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Nigeria's 2019 general elections – a shattered hope?

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Introduction: Nigeria's 2019 General Elections, A Shattered Hope?

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Nigeria's democratic journey reached another milestone following the successful completion of the general elections in 2019. Given the intense competition that surrounds elections in Nigeria, every electoral period generates fear of a possible large-scale conflict that may cause democratic breakdown or national disintegration. The fact that Nigeria scaled through with the general elections is a major achievement in its democratic history.

Clearly, the 2019 elections were followed with great expectations because of the improvements recorded in the previous general elections in 2015. The 2015 elections generated positive perception of the electoral process for a number of reasons. For the first time in Nigeria's electoral history, a winner emerged from the opposition party, and there was a successful alternation of power. The 2015 elections saw remarkable improvements in the incorporation of technology into the electoral process, which contributed to strengthening the integrity of the elections. Since 1999, after democratic transition, there was also a decline in election petitions that had become a common phenomenon after the announcement of election results. It was, therefore, not a surprise that international and local observers gave some positive assessments of the 2015 elections (Onapajo, 2015).

However, going by public comments and election observers' reports, the 2019 general elections did not meet the record of the 2015 elections. Nigerians were dissatisfied with the management of the elections by the Electoral Management Body (EMB), the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). INEC battled with logistical problems and administrative deficiencies that impacted negatively on the quality of the elections. The logistical challenges caused a sudden postponement of the presidential election six hours before its commencement on 16 February 2019. The postponement significantly dampened public expectations about the prospects of the electoral process. The elections were followed with reports of disenfranchisement as a result of arbitrary cancellation of poll results, over spurious reasons, by the EMB. This is more problematic as most of the cancellations occurred in areas considered as strongholds of the opposition parties.

The state security personnel, responsible for securing the environment for a credible election, were again at the centre of controversies. Allegations of partisanship trailed the conduct of the security agencies to such extent that the public perceived the large presence of the security agencies as a calculated strategy to intimidate voters. Despite the huge presence of security officials, the election was still marred by violence that led to a number of deaths and arson attacks on the EMB facilities. Unsurprisingly, voter turnout was abysmally low in comparison with the previous elections. With a 35 per cent voter turnout, the country recorded the lowest turnout on the continent, which speaks to the growing public disenchantment and mistrust in the electoral process (Ojetunde, 2019).

Although election observers and analysts conclude that the above incidents did not significantly affect the results, it is instructive that the courts have nullified many of the election results on the grounds of irregularities. The nullification of some of the results does not only confirm concerns by the public, but also indicates the weak quality of the elections and the need for continuous reforms in the electoral process. While the judiciary has played a major role in confirming the quality (or otherwise) of the election, it should be noted that the judiciary has been another source of controversy in the electoral process. There is need for caution in celebrating recent judgments from the courts. Increasingly, studies have demonstrated that the Nigerian judiciary

can be compromised and have become a tool for electoral manipulation (Onapajo and Uzodike, 2014). Some of the judgments on petitions from the 2019 elections have attracted huge criticisms from the public and reduced confidence in the judiciary. As such, electoral jurisprudence has also remained a challenge in the Nigerian electoral process.

Takeaways from the 2019 General Elections

The 2019 elections indicate no significant progress in Nigeria's democratic politics. The issues that have characterised politics and impacted negatively on democratic consolidation featured prominently. The contributions in the present special issue have compellingly illustrated how the elections produced the recurrent problems Nigeria has faced over a period of time. Before delving into the detailed studies focusing on the topics, we provide a summary of the dominant issues that characterised the 2019 elections below:

Weak democratic culture: The elections show that the political elite are yet to fully embrace the ethos and values that underlie liberal democracy. Elite behaviour remains a challenge in Nigeria's democracy. Driven by the "do-or-die" mentality, the elite engaged in practices that undermined and frustrated efforts established by the EMB to strengthen the electoral process. The party primaries for candidate selection were overwhelmed with large-scale violence and unresolved controversies. There were arson attacks on INEC's buildings and election materials with a deliberate aim of sabotaging the elections. The elite recruited political thugs to intimidate voters and developed sophisticated strategies for vote buying and other malpractices, despite intense campaign against them before the elections.

