

Vote Buying and Democratic Development Initiative in North-Central Nigeria: Issues and Prospects

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Abstract

Elections in North-central Nigeria had taken dimension of vote buying this has become flashpoints, which affects successful democratic development initiative in Nigeria. Elections are the baseline for all democracies. It is the process of selecting representatives in free and fair manners that is free of compulsion inducement. The incident surrounding the process of selecting representatives in Nigeria creates trust deficits that hinder the smooth functioning of democracy, even when the leader can make decision on behalf of the people to secure democratic development. The paper set to examine how vote buying has undermines democratic development to produce declared winner without integrity. The paper adopted descriptive research, which benefited from secondary sources of data from the target population. The secondary data sources were drawn from electoral body, Nigeria police report, Newspapers, Journals, Books, Conference and Seminars paper, Government publication and Internet. The study utilized social exchange theory. The theory believes that social behaviour of people is the result of an exchange process that maximise benefits and minimise cost. The paper finds that a compromise electoral democracy is fragile to democratic development; as such it pushes disgruntled groups to find less constructive channel to expression their discontents. The paper recommends institutionalised electronic voting and credible elections devoid of vote buying to actualise the essence of democratic development initiative in north-central Nigeria.

Key word: Elections; Democracy; Vote buying; Electoral violence and development

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria democratic government is widely considered the largest democracy in Africa (Godwin 2024). The history of electoral violence and vote buying in Nigeria can be traced to pre independence elections. History associated with conduct of actors in electoral process, especially those who seek to adopt all means to gain or retain control of political power in Nigeria. This took dimension of electoral violence that threatened democratic development initiative in North-central Nigeria. Vote buying and violence during elections has continued to undermine the effectiveness of our electoral process in Nigeria. Election is one of the cardinal pillars of democratic development; this give the people opportunity to freely choose their representative, hold them accountable and responsible for their actions while in government (Ogundiya and Baba, 2007). Democratic development initiative is a system set aside rules to held rulers accountable. This provides variety of political arrangements, such as competitive multi-party elections at regular intervals. This is because those holding political office do not have automatic security of tenure but can be challenged and even displaced in accordance with the will of the people through a wide range of institutional mechanism.

The series of general elections conducted between 2011 and 2023 produced results that were considered not free, fair and acceptable; due to constant and compelling

contestation that have assumed violence dimension before, during and after elections in north central Nigeria. The emphasis on election as a means of sustaining and strengthening the democratisation process in Nigeria has been a mixed bag of the good, bad and ugly (Jibrin and Michael, 2020). The four consecutive general elections held between 2011 and 2023 in Nigeria have been marred with electoral violence, vote buying and intimidation of political opponents in Nigeria. In Nigeria politics, there have never been crisis free and fair elections in the history of the states. Most electoral exercises have been punctured with controversies; this controversy often arises from electoral violence, vote-buying, ethnic bigotry and more importantly electoral finance (Godwin, 2024). The trajectory of politics in North-central Nigeria has shown distrust, injustice and ethnic hatred, these trends promote anti-democratic tendency. More so, the politics of winner-take all, which had place high premium in the country; the situation that is yet to find cure for. Various attempts to ensuring trust, transparency and fairness in all the political process in North-central Nigeria, have been dogged with controversies arising from lack of willingness of parties leaders to hold on to rules. This had made worse by the domineering influence of electoral finance by 'godfathers' has generate trust deficit, which often led to protest, petitions and legal battles from many of the aggrieved parties and candidates.

Politics and development of democracy in most ideal societies is not without free, fair and credible electoral process. Reading the reports of electoral monitoring team from both national and international organisation, read that the electoral process from 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 witness electoral violence and votes buying in Nigeria (Godwin, 2024). These factors among others, affected the prospect of democratic development in Nigeria; for the elections produced result that were considered unacceptable. Against this forgoing background, the paper set out to analyse the following research questions: what constituted vote buying in North-Central Nigeria? How have vote buying constituted challenges to democratic development initiative in North-central Nigeria? Are there measures that can end the effect of vote buying on democratic development initiative in North-central Nigeria?

