



An Analysis of the Nigerian Governorship and House of the National Assembly Elections

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Introduction

The March 11 2023 Governorship and States House of Assembly were shifted to March 18th in order to respond to the challenges thrown up by the February 25th 2023 elections. There were deep irregularities in the processing of February 25th Presidential elections. Many voters' accreditation technology, the Bimodal Verification Accreditation System (BVAS) were either stolen, hijacked, manipulated or rendered unusable. The results were not uploaded and transmitted to the INEC server (IREV) as demanded by the Electoral Act. This led to a return to manual voting, an era of inflating election results. While protesting the mal-administration of the elections, the opposition political parties staged a walk-out from the national result collation centre. Some of the parties called for the review of the results before announcing a winner of the Presidential election, while others call for outright cancellation of the exercise. Despite these protests, the electoral body announced Mr. Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Shettima as President-elect and Vice President-elect respectively.

Preparatory to challenging the result of the elections, the court granted one of the main opposition parties, the People Democratic Party (PDP) its application to inspect the BVAS and other materials used in the elections. Permission was also granted to the APC preparatory to its defence. The court also granted INEC the application to conduct the March 11, 2023 election using BVAS. Since the electoral body had no other BVAS to conduct the second phased elections, it then decided to shift the governorship election to the March 18th to allow the aggrieved parties access to the BVAS before reconfiguring them for the next elections. In this case, the electoral body made a huge administrative error. It should have known that the election results will be challenged and therefore the BVAS will be needed for verification. It never planned for this. The BVAS were inspected by aggrieved political

parties and were also reconfigured within the period of postponement and the elections of governors took place.

Powerful Governors at the subnational level

The seats of Governors and that of the State Houses of Assembly are very crucial in the political and economic power equation in the country. The occupants of the office control the allocation of national wealth. They control the parliament at the subnational level. They sponsor and, in some case, support the subnational representatives in the national/federal parliament. They control the politics and local level parliament through appointment of political officers or their election.

Like the President and the National Assembly, the Governors and their State Houses of Assembly allocate state wealth through budgets and the expenditures are made through contracts to companies, friends and cronies. Some of these contracts are subcontracted to domestic and foreign companies for execution of projects. So, the state becomes an arena for the struggle for the distribution of common wealth and the struggle to have control over it becomes very fierce. This fierce struggle is replicated at the lower levels of government: the state and local government. The control of state institutions charged with the responsibility of organizing political recruitment is also key in the calculation of the dominant classes. Most of the time, the quality of the electoral processes is adversely affected during these fights. The report evaluates the conduct of the governorship elections in the context of this fierce struggle to control state power, a necessary requirement for the control of resources of the nation.

The March 18th Election: Improved Election Administration

The election into governorship seats and States House of Assembly took place in 28 out of the 36 states of the Federation. The other states had off-season elections. From the Observer point of view, the quality of election administration improved tremendously when compared to the Presidential elections. I observed that there was early arrival to the polling units by election staff. The election materials needed for the exercise were in sufficient quantity. The accreditation and result transmission technology (BVAS) were substantially deployed and allowed to function. However, there were locations where the BVAS didn't work and in some areas, they were stolen. This therefore denied the voters the right to perform their civic responsibility. So, where the technology did not work, the ground was created for the results to be manipulation. Indeed, there was a return to the manual voting. So, the courts cases that have been instituted will draw attention to phenomenon of over voting. This set of elections witnessed substantial compliance to the Electoral regulation where election results were uploaded in good time on the INEC server (IREV). The problems that should be addressed is the automatic transmission of the results from the polling locations. This hasn't happened in a robust manner.

Electoral crimes by politicians

While the electoral administration improved, illegalities in the electoral processes continued. Politicians across parties continued to buy votes in kind and in cash in order to influence electoral outcomes. There were cases of voter suppression in many places but Lagos State stood out clearly as a

location where ethnic suppression was done through the threats of violence and actual violence. They Igbo ethnic groups were intimidated and their investments were destroyed after the Presidential elections as well as on the eve of the Governorship and Houses of Assembly elections. In many cities in the country, the dwindled voter turn-out was as a result of this intimidation. In many areas where citizens trooped out to elect their representatives, the violence was unleashed at the point of ballot box or BVAS snatching. The commission of these electoral crimes by individual politicians and political parties weakened citizens' faith in electoral politics and slows down efforts in re-democratising the country.