Weak and non-neutral state institutions: The elections bring to the fore the popular discourse on the weakness of state institutions and their vulnerability to manipulation by the political elite. Election-related agencies that are germane to ensuring electoral integrity could not meaningfully display sufficient independence and impartiality in the elections. The EMB and security agencies cannot be totally absolved from many allegations of bias for the ruling party. There were numerous cases of vote cancellations by the INEC in areas considered support-bases of the

opposition. INEC's sudden postponement of the presidential election a few hours to its commencement has also been alleged to have been engineered by the political actors – although with no substantial proof. The massive deployment of security personnel to opposition areas have been claimed to have discouraged voting in the area and limited the chances of the opposition presidential candidate.

Low public trust: The citizen's trust in democratic institutions and processes has been on a downward trend since democratic transition in 1999. Surveys demonstrate rising public dissatisfaction in the Nigerian state due to bad governance, failure to deliver on promises and perceived partiality of state institutions, including those related to elections (Bratton and Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). This has accounted for growing political apathy and aversion to democratic principles by the citizens. The 2019 general elections experienced the worst voter apathy in the history of the country. In fact, President Muhammadu Buhari was re-elected by just 18 per cent of registered voters, while only 35 per cent registered voters voted in the election.

Cleavage-based voting: The voting pattern shows that Nigerian voters are not yet sophisticated in their voting decisions. Their choices are still driven by primordial sentiments, particularly ethnicity and religion, and attest to social divisions that have enveloped politics in the country since its independence. Notwithstanding the reality that the principal candidates for the presidential election shared many identities in terms of religion and ethnicity, the geo-politics of support for their parties reinforces ethno-religious factors in voter behaviour. The All Progressives Congress (APC) won in the geo-political zones with a huge population of Muslims and the northern Hausa-Fulani group, while the People's Democratic Party (PDP) attracted more votes in areas more inhabited by Christians and southern ethnic groups.

Election violence: Violence has been a hallmark of elections in Nigeria. It was responsible for democracy breakdown in the previous democratic experiences. Since transition to democracy in 1999, elections have been marred by violence due to low level of democratic culture. A similar pattern of violence occurred in the 2019 elections, although with lesser cases of post-election violence experienced in 2011. The Situation Room, a local civil society group, reported that 626

lives were lost in the election process, including the pre-election campaign period and during the election (Sanni, 2019).

Articles in the Special Issue

This Special Issue provides a compendium of work on the Nigerian 2019 general elections, with the principal aim of interrogating the quality of the electoral process and establishing the state of democracy in the country. The Issue has eight papers, which surveyed the elections from different perspectives.

The first paper by Hakeem Onapajo examines the quality of election management in the 2019 general elections. Focusing on the EMB, the paper demonstrated the weakness of state institutions in delivering credible elections in Nigeria. It was argued that the INEC lacks required independence to function effectively following the global framework for EMBs. The author argues that the dependent structure of the EMB makes the agency vulnerable to manipulations, which impacted negatively on the management and integrity of the elections. The author concludes that a structural reform of the EMB is important for the achievement of electoral integrity in Nigeria.

In his contribution, Dele Babalola provides a historical analysis of voting pattern in Nigeria to establish continuity or change in ethno-religious voting in Nigeria's plural society. With principal focus on the 2019 presidential election, the author demonstrates that ethnicity and religion provide strong instruments of mobilisation in the elites' quest for political power. Ethnic and religious identities are particularly important to the political elite's calculations in how elections are won and lost. Babalola concludes that the presidential election results reflected the influence of ethno-religious sentiments as voters showed preference for candidates of their ethno-regional or religious identity. Thus, the election reinforced continuity in the voting pattern along primordial lines.

Fatai Abiodun's paper examined the role of technological devices introduced in the electoral process and their challenges in improving integrity of the 2019 elections. Although consumed by technical hitches such as malfunctioning of card readers, delay in accreditation and voting, the inability of polling officials to operate the technology efficiently, the author argued that the use of the technology in the 2019 elections improved the integrity of the process and also deepened democracy.

Azeez Olaniyan's paper investigates the phenomenon of vote buying during the 2019 general elections. Olaniyan argues that the high level of poverty and illiteracy, common in African countries, provide a suitable environment for politicians to engage in the distribution of material benefits to influence voting. The paper demonstrated the ingenuity of the political actors to devise new methods of vote buying to respond to growing sophistication in the electoral process. Relying on secondary sources such as reports of local and international election observers and newspapers, the paper sees the new methods as a response of the politicians to the series of electoral reforms which now make the old style of election malpractices such as ballot snatching and ballot stuffing difficult. Thus, the phenomenon of vote buying reflects a negative response to the growing improvement in the country's electoral process.

