

The Role of the Civil Society in Promoting Credible Elections in Nigeria: Lessons from the 2015 General Elections

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Abstract:- This paper examined the roles the civil society played in ensuring the success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The paper employed qualitative research method hinged on obtaining information from secondary sources including: Books, scholarly articles and newspaper reports. The research averred that general elections in Nigeria had always resulted into violent conflict, the consequences of which had resulted to the terminations of the first two republics in Nigeria. The elections held in the fourth republic preceding the 2015 general elections also toed the lines of the elections in the earlier republics as they were also largely characterized by different forms of electoral violent conflicts. However, the roles played by the civil society before, during and after the 2015 general elections and the then incumbent President Good luck Jonathan's magnanimity to gracefully consent to defeat contributed immensely to the smooth transfer of power, the very first of its kind in Nigeria. The study advocated that future elections should build on the successes recorded in the 2015 general elections. Inter alia, the study recommended that the civil society in Nigeria should be further strengthened to participate more effectively in future elections in order to ensure democratic consolidation in the country.

Keywords:- civil society, elections, fourth republic, democratic consolidation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Elections are indispensable in any political process of any democratic state (Ngwube 2016). Nigeria as a democratic State has and continue to embark on elections to install democratic leaders to govern the country. Right from independence, Nigerian elections have always been fraught with irregularities. Electoral crisis was largely responsible for the truncation of the first and second republics in 1966 and 1983 respectively. To a much lesser degree, electoral crisis was also a feature of the abortive third republic. When the military administration of Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar started the transition program in 1998 to return Nigeria to civil rule in 1999, there were high hopes that Nigerians, most especially the political class, had learned their lessons and that the

emerging fourth republic would be characterized by free and fair elections. It was thought that electoral malpractices including rigging, stuffing of ballot boxes, political assassinations, political violence and all other acts capable of causing electoral crisis had been confined to the trash bin of history. History recalls that Nigeria had witnessed such unpatriotic democratic occurrences, for instance, the Western Regional election of 1965 was a watershed of Nigerian democracy. The election has been described as a "charade of apprehension structural and psychological violence, the combination of which heightened insecurity in the country" (Salawu, 2013: 292). However, that was to be a forlorn hope as the 1999 general elections were allegedly tainted by electoral malpractices (Adenuga, 2009). As Adenuga & Aborisade (2011) observed, succeeding elections, that is, the general elections of 2003, 2007 and 2011 were characterized by increasing levels of electoral malpractices. The politics of "do or die" became the order of the day and the security agencies, which are expected to maintain peace and order before, during and after election periods were also alleged to have been active participants in the acts of electoral malpractices. Against this backdrop, there was the fear that the 2015 general elections were going to lead to the breakdown of the Nigerian state as predicted in certain quarters (Awolaja, 2014). The build-up to the elections was also characterized by what can be referred to as politics of bitterness and calumny between the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). Mudslinging and hate speeches were the preferred campaign options and Nigerians, with bated breath awaited the Armageddon which was surely to be the conclusion of such hate packaged campaigns. However, the Nigerian Civil Society proved to be the messiah that would avert the disaster.

The motivating factor for these politics of do or die is becoming incessant occurrences in African politics particularly in Nigerian politics. Scholars have argued that the financial benefit that is in politics particularly in Nigerian politics is the major motivation for the passionate desire for do or die politics in Nigeria (Walecki, 2008). The civil society needs to be sensitized on how to be vanguard of electoral malpractices in Nigeria. Further training on the basic rudiment

of early warning signs of conflict, with an alert system call for early intervention thus stopping some possible damages if responded early to nib them to the bud (Adams 2012).

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Elections can be regarded as the linchpin of any democracy because they provide the only recognized democratic avenue through which people choose their leaders. Thus, elections help confer legitimacy on governments and they help facilitate peaceful transfer of power from one government to another. In Nigeria however, elections have proved to be the albatross to democratic consolidation as they often are characterized by irregularities which are inimical to the development of an enduring democratic culture. Albert (2012), posits that violent conflict has contributed in no small measure to the underdevelopment of Nigerian State. The 2015 general elections however broke the jinx as, against all expectations, they facilitated a peaceful transfer of power from one government to another and from one political party to another, a feat that had no precedence in the annals of elections in Nigeria. This feat can be ascribed to the roles played by the civil society before, during and after the elections. What did the civil society do that averted the possibility of the 2015 elections from been a watershed elections in Nigeria and how can this feat be replicated in future elections. Also, how can they be further empowered to support credible elections in Nigeria notwithstanding the role money and power played in Nigerian politics? The answer to this question is the main pre-occupation of this study.

III. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

In 2019, Nigerians will return to the polls to choose leaders that will guide the affairs of the State for a period of four years. As earlier stated, periods of general elections in Nigeria are usually associated with crisis arising from electoral malpractices and violence. The 2015 general elections proved to be the exception given the roles played by the civil society. It is thus of utmost importance to study the roles played by civil society in ensuring the success of the 2015 general elections in order to replicate such successes in the 2019 general elections and other future elections.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *Civil Society*

Just like most concepts in the social sciences, civil society has no one universally accepted definition as different scholars have divergent views of the concept. However, many areas of convergence exist in the discussions of civil society. Extant literature on the concept agrees that the notion of civil society is as old as organized society. According to Singh (2012), the initial conception of the civil society can be gleaned from the definition of the word 'civil' which qualifies the term 'society'. Hence, any society that has evolved from barbarism and crudity to an appreciable level of civilization

typified by a citizenry with polished manners and a non-autocratic leadership can be termed a civil society. However, the modern idea of civil society which emerged in the 18th century provides a broader conception of civil society than just a population with civilized manners (Ghaus-Pasha, 2005). A major area of agreement among scholars is the idea that the civil society is located in the space between the private and public spheres (Essia&Yearoo, 2009).

In view of the above idea of what the civil society is, Akinboye and Olorunfoba (2007:6) described it as "organizations that work in an arena between the household, the private sector and the state to negotiate matters of public concern". For Ikelegbe (2013:6) "it is the organized socio-political and economic life of citizens and communities, for the mobilization of actions and engagements in relation to their needs, interests, existence and survival." Singh (2012:17) quoting Antony McGrew (1998:69) also refers to it as "those agencies, institutions, movements, cultural forces and social relationships which are both privately and voluntarily organized and which are not directly controlled by the state". Ibitoye (2012) succinctly describes the civil society as "formal organizations of people with common interest for the purpose of influencing government to the advantage of the general public". Mgba (2015:178) quoting Scholte (2004:214) provides a more detailed definition of civil society. He defines civil society as:

"a political space where voluntary associations seek, from outside political parties, to shape the rules that govern one or the other aspect of social life, bringing citizens together non-coercively in deliberate attempts to mould the formal rules and informal norms that regulate social interactions. This is not only to promote social capital needed for group political engagement but also to engender political participation beyond the sphere provided by formal political society, thereby, guaranteeing a reduced space for the state to impose its will on the larger society. Thus, civil society is an essentially participatory, broad-based and self-governing formation engaged in shaping public affairs, public policy and governance. It is a formation that is voluntarily constituted, non-state, fairly autonomous, largely self-generating and self-supporting, and is conceived with civil and public purposes. Civil society is the private realm of the citizenry, in juxtaposition with the state and corporate realm."

From the above given definitions, the civil society can thus be conceived as a space that is outside the public and private spheres where private citizens, groups and organizations can actively engage in socio-economic and political activities geared towards influencing decisions both in the private and public spheres, especially that of the public sphere. Civil Society Organizations include Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), community groups, trade unions, faith-based institutions, media organizations, professional associations, students associations, human and

civil rights groups, think tanks, etc. (Akinboye&Oloruntoba, 2007; Mgba, 2015).

V. ELECTIONS

Oni, Chidozie and Agbude (2013) aver that elections provide the main mechanism for people to choose their leaders, indicate their preferred policies and programmes, and confer a government with authority and legitimacy. In the same vein, Akinboye and Oloruntoba (2007) posit that elections give people the ample opportunity to participate in politics, either as candidates for public offices or as members of the electorate.