Decline in Voter turnout

Indeed, voter turnout demonstrates the faith which the citizens have in the electoral system. Generally, there was low voter turnout as Nigerian deserted the polling units on the election day. From personal observation in many areas of Kano Nigeria, the polling location that were heavily populated by voters on the day of the Presidential election were almost empty on the day of the Gubernatorial elections. The statistics of the turnout is yet to be released by the electoral management body. If the presidential elections recorded only 27% turnout, and there is a general consensus across the country that the turnout in the governorship is lower, then we can conclude that Nigerians indeed deserted the elections venues. This is a sad commentary of the Nigerian democratic journey.

A number of related reasons can be adduced to explain low turnout in the governorship elections across the country. Non-participation was a covert protest against the poor handling of the presidential election by the election management body, the illegalities in the election process and the violation of the mandates of the people and the declaration of certain candidates and political parties in the face of this gross violations. The decline could also be attributed to the poor performance of ruling governments at the subnational levels specially where the party dominance was interpreted as a way of returning to the office. In some states of the Federation, non-performance of the ruling party was a motivating force for massive turnout to change the regime. As noted earlier, voter suppression/intimidation kept many voters indoors on election day. In locations such as Lagos where certain ethnic groups were publicly banned from participation by political thugs, turnout was low. It is crucial to mention that turnout was relatively high in the home states on candidates contesting either the Governorship seat or seats in the Houses of Assembly.

Protecting the polls and the mandates

Democracies survive where citizens' participation in the electoral processes is high. This includes the protection of election and political mandates. Nigerians turn up to polling units to perform their civic responsibilities and they must be commended. In addition, they protected the polling units against political thuggery as they constructed barricades to prevent riggers from intruding into the polling centres. They drove away criminals who had intentions of carting away ballot boxes or BVAS or ran after those who committed electoral fraud. In some areas, voters protected the results as they were moved from the polling units to all result collation centres. They occupied the collation centres and sang war songs to serve as deterrent to would-be riggers of election results and songs of praise to sustain the solidarity of the groups. In some states of the federation these strategies worked. In states

where this strategy didn't work, various forms of post-election protests were witnessed with the hope that the 'stolen' mandates will be returned. If the elections are not properly organized and huge infractions are committed, the election vigilantism for the protection of mandates may become the order of the day in the country. Indeed, this could lead to the formation of counter-groups and this could lead to confrontations and violence in the future.

Voting Pattern

The governorship elections were a different political ball game from the Presidential elections in the sense they were local in nature and many local interests were at play and it did show in the results that were declared. While the three big parties shared the votes in the country almost equally, i.e., each winning 12 states each and NNPP winning 1 state, in the presidential elections, the Governorship elections produced a different picture. The ruling APC won governorship seats in 15 states, PDP won 6, NNPP still retained the 1 state it won in the presidential elections and the LP won 2 states. The figures are yet to be on the official website of the electoral management body, but it reported that most governors will be working with comfortable party majorities in the State Assemblies. It is important to mention that more party representation will be seen in the various State Assemblies across the country.

An interesting situation to note is the success of the Labour Party which won 6 senate seats, 34 seats in the House of Representatives, 2 governorship seats in the meantime. It is predicted that the party may become stronger and remain a political force to be reckoned with in Nigerian politics. However, there is the fear that if the party is not well managed, these elected members may be lured into joining the APC, PDP and APGA. This is because some of the members originated from the PDP and APGA. It is also not clear how the Labour movement will exert its control over the party and drive its ideological programmes. It is similarly not clear how the Nigerian Left will relate with representatives that have won strategic seats, given the fact that they joined the party for convenience and not because of their ideological dispositions. The only option is for the owners of the party to cultivate these newly elected members and sustain their interest in the party.

