

# **Towards Sustainable Electoral Process and Democratic Development in Nigeria: What Role for the Universities?**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

It is generally recognized that fortifying democracy is vital to sustainable development, but what is not as widely acknowledged is that improving the integrity of elections is key to democratic development. Regularly held elections signify commencement of a journey on a liberal democratic trajectory, but only regularly held elections infused with appreciable, cumulative integrity would lead to, and result in, the actualization of the objectives of democratic development. Hence, sustainable electoral process with requisite integrity is the panacea for democratic development in Nigeria, as indeed in all African countries struggling with the challenges of democratization.

All over Africa, and indeed, to some extent, throughout the developing world, the electoral process is failing to entrench good governance and stable and sustainable democratic political systems as a result of what can be termed as a deficit of electoral

integrity. Deeply embedded unwholesome practices, such as use of money, violence, incumbency powers, and a range of electoral malpractices and fraudulent activities in the electoral process grossly undermine its utility as a vehicle for liberal democratic development. The mere regularity in the conduct of elections does not, in itself, bring about desirable democratic development. Rather regularity of elections merely becomes a ritual, which does not yield substantive results or enduring benefits to the majority of the citizens, unless the preparations and conduct of, as well as participation by stakeholders in, elections have integrity. Indeed, dominant political classes can, and often do, hijack the electoral process through various means, to access power for selfish and self-serving objectives, rather than for democratic development that would satisfy the needs and aspirations of majority of the citizens in a country. In virtually all cases, ritualized elections, which lack integrity merely serve to legalize, if not 'legitimize', access and control of power into executive or legislative arms of government by people unconcerned with, or indifferent to, the requirements of sustainable democratic development. Hence, such elections do not catalyze, nor guarantee responsive and responsible representation and/or governance, which is defined as:

... the provision of political, social and economic goods that a citizen has the right to expect from his or her state, and that a state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens (IIAG).

Until about five (5) years ago, the dominant theoretical postulations in the study of elections especially in Africa tended to equate or conflate regularly held elections with “free, fair and credible elections”, and even attribute to them the catalytic power of entrenching sustainable democratic development (Lindberg, 2006 and 2009). However, the ground is now decisively shifting from these spurious theoretical postulations. From a pre-supposition that periodic and regular elections would catalyze democracy and good governance, scholars are coming around to recognize that only **elections imbued with integrity** can contribute to regime legitimacy, stability, and good, responsible and responsive governance in a modern nation state (Norris, 2014; Martinez i Coma, and Gromping 2015).

Given this context, therefore, the challenging theoretical as well as empirical questions would be: how can we bring about, ensure, and entrench electoral integrity in African political and democratization processes? What factors or variables are essential for this? What agents and/or agencies can and should catalyze this required change? These pertinent questions are interrogated in this presentation.

I advocate that the conduct of elections with integrity is a task that must be pursued in order to bring about desirable democratic development in Africa generally and in Nigeria in

particular. Furthermore, I argue that in pursuit of this desirable objective, the universities in general and academics in particular, have significant roles to play, and they need to take this task with the seriousness it deserves. Universities are primary institutions for the production of knowledge founded on research, for imparting this knowledge in the general quest for the truth, as well as in specifically training students for societal problem-solving undertakings. They are also institutional foundations for advanced values orientation and reorientation and positive attitude shaping and changing. Academics who drive these processes in the universities thus have crucial roles to play in researching the nature and dynamics of the challenges posed by lack of electoral integrity, teaching and imparting knowledge about how to address the challenges and imbue our electoral process with integrity, and shaping, molding and influencing positive attitude and re-orientation of the youth in enhancing the integrity of our elections.

### **Conceptualizing Electoral Integrity**

Electoral Integrity is conceptualized in this discourse to mean, ideally, the absence of malpractices and fraudulent activities in the preparation, management and conduct of all aspects of the electoral process, which enables contestants and voters to engage with the electoral process with fairness, equity and justice, such that the outcome is deemed as legitimate and

acceptable. Of course, in reality, there have been some sorts of electoral malpractices for almost as long as there have been elections. Electoral malpractices are defined as “the manipulation of electoral processes and outcomes so as to substitute personal or partisan benefit for the public interest” (Birch 2011). Such manipulations range from: “manipulation of electoral institutions”; to manipulation of the vote choice”; “manipulation of electoral administration” (Wikipedia); and manipulation of overall outcome of the election.