This study was carried out in Kogi and Plateau States of North Central region of Nigeria respectively. The North Central region of Nigeria is made up of Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and Federal Capital Territory. The region has a population of 20,266,250 people (2006 Census). The choice of this study area is because of high cases of vote buying are more pronounced in the selected areas. This paper adopted descriptive research method to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting and qualitative facts. This is because the study deals with human beings as respondents. Data was sourced through

secondary sources. This source relied on electoral observer's reports, Newspapers, Journals, Books, and Government publication and Internet.

The social exchange theory adopted in this paper is to offer a clear theoretical explanation on the study. The proponent of social exchange theory asserts that people did not weigh their potential risk over the benefits (financial or material rewards) draw from this social relationship. On this note, the paper set out to examine how has vote buying constitute challenges to Democratic development initiative in North-central Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The choice of this theoretical framework helps us to establish the limit, in terms of range of variables, and facts to be studied. This in turn led to better understanding of the topic before us. To accomplish this task, Social Exchange Theory was adopted in this paper, which proposes that social behaviour of people is the result of exchange process. This is to maximizes benefits and minimize cost. Homans (1961), position on social exchange theory is that people weigh their potential benefits and risk they social relationship in place of financial or material rewards. For instance, when the risk outweighs the rewards, then people will terminate the relationship (Cherry, 2018). The social exchange believes that people generally seek reward benefits than punishment, this is irrational thinking.

Social exchange theory discusses social life involving series of sequential transactions between two parties (Mitchell, Cropanzano, & Quisenberry, 2012); where resources are exchanged through a process that reciprocity, as party tends to repay the good (or sometimes bad) deeds of another party (Gergen, 1969; Gouldner, 1960). This kind of exchange is influenced and determined by the level relationship between actor and target beneficiary (Blau, 1964). The theory is about economic relationships amongst parties, where each party has goods that the others parties values. For example, this economic exchange tend to involve less trust and close monitoring, as social exchange lean on open- ended relationship, for greater trust and flexibility (Organ, 1990). This is because social exchange process always begins when an actor, especially politicians, treats a target individual (electorate) in a positive or negative manner. It means that when an actor offered benefit to its target, the actor is expected to have high quality of social exchange relationship, as the target provides benefits to the actors. In other words, when actors does harm to its target, it is expecting low quality economic exchange relationship, as the target beneficiary does harm to the actors

Social exchange theory view exchange as a social behaviour that may result both in economic and social outcome (Jay, Michael and Roberts, 2001). Central

to social exchange theory is that human behaviour is essentially an exchange, particularly of rewards (Homans, 1961) or resources of primarily material character (wealth), and secondarily of symbolic attribute. Accordingly, exchange theorists have elaborated and summarized the above argument as follows. Arguably, social action is an exchange of activities and rewards or cost effect between individuals on the ground that people have always explained their actions behaviours and conducts by means of its benefits and cost to them.

In applying the concepts of exchange theory to vote buying electoral violence and its implication on democratic development initiative in north-central Nigeria, it could be examined in relative to power of participants in exchange, which is conditioned by economic status, or other social factors as well as the various types of exchanges that are ongoing between the electorate and politicians seeking public offices and those undertaken under special conditions during campaigns periods. Due to social status of electorates that was characterized by poverty, hunger and low economic power, the voters had to exchange their votes, which is their only and most valuable asset, for either physical cash or other material inducements like foods, clothes, and even job employment. Ironically the people do not in most cases weigh their decisions before selling their votes. This in actual sense, negates the principle of social exchange as espoused by (Cherry: 2018) which argued that parties involved in exchanges must weigh the potential benefits and cost implications before signing a pact. To this end, this paper strongly believes that Nigerians are not aware of the disheartening effects or implications of vote buying before agreeing to sell their votes for peanuts.