Onuoha et al's contribution focused on the 'militarisation' of the 2019 elections, suggesting the heavy deployment of security personnel during elections and its challenge to free and fair elections. The authors argue that militarisation of election is connected to the post-colonial character of politics that places excessive premium on state power. They conclude that the deployment of the security forces, particularly, the military in polling centres heightened voter apathy, human rights violations, and also strained civil-military relations in the country. The authors advocate a security sector reform that prioritises the use of police in election duties.

In their contribution, Oshodi and Oshodi analyse the election observation work of Commonwealth Observer Group's (COG) in Nigeria. Exploring the stakeholders' ecosystem approach, they primarily did a comparative analysis of Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 general elections. The authors argued that there were similarities in the COG reports on both elections.

However, they noted areas of improvements in the report of the organisation on the 2019 elections. Going by the comparison of both the 2015 and 2019 reports, the authors conclude that the COG did not pay sufficient attention to commit stakeholders on working with the recommendations they offer on improving the integrity of the process.

Amao's paper discusses the international dimension of the general elections. As the most populous and largest economy in Africa, Nigeria's remains crucial to the development of the continent and of strategic interest to the international community. The author highlighted several challenges in the 2019 elections but concluded that the successful completion of the process has positive implications for Nigeria's international image. The author argues that the elections improved the reputation of Nigeria as Africa's leader by improving its chances of continuous advocacy for democracy in the continent. In addition, peace and stability was engendered in the West African sub-region because the elections did not lead to large-scale conflict and democratic collapse.

Using one of the hotspots of the Nigerian 2019 general election, Kwara State of Nigeria as a case study, Mustapha and Omar explore the important contributions of social media use to youths' political participation in Nigeria. The paper is premised on the argument that social media provide expressive and mobilisation resources for youths' political engagement. The authors discovered that youths are more active in online political participation than offline politics. In their conclusion, they call for the motivation and mobilisation of youths for offline political participation.

Tribute to Abu

Abubakar Momoh (1964-2017) was a professor of political theory at the Department of Political Science, Lagos State University (LASU). Abu – as he is fondly called – contributed to the academia in many ways. But his scholarship on democracy and elections go beyond the 'small walls' gained global attraction. Until his death on 29 May 2020 (a day that coincided with Nigeria's Democracy Day until it was changed on 8 June 2018 by the Muhammadu Buhari's

government to 12 June in commemoration of the annulled election of Late M.K.O Abiola in 1993), he was on sabbatical – serving as Director-General at The Electoral Institute (TEI), an affiliated training institute to Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). He was a scholar-activist, who had earlier narrowly escaped death while observing a re-run gubernatorial election in Ekiti State. He has been an electoral observer in African and European countries.

Abu remains one of the very few excellent political theorists of Nigerian origin. His understanding – and indeed, discourse – of democracy and elections in Africa is not disconnected from the crucial local and international structural context that (re)produced them in African countries, once posing the nagging question: ‘democracy or democratisation?’ (see Momoh, 2006, p. 63-64). Thus, while raising questions about democracy and elections in Africa, he strongly challenges its trivialisation and envelopment in the discourse of democratisation. Demonstrating his intellectual depth, Abu was a researcher and visiting lecturer at several European and American universities, including the Catholic University, Brussels; the University of Ibadan; King’s College, London; University of London; International Development Centre, Open University, Milton Keynes; Bielefeld University; Institute of Development Studies, University of Helsinki; Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University; Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, South Africa; Nordic Africa Institute, Sweden; African and African-American Studies Department, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Nigerian Defence College; and James Coleman African Studies Centre, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), among others. A former Vice President of African Association of Political Science (AAPS), Abu played active part in organisations such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU).

His colleagues and students have instituted an Annual Lecture in his name and the Moot Parliament in the Faculty of Social Science at LASU has been named after him. The Abubakar Momoh Reading Group in LASU has also been initiated as a multidisciplinary platform for

intellectual debates and engagement of books and articles published about Africa. His students and colleagues will mostly remember him as an excellent teacher, activist and above all, a humanist who contributed to improving elections in Nigeria.

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