Considering the range of malpractices and electoral manipulations, it can be said that no elections are perfect and none are likely ever to be. Hence, electoral integrity is relative and measured as a continuum from the extreme worst-case scenario, to the ideal best-case scenario, just as considering a country as being democratic is on such a scale and range. In other words, the less the incidences of electoral malpractice the more the integrity of an election and, conversely, the more the malpractices the less the integrity of the electoral process.

However, there is only a minimal level of electoral malpractices, which would not significantly impeach the integrity of elections and that could be said to be tolerable, but that would require perpetual alertness, vigilance and constant reforms to address.

According to the Kofi Anan foundation, Electoral Integrity can be defined as

any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle (2012).

Similarly, electoral integrity has been said to refer to “international standards and global norms governing appropriate conduct of elections” (Norris 2014), which “... apply universally to all countries throughout the electoral cycle, including during pre-election period, the campaign, on polling day, and in the aftermath” (Young 2019).

A lot of the factors that affect the integrity of an election are embedded within the electoral process. However, as ACE has observed, “to ensure integrity, other factors outside the electoral institutions need to be taken into account and strengthened. Electoral officials, judges and courts must have independence that is respected by politicians” (2012).

The quality of an election, hence its integrity, is measured and assessed by domestic and international observers, as well as other stakeholders, using criteria and benchmarks derived from global standards, norms and best practices; the greater the compliance, the better the integrity. There are three fundamental

principles of electoral integrity, namely: ethical behavior; fairness and impartiality; and transparency and accountability (ACE 2012). Ethical behavior accepts the moral obligation of engaging with the electoral process in accordance with the rules of the game and respect for the fundamental rights of all other participants.

For liberal democratic countries therefore, electoral integrity connotes the absence or near absence of electoral malpractices, and serious problems which arise in all stages of the electoral process, ranging from those associated with imbedded inequities with electoral laws, to lack of level playing field in money and media'; padded or blotted electoral roll; rigged declaration of results and partisan and/or partial electoral management bodies (EMBs). (See Wikipedia)

As ACE has noted, “without electoral integrity, leaders and officials lack accountability to the public, confidence in the election result is weak, and government lacks the necessary legitimacy” (2012).

Studies of elections and election observation reports generally and on Nigeria in particular expose profound evidence of persistent electoral malpractices, the enormity and consequences of which undermine the integrity of the elections and the

democratization processes they are supposed to engender (e.g.: Ujo 2012a and 2012b; Cheeseman 2015; Cheeseman and Klaas 2018; Norris 2015 and 2017; Evrensel 2006; Kurfi 1983 and 2013; Datau 2014). In most African countries, and Nigeria in particular, elections are engaged by contestants, especially incumbent office holders and/or governments with what is commonly called a ‘do-or-die’ disposition; to be won by any means necessary. Winning elections is therefore seen as an end in itself. Once elections are won in this manner, elected officials become indifferent to popular needs and aspirations and in no time lose confidence and trust of the citizens. Indeed, as citizens perceive that their votes do not count, and that their choices are truncated, they lose interest in the democratization process and become indifferent and apathetic to political and electoral participation.

### **Towards Sustainable Electoral Process in Nigeria**

As I argued in a recent paper (Jega 2019), a situational and contextual analysis of the electoral process in Nigeria reveals an incredible level of electoral malpractices and thus acute deficiency in electoral integrity, which are no doubt among the the major sources/causes of political instability, weakness or inadequacy of the governance process and eroded legitimacy of elected governments in the country.



