



## Political Elites and the Challenge of Free and Fair Elections in the Nigerian Fourth Republic

### LES ELITES POLITIQUES ET LE DEFI DES ELECTIONS LIBRES ET EQUITABLES DANS LE 4e REPUBLIQUE NIGERIANE

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#### Abstract

Conducting free, fair and credible elections constitute a major challenge to democratic stability in emerging democracies. This paper with specific focus on the Nigerian state of the fourth republic discusses the impediments to free and fair elections from the perspective of elitist contradiction and manipulation for power acquisition. The paper accentuates that elitist practice as regard the means of power acquisition, the purpose and utilization of political power or the nature of politics as witnessed in the present political dispensation is antithetical to democratic process. The paper further discussed the negative impact of ethnicization which presently manifest inform of zoning, incumbency factor and class interest on political behavior in the Nigerian polity and thus recommends the involvement of the academia and the civil society in enhancing political education as well as the need for informed political participation on the part of the people which is acquired through experience in the exercise over a period of time.

**Key words:** Democracy; Electoral process; Elitist contradiction; Political power; Political representation; Political skill

#### Résumé

La réalisation d'élections libres, justes et crédibles constituent défi majeur pour la stabilité démocratique dans les démocraties émergentes. Ce document avec un accent particulier sur l'état nigérian de la Quatrième République discuter des obstacles aux élections libres et équitables du

point de vue de la contradiction et la manipulation élitiste pour l'acquisition de puissance. Qui accentuent la pratique de ce papier élitiste que les moyens d'acquérir le pouvoir, le but et l'utilisation du pouvoir politique ou le genre de politique, comme en témoigne dans la dispensation actuelle politique antithétique à la démocratie est un processus. Le Top du papier suite d'avoir discuté de l'impact négatif de l'ethnicisation qui actuellement se manifester informer de facteur de titularisation de zonage, et l'intérêt de classe sur le comportement politique dans la politique nigériane et Malthus recommande l'implication du monde universitaire et la société civile pour renforcer l'éducation politique ainsi que les Besoin pour la participation politique éclairé sur la main du peuple qui est acquis par l'expérience dans l'exercice sur une période de temps.

**Mots clés:** Démocratie; Processus électoral; Contradiction élitiste; Pouvoir politique; Représentation politique; Compétences politiques

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#### INTRODUCTION

Election is one of the basic ingredients that oil the machinery of governance especially in a democracy. It is the process for evaluating the political performance of the representatives of the people either for the purpose of returning back to political offices or replacing them with perceived better representation (Omodia, 2009). As a result, it is quite indispensable that for political representation to be more responsive in a democratic system there is need for the electoral process to be free and fair.

The conception of free and fair election here is seen as an embodiment of a chain process where the people are the driving force and determinant of political representation or the outcome of the electoral process. In other words, the conception here is not only for inter-party elections to be free and fair especially in new democratic states of Africa, but, the need for electoral activities to be centered on the people in such a way that it would aid the emergence of political leaders at the intra party level, aid informed political decisions at the polling booth and where the people's choice would be the major determinant of electoral contest.

In order to achieve the above, political parties are expected to effectively perform the function of political education, political candidates or parties are not supposed to be restricted to access to mass media or any other functional means of political campaign, a candidate or party is not expected to be unduly financially advantaged through the use of state fund, the electoral body is also expected to be independent in such a way that it could effectively discharge the functions of transparent voter registration exercise, collation and declaration of electoral results among others.

Moreover, it is expected that there would be a hyphen and buckle between people's vote and electoral results. As a matter of fact, unfolding scenario especially in the Nigerian State of the fourth republic is such that, there has been a wide gap between people's electoral choice and electoral results declared by the electoral body (Zimako, 2009; Omodia, 2010). This no doubt manifested in states like Edo, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun among others, where judicial courts had cause to nullify Gubernatorial results declared by electoral bodies in those states (Omodia, 2010).

Conversely, it is important to state that the reasons for the above ugly situation have been attributed to multi-factors such as: elitist manipulation, institutional fragility, poor political culture, excessive monetization of political offices among others (Omodia, 2007; Omodia, 2008; Bello, 2008). The perspective of this paper however, is to unfold the challenges political elites poses to free and fair elections in Nigeria with specific focus on the Nigerian fourth republic by synthesizing the nature of political contest, the purpose of political power, as well as the means of acquiring political power.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although, the workings of democratic governance could be understood from such theoretical perspectives as the Group theory, Game theory, Class theory, System theory, Structural functionalism to mention a few. However, the focus of this paper is anchored on Elite theory because it discusses from the realist perspective the workings of modern democracy which focuses on representative democracy.

