

Nigeria's 2019 General Elections: A Bumpy Road Ahead

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Abstract

This article is an empirical outlook on the dynamics of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. It is motivated by the suspension of February 16, 2019, schedule of elections. Against the background of the chequered nature of the electoral process in Africa, and Nigeria in particular, the article examines some variables that might impinge on the outcome of the 2019 general elections. These include the role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as an umpire, the increment in the voters' roll, backlash of party primaries, the entrance of new political parties, meddlesomeness in the electoral process by the incumbent administration, and the spiraling violence underlined by the activities of Boko Haram and farmers-herdsmen conflict. The objective here is to highlight aspects of our political reality to enable us to navigate the charged political atmosphere. Based on historical antecedents, the article argues that the above-mentioned factors can affect voter turnout and the electoral outcome.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Electoral process, Farmers-herdsmen conflict, General elections, INEC, Spiraling violence

Introduction

Like political parties, the engine room of democracy, elections dramatise the democratic process; they constitute the black box of democratic legitimacy where consent, the citizens' will resides. It is profoundly important to any claim of democratic governance. Nigeria is currently in the throes of its 2019 general elections. Notably, the proceedings for the 2019 general election ran into a short-term setback that reverberated across the country and shoved the faith of Nigerians and the international community in the two-decade old democratisation process. While there are lingering doubts whether the country will surmount what appears to be elite contrived bottleneck, we venture to offer a more detailed insight into the ongoing process in ways that may enlighten us and anticipate future progress or regress.

Elections in Nigeria, particularly since 1999 when the military relinquished political power, have remained the major way of achieving legitimate rule. Studies of Nigerian elections have underlined the country's adoption of the western model of liberal democracy. But whether this electoral model has enhanced democracy in Nigeria and

Africa is debatable. However, Ali Mazrui (2008) had earlier distinguished the necessary and ultimate requirements to achieving a democratic order. The right to vote might ensure legitimacy in governance, freedom of press leads to an open society and freedom of information. From this standpoint, a sound electoral process is meant to achieve four fundamental goals: accountable rulers, open society, social justice and an enthusiastically participating citizenry (Stromberg, 1996).

The West from where Nigeria derived its electoral format has greatly perfected the processes needed to achieve the aforementioned goals. This was achieved by developing crucial tools such as the rule of law, parliamentary autonomy and leadership that respects public opinion (Hensley, 2001). It is debatable whether these electoral ingredients can be ascribed to Nigeria where public opinion is weak or even uncritical; the judiciary is powerless as court orders are flagrantly disobeyed. It is against this background that the Nigerian 2019 election is enigmatic.

The enigma comes in the heels of crucial assessments from the international community. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in 2010 had observed that though “elections have become a normal occurrence” in Africa. Only five countries in the continent where elections had been held, were judged “to be free and fair”. Nigeria is excluded in the list of the African countries: Cape Verde, Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius and South Africa (EIU, 2010). EIU has made other predictions concerning Nigeria’s 2019 election, though that is the focus of this study. On a lighter note, a Nigerian analyst, Claude Ake had earlier postulated the way forward to the extent that both the ruled and the rulers are implicated. Electoral democracy does not depend on the altruistic actions of other people or states. “People must do it for themselves, or it does not happen” (Ake, 1996:38). Nigeria is a sovereign state according to its Constitution. What that means is that any ascension to political office must be determined by the will of the people through chosen representatives and based on electoral equality which in effect demands free electoral competition. To ensure a free competition, Nigeria’s Constitution and the Electoral Act are the crucial legislative instruments in the electoral process even though neither Nigeria’s Constitution nor the Electoral Act contains the phrase “free and fair”, however, some of the electoral requirements are suggestive that the process must be free and fair.

The 2019 a Milestone

2019 is a milestone to be crossed. Election that would either change its political leadership or extend its current leadership for another four years is the heart of the matter. Nigeria’s 2019 general elections may well go down as one of the country’s most keenly contested elections in history, and if caution is thrown to the wind the most maligned. Expectedly, electioneering activities have begun to occupy the country’s political landscape. Preparations for the elections have already reached top gear, and the picture is already getting clear with regards to what to expect at the polls following the February 16 fiasco.