From the above definitions, it becomes obvious that elections are closely related to democracy. Indeed, it is an aberration for a State to be described as democratic if elections are not held periodically(Oni, Chidozie&Agbude, 2013). Thus, while elections may not be synonymous with democracy, they are one of its basic determining characteristics (Ndulo&Lulo, 2010).

➤ *The Civil Society and Nigerian Electoral History: An Overview*

Given the fact that elections provide the main avenue for the acquisition of legal authority and legitimacy, they are often keenly contested. As Kuhne (2010:2) rightly observes, elections are often regarded as the “fierce contest for positions of leadership, power and access to resources”. Thus, in multi-ethnic States, such as Nigeria, elections are often turned into battle grounds where the various ethnic groups fight bitter wars to capture power and by extension, the access to the resources of the State (Oni, Chidozie&Agbude, 2013).

However, where the civil society is firmly entrenched and where they are allowed to operate without restraints, elections become the avenue for peaceful exchange of governmental powers. As Kuhne (2010) posits, a very key element of a good election is the capacity to build up the confidence of all the stakeholders involved in the electoral process. Where there are adequate confidence-building measures, the election is bound to be successful but where the electorate, the candidates for offices and other stakeholder’s exhibit lack of confidence in the electoral process, the election becomes doomed.

The civil society has always played important roles in the democratic experiences of the Nigerian state. Civil Society Organizations including labour and students unions were at the forefront of the struggle for the independence of the Nigerian State (Akinboye & Oloruntoba, 2007; Mgba, 2015). The pertinent questions to ask at this juncture is did the civil society go to sleep after helping Nigeria to gain her independence from the British? Why did the elections of the first three republics experience serious hiccups? The answer to these questions is not far-fetched. The governments of the republics saw and treated Civil Society Organizations as

members of the opposition, rabble rousers and anti-democratic elements(Ibitoye, 2012). Members of these organizations were either imprisoned or hounded into exile and without the effective participation of the civil society in the electoral processes in these republics, the resultant lack of confidence in the processes doomed the elections.

The civil society was also very instrumental to the birth of the Nigerian fourth republic in 1999. Civil Society Organizations including students unions such as the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS);labour unions such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC); professional associations including the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU); the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA); the National Union of Teachers (NUT); the Nigeria Medical Association (NMA);and human rights groups including the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO); Campaign for Democracy (CD); Civil Liberties Organization (CLO); and the Committee for Human Rights (CDHR); fought the military organization to a standstill and despite all the threats and intimidation, they achieved the seemingly impossible (Akinboye & Oloruntoba, 2007; Gberevbie, 2013). Another pertinent question at this juncture is despite the virility of the civil society, why did the earlier elections in the fourth republic also witness distress? The answer to this question is also not far-fetched. As Adenuga (2009) and Ibitoye (2012) note, Nigerians spent about thirty years under military rule and thus it was to be expected that the psyche of the average Nigerian had become militarized and this psyche impacted negatively on the conduct of these elections. The civil society was thus saddled with the very important responsibility of demilitarization the Nigerian psyche.

➤ *The Civil Society and the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria*

As stated earlier, the civil society was instrumental to the success of the 2015 general elections. How did the civil society achieve this feat? First, it recognized that a civil society that is worth its salt must be autonomous of governmental structures and at the same time must not be seen as an adversary of the government. A neutral civil society can best engage the government and other political stake holders without being accused of bias which is precisely what the Nigerian civil society did and is still doing. Secondly, it is understood that a fire brigade approach to the issue of election monitoring and averting electoral crisis can only be an invitation to anarchy. Elections come in three phasesviz, the pre-election period, the election period itself and the post-election period and each of these phases is as important as the other. The solid foundation of 2015 election was peaceful, free and fair. This was the civil society’s agenda, which they carried out through educating Nigerian masses especially the Youth, through series of enlightenment programmes. The role of the civil society was such that they engaged security agencies and various stakeholders on the need for smear-free campaigns. They were also skilled to strengthen their participation as they understood the early warning and early

response systems by giving timely alert of possible violence to the necessary security agencies(Mavalla, 2014, 2016).