From the perspective of representative democracy,

it is important to state that, the focus of this paper is not embedded in the interaction of political structures vis-à-vis its functions (system theory or structural functionalism), nor in group pluralism vis-à-vis how group shapes political decisions (Group theory). Rather, this paper focuses on the purpose and means of power acquisition which justifies the utility of Elite theory as the theoretical perspective of this paper.

Elitism as a democratic perspective unfolds the understanding that representative democracy is a function of the dictates and manipulations of the elites based on class organization and acquisition of political skill (Olaniyi, 1997; Varma, 2001). Thus, it negates the Marxian conception of masses control of democratic process because the masses lack the organizational and political knowledge which democratic leadership requires.

Conversely, it is important to accentuate that the fact that there are various forms of elites-political, traditional, bureaucratic, military etc, is an indication that the elitist class is not as homogenous as envisaged by the classical elite theorists (Omodia, 2004). The result therefore, is the manifestation of elitist contradiction even within the political elite class when it comes to power acquisition. This scenario, no doubt, is obtainable in the Nigerian state in that one could argue that the greatest threat to the survival of the Nigerian state is the elitist contradiction associated with the competition for political offices by the political elites.

It is therefore from the above background that this paper intends to unfold the challenge of elitist contradiction to free and fair elections in Nigeria by understanding the nature of political contest, as well as the purpose and means of acquiring political power.

## MEANS OF POWER ACQUISITION

It is a known fact that interest is the main propelling force for the acquisition of political power (Varma, 2001). The question that then comes to mind is: to what extent is elitist interest synonymous with masses interest? This question is quite indispensable considering the fact that by the nature of politics, even in a democratic set-up, the elite tend to manipulate the unconscious mass class in favor of elitist hedonism. This shows that in most democracies including Nigeria, the quantity strength of the mass people have continued to count less because of the manipulative political skills of the elites.

In developed democracies, the skill of the politicians have manifested more in an integrative political machinery that accommodates the interests of the masses through inter-party electoral process which is mainly free and fair, internal party democracy no doubt reflects elitist dictate (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 1997). In the Nigerian state, just like most emerging democracies, the political skills of the elites have remained crude through the utilization of violence, thuggery, ethnicism, religious chauvinism

and other negative factors in manipulating the masses for the acquisition of political power (Ukaeje, 2001; Oloso, 2004; Wilmot, 2007; Yamma, 2008; Idahosa, 2010; Okoh, 2010). This situation is worse-off considering the fact that these manipulations exist at both the intra and inter party level of competition for political power which has led to a scenario where votes are designed not to count in the democratic process.

As a result, one could vividly state that in the Nigerian democratic experiment, undemocratic and unconventional devices are used as means for acquiring political power. This to a great extent explains for the fragile nature of Nigeria's democracy as a process which is not rooted in the people.

Although (Omodia, 2003) argued that this could be said to be a transformational process to an enduring democracy if democracy is nurtured to grow. The present democratic scenario in the Nigerian state as witnessed in the 2011 General elections, suggests that although unconventional means were utilized by political elites during the exercise, the exercise no doubt was a mark difference from the past based on the following:

- i. The hunger for free and fair elections by Nigerians and the open declaration by the President for the commitment to free and fair elections at different public forum;
- ii. The expression of confidence in the credibility of the person of the head of the National Electoral body vis-à-vis the electoral process leading to the elections by the major players and actors of the electoral process;
- iii. The heightened involvement of the civil society in voter education for effective political participation;
- iv. The rising revolution against dictatorship in North Africa in favor of democratization which could snow ball into Nigeria if the will of the people is largely tampered with and
- v. Reduction in pre and election-day violence and thuggery unlike what was obtainable in the past.

While the above could be identified as mark improvement in the process, the collation process was no doubt, manipulated by political elites in areas of strength and therefore constitute a threat to democratic survival in the Nigerian democratic experiment, especially as witnessed in the post election crisis in the Northern part of the country.

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## THE NATURE OF POLITICAL CONTEST

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While the utility of the above analysis is anchored on the understanding that the nature of political contest is generally between elites and the utilization of the masses for achieving the political end of elites, the matter as argued above in developed democracies, is an integrative process at the inter party level, where the votes of the masses are considered to be weighty in deciding who occupy political offices among the competing political

elites (Janda, Berry and Goldman, 1997). In the Nigerian system, the nature of contest is a divisive mechanism which often manifests the fragility of the Nigerian state (Omodia, 2010b).