I have taken liberty to quote extensively from that paper as follows:

The Nigerian electoral process has historically been flawed, and replete with profound challenges in all the three key phases (See Jega, 2018). These can be summarized as follows:

Pre-election phase: has been characterized by:

1. Inadequacy and/or inconsistency of the legal framework for the conduct of elections
2. Epileptic, insufficient and delayed funding for the elections
3. Inadequate and/or unfocused sensitization, public enlightenment, political and voter education
4. Inadequate EMB engagement and sharing of information with the key stakeholders (i.e.: political parties, candidates, Civil society organizations, security agencies, the media)
5. Over-bloated and/or 'incredible' voters' roll (Registration of voters)
6. Lack of a level playing field for parties and contestants in the pre-election campaigns, which obstruct competitiveness

7. Costly and corruption-laden pre-election litigation, associated with undemocratic and fraudulent conduct of party primaries

Election-Day Activities: have been characterized by

1. Poor arrangement for, and deployment of, personnel and logistics
2. Lack of transparency and accountability, and corruption in the management of polling units and collation centres, as well as with regards to compilation, transmission and announcement of results
3. Chaotic and ineffective arrangement for reverse logistics after elections
4. Ineffective and inefficient management of the polling units and results collation centres, due to lack or inadequacy of training of poll workers
5. Insecurity, conflicts, violence and disruption polling day activities, due to inadequate and ineffective role by the police and other security agencies
6. Crass harassment, intimidation and/or inducement of electoral officials
7. Commission of Electoral irregularities and offences by key stakeholders.

Post-Election Phase: has been characterized by

1. Lack of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms
2. Costly and corruption-laden post-election litigation
3. Poor storage and archival of sensitive election materials, which denies litigants access to original official records of elections.
4. Inadequate and/or poor review, assessment and evaluation of the conduct of an election, which constrains the factoring of 'lessons learned' into the preparations for future elections.

The manifestations of all these challenges in varying forms were evident in all elections, since the First Republic (1960-66). The 2007 elections, considered by most observers and analysts as the worst elections in Nigeria's history, provided even more graphic and obnoxious illustrations of these challenges, which have bedeviled the Nigerian electoral process (See, for example, Kurfi 1983 and 2013).

(Jega, October 2019: 3-4).

In spite of series of reform measures aimed at raising the bar of electoral integrity since 2010, many embedded malpractices have remained unresolved, and the integrity of Nigerian

elections leaves much to be desired. For example, logistics of deployment and retrieval of elections materials remains a formidable challenge, while use of money and incumbency continues to make the field very uneven, as well as help to perpetuate a series of malpractices, including vote buying and other violations of campaign finance laws and regulations. Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that crass use of money to buy votes is reversing some of the gains, which the use of technology (e.g.: smart voters cards and card readers) has nurtured. As politicians come to the realization that deployment of technology is blocking the efficacy of some of their traditional malpractices, such as buying election officials to declare false results, more ‘busing’ crooked voters to do multiple voting, they now increasingly resort to buying votes and inducing security agencies to look the other way while this goes on at the polling units.

### **Restoring and Entrenching Electoral Integrity**

To restore and protect the integrity of our elections, therefore, there is need for continuous legal and administrative reforms, as well as sensitization and public enlightenment. Most significantly, there is need for all stakeholders to strengthen their constructive engagement with the electoral process, with a view to improving, protecting and defending its integrity.

We can help to bring about electoral integrity and entrench it in our democratization processes by identifying the factors and challenges, which undermine it, creating the best ways to address these, and participating actively in the electoral process to ensure that it is framed by requisite integrity. In other words, all critical stakeholders engaged with the electoral process have to work together to eliminate or reduce to the barest minimum the range of all malpractices, which have bedeviled the electoral process.

### **What Role for the Universities?**

Universities, as pinnacles of education, research, training and advocacy, need to constructively engage with the national quest for democratic development generally, and in particular with the desirability and necessity of entrenching electoral integrity in our political systems and processes. The concept of “Ivory Tower” represents elitism, detachment, eccentricity, self-preoccupation, if not self-centeredness. Universities in the classical sense generate and impart knowledge through teaching and research, literally pursuing knowledge and ‘the truth’ as an end in itself. Although universities in the contemporary era have assumed the additional role of training needed critical human skill sets necessary for survival, reproduction and sustainability, as well as for progress and socioeconomic development, the

tendency of academics to be relatively detached from their host communities, locally and nationally, has remained.