CONCEPTUALISING DEMOCRACY, ELECTION, VOTE BUYING AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Democracy has a long tradition. But the basis for its justification has been revised from time to time to keep its existence. But the notion regarding its changes is not justified. The paper has in mind the silent features of democracy that include equal participation, an atmosphere of free discussion and respect for rule of law as applicable in United States of America and other parts of developed countries. Though, it is quite challenging in most parts of African countries such as Niger, Senegal, Gabon and etc. Democracy is considering most accepted system of government adopted by most countries in the world. This system of government is anchoring on collective participation of both the ruler and the ruled in decision making process.

Democratic development resulted from the level of population growth and complexity of society in modern time, these renders the direct participation practice in

ancient Greece impossible with a possible adoption of more expedient representative democracy, which is a situation where people are elected in a manner that the interest of the people are duly projected in decision making by the elected representatives (Jibrin and Michael, 2021). The two core ideas defining democracy are popular participation and accountability, which give the people opportunity to determine who governs them and those who give account of their stewardship through periodic election is the most important means to achieve democratic objective. In north-central Nigeria, it has become an opportunity through which affluent, corrupt political class commits the practice of vote buying against both fellow candidates and the general public to secure victory.

Election in contemporary society remains an essential part of a democratic development that enables the electorate to decide and form a new government at regular interval. And for elections to be accepted, it must be free, fair and credible. Elections represent a contemporary and commonly accepted process through which individuals are openly and methodically chosen to be a body or government (Uche, 2007). Elections express attempt to ensuring a peaceful and orderly change of powers. But the cases of election between 2011 and 2023 in North-central Nigeria history has shown that it is usually difficult to hold elections that is free of electoral violence and votes buying. The general elections held between 2011 and 2023 in north-central Nigeria were accompanied by irregularities and intimidation of participant, these resulted to loss of lives, properties and several litigations in courts and tribunals across the nation. Elections in North-central Nigeria were associated with precious activity that threatened democratic development in Nigeria.

It was alleged that after Nigeria got her Independence, elections have become a political liability, a source of instability and decay (Yaqub, 1999). This is because the various electoral experiences in Nigeria was alleged to have brought in votes buying, political thugs, and unrestrained violence characterised by wanton destruction of lives and property as compared to the American experiences. In fact, the so called electoral politics in Nigeria has been likened by Ake to warfare (Ake, 2001). The fact that the series of general elections conducted in North-Central Nigeria between 2011 and 2023 had a fair experience of vote buying and political warfare. This is a pointer to the fact that Nigeria's democracy is in jeopardy; because general elections in north-central Nigeria, witness vote buying and political motivated killing of high-profile politicians and electorate; this formed the top breaking news on Nigeria dailies during elections (Ocheni, 2019). The reason is drawn from the fact that politicians in north-central Nigeria see politics as most lucrative industry to invest their resource. It is in this mindset that aspirant exhausts all means necessary to secure and capture the

position; through evident in past elections which are fraught with vote buying. In this experience political power is obtained by virtues of votes buying and thugs. Thus, political power have deviate from the service to humanity, protection of lives, properties and social security, rather seen as means of acquiring economic and political power through instrument of votes buying to submerg the will of the people.

Vote buying, several scholars made different attempts to describe it, because it takes different idea and believes, depending on the climes (Shacffer, 2007). Vote buying is 'exchanging political rights and material rights' (Fox, 1994). This perception is revealing how the right of voters were compelled during voting in election. The voting becomes transactional. Bryan in Pam Sham, (2008) avers that vote buying is use of money and direct benefits to influence voters. Bryan's definition indicates use of money and influences. Thus, vote buying is describe as transactional, whereby candidates distribute items such as cash and gifts in exchanges for electoral support or high turnout during campaign (Brusco, Nazereno and Stroke 2004). Votes buying are activities that includes food item, purchase of voters cards, targeting of social transfer and delivering of public service to local communities (Schelder, 2002). The act of vote-buying by this view affect democratic development as it create inability for majority of voters to access quality social facilities (health, education and employment), otherwise it is translate into unemployment, malnutrition, high mortality rate, incessant national economic crisis which translate into poverty rate (Ojo 2008, Ovwasa, 2013). Central to democracy development is free and fair election. Election involves registration, campaigns and lobbying for votes that requires money to play the game. Nonetheless the role of money in politics is a biggest threat to democratic development in Nigeria and beyond.