Though, ethnicization was indicated in the nature of political contest leading to the termination of the first and second republic (Ademoyega, 1981; Kurfi, 1983), the present republic had sought to check such difficulty through zoning of political contest between the North and South (Nwachukwu, 2005; Omodia, 2010). It could be recalled that in the 1999 Presidential election for example, the contestants were Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Chief Olu Falae of the All People's Party (APP) both from the South Western part of the country. It could also be recalled that Chief Olusegun Obasanjo won and was re-elected in 2003.

In 2007, although candidates from the Southern part contested, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua a Northerner however emerged as the winner. This was like what happened in the 2003 election where candidates from the North contested and a Southerner won. The understanding was for the South to have a second term in 2003 and the North to also have a two term of eight years beginning from 2007 (Egwemi, 2007).

However, the demise of Yar'Adua on 5th May, 2010 and the election of Goodluck Jonathan, a Southerner, in the 2011 Presidential election is an indication that the incumbency factor is a very important factor in understanding the nature of political contest in the Nigerian state. This factor is important considering the weak nature of democratic institutions in which political office holders are seen to be above party positions and are therefore not subject to party discipline (e.g. the manipulation of the zoning policy of the PDP to accommodate the political ambition of the incumbent Nigerian President).

In addition to the factors of ethnicization of political contest, incumbency factor is the factor of class contest. This indicates that of utmost importance to the political elites is the survival of the elitist capitalist class. In other words, ethnicization and incumbency factor in political contest could be viewed as a utilizing tool for the survival of class survival or as factors that must be jettisoned if class interest is threatened.

This explains the reason why some political elites even with mass support in their geo-political zone may not be supported by the capitalist elites in the same zone. A typical conception is the person of General Buhari who possesses mass support in the North but who has continually been viewed as a threat to the capitalist/aristocratic interest of the Northern elites. The implication is that even when political contest was narrowed to the North and South, with Buhari representing the North as the case in the 2011 Presidential election, the Northern capitalist elites expressed their preference for the candidate from the Southern part of the country based on

the conviction that he would uphold their interest rather than a Buhari who is viewed as having interest that is antithetical to capitalist class orientation.

## THE PURPOSE OF POLITICAL POWER

At this juncture, the questions that come to mind are:

i. Of what purpose is political power that it necessitated elitist utilization of undemocratic means for the acquisition of political power?

ii. What has been the political elite's reaction to the threat created by the utilizing of undemocratic means to the survival of the Nigerian state?

On the first question, from the analysis above, one could deduce the following as the purpose for the utilization of undemocratic means for power acquisition:

a. The excessive monetization of political offices and the utilization of such offices for creating selfish economic base or for the protection of capitalist class.

b. The lack of or poor level of political ideas cum functional blueprint needed for socio-economic and political transformation of the Nigerian state. In other words, politics is not issue based, thus, the need to use unconventional means to acquire political power in a democratic setting because there is simply no or poor developmental ideas to sell to the people by the political parties or the political contestants.

On the second question, elitist reaction has manifested itself especially in the present dispensation of the fourth republic on the need to emphasis more on elitist cohesion even at the expense of socio-economic transformation as a result of poor political leadership. This is because, most elites that found themselves in the corridors of power as a result of this arrangement were elites that were least prepared for the functions of political leadership. This could be said to be true of the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the President of Nigeria in 1999. As a matter of fact, the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 was viewed by political actors as an arrangement structured to pacify the South-Western part of the country over the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election that was purported to have been won by Chief Moshood Kashimawo Abiola who was a son of the region ( Opara, 2007).

The same could also be said to have been responsible for the emergence of Alhaji Musa Yar'Adua as President in 2007, who arguably was the least prepared aspirants among the contestants for the Presidential candidacy of PDP and indeed the presidential seat. The implication no doubt was the snail speed work rate of the administration to the disadvantage of Nigerians in term of socio-economic development.

The above scenario therefore indicate the failure of political leadership in Nigeria as a result of elitist survival which have continually impacted negatively on free and fair elections in Nigeria. This is because the purpose of

political power, the nature of politics and the means of power acquisition in Nigeria is not developmental in orientation and thus dysfunctional to the survival of the Nigerian state.

## CONCLUSION

Although free and fair election is generally viewed as the process of voting and making such vote count. However, this paper in its analysis, majorly focused on the process and activity associated with electoral participation from the contestant point of view, what shapes the emergence of political contestants, the emergence of political representatives cum elites, the role of the people in such emergence and the purpose and means of political representation among others.

The argument of this paper is that democratic activities and processes in the Nigerian state are antithetical to free and fair form of democratic representation because of elitist manipulation which throws-up political leaders that are not true representatives of the people. This no doubt constitute a major challenge to democratic survival in the Nigerian state which could be checked through informed political education on the part of the civil society, the academia and the citizens themselves through experience acquired in political participation that span over a period of time.

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