Given the prevailing socioeconomic and developmental contexts in which many, especially African, countries have found themselves in, universities and academic communities out to no longer remain aloof about political and governance issues bedeviling their host environments. In particular, they need to become more actively and constructively engaged with the politics of democratic representation and governance, of which conduct of elections with integrity is key.

This, they can and should do, through their traditional preoccupation with knowledge generation, creation and dissemination, through teaching and research. But they can and should also do this through advocacy, training, mentoring and the creation and development of positive agents of democratic change, from amongst their products/students. In this regard, both professors, lecturers and students have significant constructive roles to play. They can play these roles in the contexts of research, training, advocacy, mentoring and in electoral administration.

## **Research**

Like many other areas of our public lives in Nigeria, elections are among the most understudied, rigorously, empirically and scientifically. Through research, universities in general and the academic staff and their students in particular could investigate, analyze and seek to understand the nature and extent, as well as dynamics of electoral malpractices and the obstacles and constraints to electoral integrity in the Nigerian context. This need not be only a preoccupation of social sciences, for even the sciences and technology disciplines have roles to play. For example, as technology is increasingly being deployed in our elections, research and knowledge is needed on the nature and types of technologies being deployed, and also in building capacity in inventing election-related equipment and technologies. The social and management sciences as well as psychologists can study voting patterns, psychological dispositions of voters and candidates, candidate characteristics, type and nature of voter education and sensitization, administration and management of elections, deployment of logistics, and so on. The researchers can then provide evidence-based, empirical and rigorous explanations of the challenges to electoral integrity specifically, or the political and governance frameworks generally, as well as provide policy and other recommendations on how best to address these.

## **Advocacy**

From the results of research, academics and their students, and other users of the knowledge they produce can contribute to not only generation of knowledge but also its dissemination, for example through policy and other types of advocacy for reforms to bring about integrity to the electoral and democratic governance processes. This could go a long way to sanitize and improve upon the kind of subjective, wishy-washy, and even opportunistic, nature of advocacy and sensitization, which is undertaken essentially by ill-prepared civil society organizations.

## **Training**

Training is another type of role that universities are endowed with capacity to provide and they need to take this responsibility with the seriousness it deserves. Universities and academics can and should partner with the election management bodies, such as State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as well as civil society organizations (CSOs) for series of general capacity building and targeted training programmes that add value to the integrity of our electoral and governance processes for democratic development. Presently, consultants and CSOs are essentially opportunistically playing these roles. This needs to be improved upon and up-scaled and only our tertiary



institutions, universities in particular have the resources to adequately perform these roles in training.

### **Mentoring**

Other time, negative attitudes and mindsets have evolved, which contribute to the undermining of electoral integrity in Nigeria. Perhaps the relatively long (30-plus years) period of impactful military rule has created or shaped these undemocratic attitudes and mindsets, which need to change, if Nigeria is to be properly positioned for electoral integrity and democratic development. In this regard, also, universities have tremendous roles to play in not only educating, sensitizing citizens, but also in mentoring, and reorienting especially the young and impressionistic minds who are the overwhelming majority of their students. In the long run, this is absolutely necessary because as is often said, countries cannot build electoral democracy with citizens circumscribed by undemocratic attitudes and mindsets.

### **Electoral Administration**

Necessity, it is said, is the mother of inventions. When confronted with rapidly deteriorating integrity in electoral administration, INEC from the 2011 general elections began to more systematically use members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), students and senior university staff in several tiers of election day administration, ranging from polling unit

management on election day, to result tabulation and declaration. Today, there is no doubt that this involvement has improved the integrity of these aspects of electoral administration. Academics have since been used in the 2015 and 2019 elections. In general this role has been commendable. Only in few instances of state governorship elections (e.g.: Rivers in 2015, Anambra in 2018, Imo and Kano in 2019) where there serious allegations of attempts by the politicians to influence some of those involved. Any such allegations must be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated, and if culprits found they should be severely sanctioned. However, there is no need through the baby away with the bathwater. What has essentially worked well, needs to be retained, perhaps repositioned and improved upon for greater value-addition to the integrity of our electoral process. as we strive for even more remarkable improvements to the integrity of our electoral process, we should also strive to identify and utilize credible persons into electoral administration from other sectors of the Nigerian society, such as professional associations of lawyers, doctors, engineers, and so on. In any case, academics should continue to be used, but with greater screening and vetting to ensure that the few bad eggs within do not in connivance with crooked politicians penetrate and compromise the integrity of electoral administration.