Democratic development is the expansion of freedom. The development of this kind is defined as freedom from want. These want includes food, water, shelter and clothing (basic needs of life), and without which man is no better than animal. Democratic development is an organised measure of social and political movement which need democratic freedom for their very existence and which therefore struggle to defend them (Jibrin and Michael, 2020). The paper agree that democracy is necessary for development when the state adopted popular sovereignty accompany by rule of law that is organic to Nigeria cultural soil. This makes democracy work for ordinary people to also grant those rights for cultural expression, political and economic participation. These types of participatory democracy require a more expanded role for the people in whose name government policies are justified.

Democratic development in Nigeria has remained the topical issue among scholars and even among observers.

In ideal democratic setting, democratic development is not without putting in place mechanism that guarantee free, fair and credible electoral process. Reading the various reports of electoral monitoring team from both national and international organisation, it was alleged that the electoral process between 2011 and 2023 had witness high degree of vote buying in North-central Nigeria. This factor among others affects the prospect of democratic development in Nigeria.

OVERVIEW OF VOTE BUYING BETWEEN 2011 AND 2023 ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

Votes buying have become a strategy by many politicians across African states and Nigeria in Particular. The use of money during elections in Nigeria is as old as Nigeria. It is dated back to pre-colonial period where the nationalist adopted what is similar to rent-seeking behaviour parties, politicians and electorate (Tenuche and Egwemi, 2020). The absence of strict rules of parties' finances made it easier for political parties and politicians to involve in illegal funding of parties activities and corruptions in the Nigeria first republic. This era did not have clear regulatory framework on party funding. During this period the candidates were responsible for election expenses.

This was extended to the second republic; during the election period most candidates with financial strength used their wealth to hijack the parties of their choice, stating that with unbridled use of money to buy votes. This took very firm stand by seeking electives position, while most politicians rely on votes buying to secure victory at the polls.

In 2011 worse of this experiences occurred, where votes buying took place in all the political activities and among the candidates. The conduct of 2011 and 2015 elections had demonstrated the scenario where huge capital were invested during the party primary and general elections (Adama, Ocheni and Ibrahim: 2016), the 2011 elections were not devoid of similar complaint and experiences, there were criticism over donations from top politicians to lobby through vote buying to secure power. 2015 saw a consolidation of votes buying, much of this were aptly observed by (Suberu, 2007 in Adama, Ocheni and Ibrahim: 2016) where both opined that "the use of money in 1999 general elections were open and shameless, while that of 2015 was despicably filthy".

In the same vein, vote-buying reached its peak in 2019, it was described as a do or die contest. Vote buying was recorded in all part of north-central Nigeria in general and Kogi State in particular, money was paid in exchange for votes and voters card at the polling units across Kogi States. Election managers were not left out in the inducement saga. Staffs of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in plateau, Nassarawa Benue State respectively and party agents were allegedly

induced (Olatunji, 2018). In 2019 alone, recorded the highest vote buying transaction saga in Nigeria; where voters offered cash and commodities such as food, clothing and jobs (Aworinde, 2019).

In the previous general elections held between 2003 and 2011 in Nigeria, N2000 was set aside to induced voters. But the median price of a vote payment rose between 2015 and 2019, to N5000. The 2015 general elections were most expensive elections. Individuals and incumbent government set out so much money and other resources to win the elections. Over a thousand groups emerged to support the incumbent government and billions was disbursed for campaign strategies (Temitope, 2018). Blatant Vote buying was widely reported during 2019 gubernatorial elections in Kogi State.