INEC as an Umpire

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which presently serves as Nigeria’s election umpire seems not sure-footed with the disappointing postponement of the initial schedule of the general elections. However, it is expected to leverage on the gains

made in the past. The introduction of permanent voter's cards (PVC) for the 2015 elections is believed to have contributed significantly to the success of the elections and it is to be continued in the present elections. Triumphantly, at the end of the Continuous Voter's Registration (CVR) exercise organized by INEC in preparation for the 2019 elections, there were a total of 14.5 million new registrations, bringing the total number of persons eligible to vote in the 2019 elections to 84.2 million, as against 69.7 million persons who registered to vote in 2015 (Akinkuotu, 2018). It is important to note that only 72.7 million voters have their PVCs. The implication of this development is that all things being equal, more persons are expected to participate in the 2019 elections than had participated in the previous elections. Besides, a number of other factors that can affect voter turn-out and electoral outcome are focused upon in the following sections of this study.

Administratively, INEC has already surmounted some of the legal and administrative challenges such as the controversy over the ordering of elections following proposed amendments to the Electoral Act by the National Assembly which incumbent president refused to assent as well as funding as a result of the late passage of its budget (Ajayi, 2018).

Election postponement is a critical administrative matter. INEC has this history. This history repeated itself on February 16. We recall that during the preparations for the 2015 general elections, INEC announced its plan to postpone the election on the ground of security concerns, after several months of claiming it was ready to conduct the polls despite insurgency in the North-east (Vanguard, 2015). The point to stress, therefore, is that there is the possibility that the 2019 elections will be further postponed for some political reasons. Best case scenario might be inconclusive elections in some states. Whatever, the turn of events, it will impact on the overall electoral outcome due to the shifting alliances and allegiances that the constraints might engender.

All things being equal, 91 political parties are expected to field candidates for Saturday's elections. These parties can be grouped into three main categories which include: the major contenders, the middle players, and the newcomers. Arguably, there are two major contenders in Nigeria's forthcoming elections, and these are the All Progressives Congress (APC) which is currently the country's ruling party, and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) which is the major opposition party. Among all other registered political parties in Nigeria, both parties occupy the highest number of seats in the National Assembly, control over 90 percent of the States, with a towering membership that far exceeds all other registered political parties combined. Moreover, virtually every prediction of the likely outcome of the polls point to either of both parties as likely winners of the polls.

The 2019 Political Parties

The second category of political parties registered to participate in the 2019 general elections is here described as middle players. These parties do not presently occupy enough political positions as compared to the two dominant political parties, but by virtue of the quality and track records of their main candidates, their history, as well as their major backers, these political parties are expected to contribute significantly to the outcome of the polls. Notable in this regard include the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA)

which has produced two governors in Anambra State, four members of the House of Representatives, one senator, and is reasonably popular in the South-east region. Another major example within this category is the African Democratic Congress (ADC) which until now, was not well known, but came into limelight when it was adopted by former President Olusegun Obasanjo's Coalition for Nigeria Movement (CNM). Ever since, there have been a number of high profile defections in favour of the party, including some members of the National Assembly. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) equally ranks within this category, not necessarily because of the number of seats it occupies, but as a result of the quality of its members, some of which include a former governor of Cross River State, and the party's presidential flag bearer, Donald Duke, a former minister of information, Jerry Gana, among several others. Unfortunately, it has descended into intra-party bickering which could weaken its electoral fortune.