The civil society took an active role to ensure democratic oversight of the security agencies were called to account for their actions through accountability mechanisms; and interfacing with the media for a factual and balanced reporting of all election related developments (International Crisis Group, 2014; Musa, 2014, Adams, 2012). In this wise, civil society organizations engaged various political and security actors proffering how they can carry out peaceful election in a bid to ensure a violent free and fair election. Also, the Democracy Vanguard and Enough is Enough Nigeria conducted voter's education and enlightenment campaigns. Furthermore, the Transitions Monitoring Group (TMG); CLEEN Foundation; the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC); and National Association for Peaceful Elections in Nigeria (NAPEN); the Niger Delta Civil Society Coalition (NDCSC) all participated to ensure a peaceful, free and fair election (International Crisis Group, 2014). Ikhilae (2015) also largely attributes the success of the 2015 elections to the activities of the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room. The Situation Room, is a coalition of about sixty civil society organizations, which monitored the processes leading to the elections and which also engaged major key players in the electoral process. The key officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), top security operatives, chieftains of the various political parties and the flag bearers of the political parties are called to actively participate in the elections.

Fadoju (2015) also observes the growing percentage of Nigerians with internet access and social media use; the civil society mobilized and used technology to create political discussions. They used these mediums to provide information on the election process and the candidates vying for political offices. The Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation (2015) also confirmed that about eighteen Nigerian civil society organizations in partnership with seven international organizations collaborated to use technology to improve transparency and openness in the 2015 elections.

The civil society also engaged the government over its decision to postpone the elections from February 14 and 28, 2015 to March 28 and April 11, 2015. It warned the government, especially the executive and judicial agencies, against scuttling the electoral process as Nigerians and the entire world were keenly watching developments in the Nigerian state and that the postponement had created doubts over the sincerity of the Nigerian government. It therefore advised the government to keep strictly to the new election timetable as another postponement could degenerate into an electoral crisis. During the period of election, the civil societies closely monitored the elections and observed lapses including the late arrival of some electoral officers to polling centres. The civil society also monitored malfunctioning of some card reader machines, unwholesome behavior of some

security personnel and interference in the electoral process in some states which were quickly reported to the appropriate quarters (Ikhilae, 2015).

The use of social media technology and with effective collaboration with the print and electronic media, the civil society kept the good people of Nigeria and even the world in general abreast of developments during the election period. Hence, the large beam of civil society's searchlight on the conduct of the election significantly reduced the tendency of unscrupulous politicians and their agents to commit electoral malpractices. These agents covered a wide area where polling stations were situated to be able to give adequate reportage of the elections which conferred a high level of credibility on the 2015 elections.

In the post-election period, the civil society also engaged in the general assessment of the 2015 elections in order to provide a better framework for the conduct of future elections in Nigeria. As Musa (2014) notes, the real assignment of the civil society is to ensure that the government that comes in after the 2015 elections toes the path of good governance and judging by the roles the civil society played in the pre-election and election periods. It is safe to assume that the civil society has fully come to the maturity of actively engaging the government in the task of ensuring good governance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The 2015 general elections in Nigeria were basically different from other elections given the confidence-building roles played by the civil society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments should see the civil society as partners in progress. Where the civil society is seen and treated as an enemy of the government in power, it portends doom for the state. By extension, any election without the active participation of the civil society will end in crisis and thus the governments formed on the basis of such elections lose legitimacy. It is wisdom for every government to strengthen the capacity of the civil society to play its roles in the society. Governments may not necessarily fund Civil Society Organizations but it is imperative for governments, through their policies, to create enabling environments for the civil society to flourish.

As a corollary of the above, Civil Society Organizations should also not see itself as opposition parties. While the main essence of the civil society is to make governments more responsible and responsive to the people they are supposed to serve, this objective can be better realized through positive interactions with governments than through destructive criticisms. Governments will readily partner with and accede to the demands of a Civil Society Organization that is seen to be more interested in achieving its objective through rational

avenues than with a Civil Society Organization that is seen to be hostile to the government in power. Thus, while autonomy is a major attribute of the civil society, such autonomy must not be defined by hostility towards the government. For example, the civil society was able to change the decision of the Jonathan Good luck led administration from postponing the 2015 general elections through positive engagements.

Finally, the roles played by the civil society during the 2015 general elections should also be studied and adopted as the template for the activities of the civil service in future elections.

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