Response to Electoral Outcome

The responses to the electoral outcomes are varied. In areas where opposition parties defeated the ruling party, celebration were witnessed. In areas where ruling parties were seen to have manipulated results, political parties and the voters organized peaceful and in some other cases violent protests by aggrieved parties. In some cases, individuals and groups who were thought to have voted against the ruling parties were targeted. An unorthodox form of protest was staged by women who appeared nude on the streets of the state capital of Nassarawa State.

The political parties have headed to the courts to contest the declaration of the election results by opponents. The three main political parties including the party of the President-elect have filed their papers as noted earlier. The Labour Party has warned that the President-elect shouldn't be hurriedly sworn-in because it will amount to unconstitutionality and that this will be met by resistance. The party of the President-elect has conceived this to be an intended mutiny and have therefore

communicated their fears and displeasure to the Directorate of State Security and indeed demanding that an invitation be extended to the LP for questioning. There are insinuations that the judiciary has been secretly approached by the ruling party of the president-elect to compromise the judicial inquiry into election petitions. This is because both the president-elect and Chief Justice of the Federation travelled to the United Kingdom almost at the same time. Although this has been denied, Nigerians believed that the coincidence of both them to be in the UK at the same time is too close for comfort. It is argued that the President-elect has a penchant for influencing political processes to his favour. But it has been argued that the LP Presidential candidate has been a beneficiary of court decisions in the past and therefore he has faith in the institution and he will approach it. Indeed, the integrity of the judiciary will be put to test once again in determining the electoral cases before it.

The Governors and the rising expectations of citizens

Citizens have high expectations that the incoming administration will be a fundamental departure from the previous ones particularly in addressing peculiar community challenges. Therefore, the new administrations at the subnational levels will be confronted with the task of constituting cabinets with a right mix to deliver welfare and development to citizens; local governance issues particularly the issues of autonomy for local councils; and taking concrete steps to heal the wounds created by the elections, probably by constituting their governments and administrations on the principle of unity.

The governors will also be dealing with insecurity in their states; revenue generation; infrastructural deficits; huge internal and external debts and weak delivery of public service such as water, electricity and education. The new administrations must confront the weak involvement of citizens in administration and development.

There is need to review the constitution to free governments at subnational levels to enable them design their development patterns and move the country forward. In addition to doing these, the governors and their parties have a task of balancing hard and populist policy choices in order to create impact in society. The citizens must therefore be carried along.

The future of Nigeria's democracy

The Nigerian elections have continued to produce for us big lessons for further reflections in building our story of democracy in that country and how the entire process can be reformed. The exercise has revealed that high level of personal and class interests over the national interest can subvert institutions and processes properly put in place to achieve national greatness. This is because the competing interests of fractions of the ruling class have indeed frustrated the national process of genuinely recruiting leaders to preside over various national institutions. In addition, a decrease in the inner-party democracy will lead to an increase in members 'secession' to new or older parties. Indeed, this is giving rise to a situation where electorates vote for candidates rather than political parties. This may signal the decline in the value of political parties in the electoral process. Another lesson points to the fact that the level of trust which Nigerians have in political institutions such as the election management body will indeed continue to shape citizens electoral and general political participation. Citizens' desertion of the polling centers across the country is the case in point. In addition, an increase in the level of political consciousness may lead to more sophistication in political organizing for the

defence of political mandates. A reduction in the level of trust on the judiciary may lead to an increase in protests, violence and other unconstitutional alternative mode of seeking redress. This could roll back democratic gains made in the past.

A major takeaway from the elections is that the road to democracy in Nigeria has been bumpy and precarious. The integrity of the political parties, election management body and security forces are suspect. They appear to have been captured by the ruling elites. Therefore, the political processes are caught in the web of political authoritarianism and the initial gains of constitutionalism and democratisation a rolling back.

To revise the rolling back of constitutionalism and democratization, there is need to embark on reforms of the electoral system to ensure that the regulations, rules, structures, funding and personnel recruitment are addressed differently. There is need to improve processes through the use of technology and make the processes inclusive.