## **Required Improvements for Electoral Integrity and Sustainable Democratic development**

Protecting and defending the integrity of the electoral process for sustainable democratic development in Nigeria requires eternal vigilance, determined effort and creative and innovative deployment of national resources and endowments. We should strive for improvements holistically, but especially in the following areas:

1. Legal and regulatory framework for elections, through periodic reviews and value-additions from one electoral cycle to the another. This has been haphazard and epileptic, and leaves much to be desired. In good time before the 2023 elections, the constitutional electoral provisions and the Electoral Act need to be reviewed and remarkably improved upon for improvements in the independence, funding and sanitizing the roles and responsibilities of INEC for greater efficiency and effectiveness in the management and conduct of elections.
2. Utilization of technology, which should be increased, improved upon and up-scaled. There is need to by 2023 further deploy technology in other areas of the electoral process, especially in results tabulation and transmission, in Online voters' registration and even in piloting electronic voting.

3. Inclusiveness, transparency, accountability and competitiveness, in all aspects of the electoral process. In law and in practice, our electoral process needs to be broadly inclusive, more open and transparent, more competitive and with greater accountability of both election officials and the elected officials to the citizens/voters.
4. Citizens' trust and confidence in the electoral process, to motivate them for greater participation not just in the electoral, but also in the governance, processes. The declining voter turnout as a percentage of registered voters is indicative of the increasing loss of trust and confidence in the electoral process by the voters. For example, voter turnout declined by about 50%, from the 2003 elections turnout of 69.1% to the 2019 elections turnout of 37% (see Jega, 2019: 7).
5. Nurturing of positive agents of democratic development through attitudinal reorientation. Creating and nurturing positive agents for electoral integrity and democratic development is a fundamental requirement for countries, such as Nigeria. In this respect, perhaps more than in any other area, universities have significant roles to play, in teaching, educating, and imparting critical core values and ethical conduct for electoral integrity and democratic development.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, what I said in a recent paper is worth repeating here:

Nigeria needs a thriving democracy in spite of its complex diversity, the dynamics of its politics and the structural weakness of its economy. Indeed, it is quite possible to bring about a thriving democracy in Nigeria, in spite of the evident challenges. It would only require a more serious and purposeful engagement with, and in, the electoral process by all the key stakeholders, to ensure that it brings the desired quality representation, and elected public office holders who are responsible and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the citizens, and that would catalyze and nurture good, democratic governance (Jega 2019: 12-13).

To achieve this desirable objective, of sustainable democratic development, entrenchment of electoral integrity is a critical requirement. Entrenchment of electoral integrity in turn, requires the active commitment and engagement of all stakeholders, especially the universities' staff and students. As enlightened members of society, with privileged access to researched knowledge and requisite skills, university communities have crucial roles to play for sustainable electoral

process imbued with integrity and democratic development. Members of university communities cannot and should not be the proverbial ostriches, burying their heads in the sand, when all around them are challenges, which they are capable of contributing to finding lasting solutions to. Some would argue that universities are themselves bedeviled by enormous challenges, which they should preoccupy themselves with. True, there are profound challenges in our universities desirous of serious attention. But these are intricately connected with the seemingly larger, external issues, such as challenges to electoral integrity and democratic governance, which if addressed, would pave the way for easier resolution of the internal challenges.

For, if electoral integrity is entrenched, and peoples' will and voters' true choices become dominant as electoral outcomes, good governance would become viable, as elected officials would, in fear of the power of the voters, become more responsible, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the citizens. With good governance, national resources would be better harnessed, national priorities would be better set, and national resources would better channeled into addressing such issues as the crisis in education and underfunding of universities.

At the moment, this would seem a distant aspiration, given the acute lack of electoral integrity and the consequential bad leadership and governance. But it is possible to reverse this situation; may be difficult, but it is not impossible to do so. University communities, with enlightened collective interest, can and should be positive agents to bring this about.

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