In 2023, money played a very significant role during general elections, where allegations of corrupt practices, political cabals and kingmakers gave out party nominations to the highest bidder, while uncompromising participants were deprived due to financial incapability. Across Nigeria, governorship election was alleged to have witnessed vote buying, where voters votes at the average of 5,000 depending on the areas.

ISSUES OF VOTE BUYING IN DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Vote buying in Nigeria has continued to constitute a great threat to the development of the country's nascent democracy. The problem associated with vote buying is, it both inhibit free, fair and credible elections but as well serve as hindrance to quality representation and delivery of democratic dividends.

The British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Paul Arkwright, described votes buying as form of electoral misconduct like rigging and ballot stuffing (Punch, July 25 2018). Vote buying had affected the integrity of electoral process in Nigerian especially in this fourth Republic. The credibility of candidates seeking for positions in public has been undermined by the size of their pocket. Elections and primaries held in 2023 readily come to mind in this regard. All party primaries were marred by vote buying among political parties in Nigeria.

The Nigerian electoral process as evident in past elections is filled with vote buying and rigging, etc. (Adigun, 2019; Lucky, 2014; Unufe & Justin-Ugo, 2019). Out of these electoral frauds, vote buying in recent times seem to have taken the centre stage (Lucky, 2014). This was also affirmed by Onuoha and Ojo (2018) that described vote for cash. This involves agreement of reward, after the voter had casted its vote and provided evidence that he voted for the party of vote buyer; as they show evidence of votes casted in the voting cubicle, or by displaying the thumb printed portion of the ballot papers to the part agent to ascertain that they actually voted for

the party of vote buyer. This strategy is called pre-paid method of vote buying.

The deeds of these politicians during general election in north central Nigeria encouraged vote buying, where political candidates placed much regard to money politics. The selling of votes by the poor electorates in exchange for financial and non-financial incentives indicates that the electoral process is not a true reflection of the minds or will of the people. This is the demonstration of high level of threat to democratic development in Nigeria. It simply shows that the credibility of the electoral process and even the state's democracy is in jeopardy; as the politicians compelled voters through financial inducement or non-financial motivation to reinstate them into political office. On this notes, Leight et al, simply write that "vote-buying jeopardize democratic development and credibility of election results; which undermines people belief and trust in electoral democracy (Leight, Jessica; Rohini, Pande, and Laura Ralston, 2016). This ignites most post-election violence, and political leaders who secure the throne of leadership using the mechanism of vote buying, lack the will power to fight corruption. Thus, affects the public perceptions of accountability. This explains and justifies the rationales behind Nigerian states being the most corrupt political entities in the world,

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Vote buying is the major characteristic of electoral process in north-central Nigeria. These study areas have exposes the outcome of vote buying and threats of money politics on democratic development. The effect of vote buying is associated with inducement of voters to enhance partisan loyalty; which did not expressed the will of the people in the ballot papers due to influence of benefits during elections. This filled persons who are not qualified to fill the political positions they were voted for. This spells doom on the development of electoral democracy in Nigeria. So, Schaffer (2007) argued that vote buying is a reprocessing of corrupt and depraved politicians. The reprocessing of this kind of politicians is made possible because most voters did not criticize electoral manipulation as wrong. This increases the level of corruption in Nigeria electoral system.

The study had provide Nigerian government, political parties, Nigeria electoral body, security operatives, among others mechanism to alleviate vote buying in North-Central Nigeria; as it provide explanations on the danger and implication of vote buying on democratic development in Nigeria.

The study therefore, recommends that those politicians seek to control voter's decision through inducement and votes buying should be criminalised.

The study recommends that there should be a total

review on the cost governance, to discourage politicians with intention of acquiring economic power through political powers, thereby making the electoral process credible in Nigeria.

Government should establish mobile courts during conduct of general elections to adjudicate cases of political leader who want to ascend the throne of leadership via the mechanism of vote buying at the polling units.

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