Falling under the third category include a host of other political parties that are enlisted to participate in the 2019 elections, apart from the ones already identified above. Notable among the political parties that fall under this category include the Young Progressive Party (YPP) with Kingsley Moghalu, a former deputy governor of the Central Bank as its presidential flag bearer. There is also the Allied Congress Party of Nigeria (ACPN) which until recently presented Oby Ezekwesili, a former minister of education to run for the office of the President. She had since stepped down ostensibly to forge a winning coalition among the new entrants into the presidential race. Others include the Alliance for New Nigeria (ANN) with Fela Durotoye as its presidential candidate; People's Trust with Gbenga Olawepo-Hashim as its presidential candidate; Fresh Democratic Party (FDP) with Chris Okotie as its presidential candidate, People's Party of Nigeria (PPN), with Hamza al-Mustapha as its presidential candidate, among several others. Given that most of these relatively young political parties do not have formidable structures when compared with some of the major parties, they are not expected to clinch a good number of seats whether in the executive or legislative arms, however, they would go as far as dividing votes that should have ordinarily gone to the major contenders. As such, it is expected that before the elections are concluded, some of the major contenders will form alliance with some of the newcomer political parties in order to increase their chances of winning the elections. The likelihood of this crystallising is remote given the fact that we are on the eve of actual voting.

The conduct of party primaries in preparation for the 2019 general elections has generated severe intra-party crises than what was recorded in the previous elections, and this development is likely to impact on electoral outcomes. The failure of some governors to install preferred candidates as their party flag-bearers is worthy of mention. In Imo and Ogun States, the fate of the ruling party remains unclear, as the outgoing governors of these states have openly created new formations to realise their own ambitions and that of their preferred candidates. In Lagos, the incumbent governor was unable to clinch the party's ticket for the 2019 elections. He has since pledged his support for Sanwo-Olu, the candidate of the party. It is however unclear whether the outgoing governor's hand of fellowship is in good fate or simply a survival mechanism. This is in view of the threats of impeachment hovering around the governor if he dared to abandon the party (Sessou, 2018). If the latter is the case, winning Lagos may be an uphill task for the ruling party

since the governor's commitment to the election of Sanwo-Olu may end up as a mere lip service. In Delta States, intra-party divisions within the ruling party may affect the fortune of the ruling party while recent killings bode ill for the electoral environment. In Rivers and Zamfara, both INEC's sanctions and Supreme Court ruling have robbed the ruling party at the centre any chance of meaningful vote harvest.

Nigeria and Electoral Violence

Nigeria has had a long history of electoral violence, and this makes security a serious source of concern with regards to the elections. Suffice to recall that the fall of the first republic in 1966 is largely attributed to the wave of violence that attended the 1964/65 general elections in the immediate post-independence Nigeria (Adamo, 2018). Remarkably, "Operation wetie" in the Western region at the time saw to the destruction of several homes as well as the death of a good number of politicians (Ashindorbe, 2018). The Second Republic did not fare any better, as the general elections of August 1983 was equally riddled with violence especially in the old Ondo State, and was part of the justification given by the military regime of Gen Muhammadu Buhari for the military takeover of government from the Shagari-led administration in December 1983. The Third Republic never took off in earnest but was equally saddled with election-related violence after the June 12 election which was nullified by the then-military regime of Gen. Babangida. The present fourth republic has hardly seen an election year that was free from violence. Arguably, the general elections held in 2011 towers above all other elections in the fourth republic in terms of the scope and severity of violence recorded.

Developments since 2015

However, beyond the country's history of electoral violence, certain developments since the end of the 2015 general elections help to accent concerns about security in the 2019 general elections. Notable among these include the farmers-herdsmen conflict in the Middle belt region, which is likely to be hijacked by politicians to ensure that elections in their opponents' stronghold are destabilized (Essoh, 2018). Recently, the Governor of Benue State alleged that his predecessor, George Akume, had already seized the farmers-herdsmen conflict as a platform for furthering his political objectives with regards to the present elections (Duru, 2018). Even the Presidency sometime made allegations that politicians were responsible for the killings that were considered as part of the Fulani herdsmen conflict (Aziken and Oyadongha, 2018). While some of these accusations may be untrue, the point to stress is that Nigerian politicians already recognize the ongoing conflict between herdsmen and farmers as a potent tool for attaining one's political objectives in the 2019 elections. The controversial killings in Kaduna announced by the state governor on the eve of the botched elections points to instrumentalisation of existing inter-communal feuds by politicians.

