversal is still possible even at this stage. Linz and Stepan (1996) measure democratic consolidation on three dimensions: behavioural, attitudinal, and constitutional. On the behavioural dimension, democracy is consolidated when no significant national, social, economic, political, or institutional actors spend significant resources attempting to overthrow the state or resort to violence or foreign intervention to secede from the state. On the attitudinal dimension, democracy is consolidated when a strong majority of the population believes that democratic institutions and procedures

are the most appropriate way to govern society and support for anti-system alternatives is marginal. On the constitutional dimension, democracy is consolidated when government and nongovernment actors are subjected to, and habituated to, the resolution of conflict by the laws, procedures, and institutions of the new democracy. Essentially, democracy is consolidated when, in the famous words of Guiseppe di Palma, it has become the "only game in town" (Linz and Stepan, 1996:5-6).

The process of consolidating democracy in Nigeria must guarantee a synergy between the government and the governed. There is an urgent need to re-invent and reposition the wheel of democracy on our polity. The trend in the world is towards sustaining democracy (Majekodunmi, 2012:71). Achieving a consolidated democracy requires good governance by democratic regimes. It also demands upholding democratic values of popular participation, respect for the rule of law, free and fair elections and the independence of the judiciary. Achieving democratic consolidation therefore calls for the enthronement of democracy as a system of organizing both the society and government and thereafter creates concomitant institutions, culture, ethics, support system and the 'will' that are crucial in making it stable, efficient and responsive. For democracy to have any meaning, as Kolawole (cited in Majekodunmi, 2012:71) posits government must be accountable to the people, not only for the resources they received and spend, but for the very policies they formulated and executed. In this respect, if there is so much faith in democracy, it is because of the 'belief that democratic political processes will make the state perform better, curb corruption, rationally allocate resources and secure for the individuals a dignified place within the civil society.

As rightly observed by Omotola (2010:17-18), the prospect of consolidating democracy in Nigeria through elections remains a tall order, though not impossible to deliver. Consolidating democracy through elections depends largely on the institutional foundations of the electoral processes, particularly the EMB. A professional, capable, and independent INEC, free from partisan influence and government control, would provide better prospects of effective electoral administration. In a similar vein, Huntington (1984:214) advances conditions for the institutionalization of democracy, namely: higher levels of economic well-being; the absence of extreme inequalities in wealth and income; greater social pluralism, including particularly a strong and autonomous bourgeoisie; a more market oriented economy, greater influence vis-à-vis the society of existing democratic states; and a culture that is monistic and more tolerant of diversity and compromise. Thus, to advance the democratic project, the Nigerian public needs to gain confidence in its institutions. The public needs to feel that there are organs of the political system that can guarantee fairness and justice and that are not undermined by wealth through corruption. Common citizens must have recourse to democratic institutions in order to express demands and resolve conflicts. At this point, the public has little to no confidence in turning to any branch of the government to help directly resolve problems without the benefit of wealth. A central concern for building democracy in Nigeria is thus to alter this relationship between the oligarchy and the citizenry, so as to reconnect the state to its citizens in a more responsible and responsive manner (USAID, 2006:9).

7. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that democracy must create the basis for frequent democratic ways of changing the political leadership of a country; the promotion of a democratic culture, based on tolerance and respect for diverse views and opinions. The popular will of the people, expressed through popular democracy must be the foundation of any political system built on the rule of law and respect for human rights. It is also established in this essay that, at a minimum, the fundamental features of a democracy include government based on majority rule and the consent of the governed, the existence of free and fair elections, the protection of minority rights and respect for basic human rights. Democracy presupposes equality before the law, due process and political pluralism. In Nigeria, as could be deduced from this essay, the initial enthusiasm for democracy is turning to disillusionment as people sense that its dividends have not been realized in practice. Thus, given the hope citizens attach to every process of transfer of power during elections, they often feel frustrated by their perceived lack of influence over governments.

While admitting the fact that the entrenchment of these democratic norms is an on-going effort, Nigeria should adopt what Darkwa (2009) calls 'coexistence-sensitive democracy'. According to her, the relationship of coexistence and democracy is in fact symbiotic. A multi-cultural society that values coexistence is best positioned to build sustainable democracies. Similarly, a democracy built upon a foundation of coexistence-sensitivity is poised to nurture and sustain the coexistence among the citizens it represents. Because democracy explicitly values inclusivity and consensus-building and implicitly values peaceful expression of difference, it would seem a natural tool to promote positive coexistence in multi-cultural societies. Diamond (1997, 5) argues that above all things African societies need time to learn democratic habits for democratic consolidation and to build democratic institutions that are appropriate to their specific political and cultural situations. Therefore, in this case, the process of democratic consolidation has to be gradual.

Although other elements of democracy can develop before competitive elections are held, a country cannot be truly democratic until its citizens have the opportunity to choose their representatives. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people. The nexus between elections and democracy is therefore, a reality that Nigeria should locate so as to assist the people in realising their hopes and aspirations in an orderly society. Though the mechanisms seem to be in place for systems to be more democratic than they have ever been, yet there is a fundamental disconnect between the citizens and the elected officials that supposedly represent them, making a caricature of the democratic norms and values highlighted in this essay. There is no doubt that when it comes to contemporary democratic institutions things are not as they once were. But this is only to be expected 'when nineteenth-century concepts meet twenty-first century realities' (Warren, 2003). While citizen understanding of democracy and the degree to which they apply democratic principles may differ from country to country,

elections are a consistent feature in democracies and are the most tangible democratic act. When conducted regularly in a multiparty system, elections serve to institutionalize democratic norms by rewarding responsive and accountable governance by re-electing incumbents and sending poor performers home.

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