Nevertheless, considering the fact that the two main contenders in the 2019 presidential elections, Muhammadu Buhari of the APC, and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP are of Northern extraction, and are both Muslims, it is unlikely that the 2019 general elections would fuel ethnic or religious tensions as was the case in the two previous general elections. This does not, however, disregard the possibility that some criminal elements

may hide under the cover of elections to perpetuate their criminal activities. Also, political thuggery coupled with ballot box snatching has, historically, been a source of violence in Nigeria's elections (Afolabi, 2018). To be sure, the inability of the Nigerian state to identify and punish perpetrators of mass violence during elections has been identified as a threat to the peaceful conduct of future elections.

Furthermore, there are indications that the 2019 general elections may attract some relatively higher degree of political participation than the previous elections held in Nigeria since independence in 1960. This is due to a number of factors, notable among which is the rise in social media usage which has been observed to have direct implications for political socialization and participation (Vromen and Loader, 2014). It is therefore expected that the 2019 elections will witness an optimum level of political participation as was the case during the 2015 elections despite the February 16 postponement. We note however that a relatively higher degree of political participation may not necessarily translate into higher voter turnout. The 2015 general elections is a useful example in this regard. Whereas during the period leading up to the election political participation was rated high, ironically, voter turnout for the elections ranked lowest of all elections conducted since the general election of 1979 (Ibrahim, Liman and Mato, 2015).

Insecurity and 2019 Elections

Insecurity is one major factor that has been considered as responsible for the low voter turnout recorded during the 2015 general elections, despite considerable political consciousness across the country. We recall that the conflict in the country's North-east region had led to the displacement of thousands of people as a result of the activities of the Boko Haram sect. This was coupled with persistent bombing of soft targets. It is therefore possible that a good number of persons would stay away from the polling centres over fear of possible attacks from the Islamist group. While the Boko Haram insurgents are said to be largely decimated by the military, the group should ordinarily not pose any severe challenges in the 2019 elections, as was the case in 2015. Nonetheless, the resurgence of the fundamentalist group in recent months is worrisome. Boko Haram had recently attacked many military installations and barracks in the North-east region of Nigeria. In effect, the Boko Haram insurgency and clashes between herdsmen and farmers in the North-east and North-central regions of Nigeria pose lots of threat to these elections. It could be manipulated by political actors for nefarious ends.

Also, the issue of credibility of election with regards to the 2019 elections is worth noting. While the 2015 election which led to the emergence of the present administration was adjudged as fairly transparent and fair, it is still uncertain the extent to which the 2019 elections would be adjudged and accepted as credible, regardless of the outcome of the polls. Suffice to recall that since the onset of the present administration, the opposition has not relented in its allegations of tyranny and stifling of democracy on the part of the presidency (Odebode et al, 2018). Executive incursion into the judiciary as illustrated by Onnoghen's case (**Onochie, 2020**) and the invasion of the National Assembly by security forces (Eboh and Onuah, 2018) as well as the presence of service chiefs in the incumbent president's flag-off of election campaign (*Vanguard Editorial, 2018*) may taint perception of impartiality and degree of freeness, fairness and credibility.

Conclusion

Finally, there are indications of inconclusive elections given the recrimination of INEC over the botched February 16 exercise. These observers fear could lead to a reply of the Osun template where the ruling party lost by an initial tally but won by a rerun in handful constituencies due to trade-offs and security siege on voters. The desperation displayed by the incumbent president, espousing extra-judicial killings by security forces of so-called ballot-snatchers and chest-thumping the point that he could not be humiliated out of power bode ill for an impartial climate. What we have done in the foregoing is to highlight aspects of our political reality to enable us navigate the current charged political atmosphere. Our analysis is only a guide to understanding the current cycle of elections. We hope it will help reposition Nigeria's democracy.

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