JOURNAL OF PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
JPSDS 2(1), 1-12, December (2023)
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OPEN ACCESS
ORGINAL ARTICLE

Civil Society and Election Misadventures in Africa: A General Overview of Policy Lapses on Election Monitoring in Nigeria

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Abstract
The challenge posed by issues of election misadventures in Nigeria necessitates an overview of the roles of civil society in ensuring the credibility of elections. It focuses on policy lapses, systemic flaws, and the role of civil society in monitoring and legitimizing Nigerian election outcomes. The essence of the study is not only to examine the processes and procedures for election monitoring by a neutral body other than the political parties but essentially, to justify the relevance of civil society in the election monitoring process in Nigeria. The study is partly historical, descriptive, and explanatory. It generates data from the secondary source and draws an inference from the thematic issues based on textual analysis. Based on the findings, the study recommends some vital policy measures and action plans for effective election monitoring by civil society groups, to complement the roles of the election management body.
Keywords: civil society, election misadventure, monitoring, Nigeria, policy lapses.

Introduction

One of the major unique attributes of democracy is the election of the people representing the public in government. Without the election of political leadership being an open and all-inclusive exercise, the global campaign for democratic governance would be nullity. Although multiple challenges hinder the organization of political institutions across continents, regions, and within each country, leadership succession appears to be one of the most decisive causative factors of political instability and social strife in most political systems, more so in third-world politics. This explains the amount of human and material resources invested to achieve free, fair, and credible elections, and civil society groups are at the center of this process.

The role of civil society as a watchdog in the practice of modern democracy and governance has a remote origin. It can be traced to the Renaissance period when some concerned groups came together to spearhead campaigns for improved political enlightenment, economic liberalization, and good governance in the ancient democracies of Europe. The results were rapid growths in institutional capacity, enthronement of good governance structures and efficient services, proactive response system to public opinion, accountability, and transparency leading to consolidation of free, fair, and credible elections in most western democracies and America both of which today serve as world models.

However, the same does not depict the scenario in emerging democracies in developing nations. The close monitoring of elections has had a different variant in Africa generally, and Nigeria in particular. The history of the inclusion of civil society is relatively recent; though it is difficult to point to a particular period it crept into the political lexicon of Africa and Nigeria. It may have accounted for the poor impact of civil society in election monitoring and ensuring that the government that emerges from the process is accountable and responsible.

To discuss the interplay of historical ambiguity in a colonized state, the emergence of civil society in its internal affairs, and election monitoring in Nigeria, will require eight sections for a thorough analysis to be done on the subjects. The selected areas include the general introduction, conceptual and theoretical discourses, problematising civil society and election monitoring generally, historical ambiguity of elections in Nigeria; the roles of civil society; challenges of civil society; policy and actionable plans, conclusion, and recommendations.

Conceptual and Theoretical Discourses

Civil Society. As with most popular academic concepts, there is no universally accepted definition of civil society. Solomon and Samuel (2007), corroborate this ubiquitous notion when they said that civil society connotes different things to different people depending on the ideological disposition and the practical implication of the activities of such organizations in the areas of the jurisdiction concerned. From this angle, Dutta, (2014), and particularly Kaviraj & Khilnani, (2002:11) posit, "Looked at the same time as the diagnosis and as the cure for current ills, deployed by conservatives, liberals, and radical utopians alike, by oppositional movements, and by international aid donors, civil society has become an ideological rendezvous for erstwhile antagonists". These qualifications represent the outstanding essential mosaic natures of civil society.

Beyond the numerous difficulties of ascertaining the character and flow of opposition movements in Africa, the concept of civil society, like the concept of social class has enjoyed currency among political scientists studying Africa. Like class, it has also raised particularly vexing definitional issues in its application in sub-Saharan Africa, (Boyle, 1999). This stems from the peculiar attributes of the continent, which is inundated by a preponderance of fledgling democratic institutions, reign of autocratic regimes, dearth of the middle class, and poverty, and where the robust ideals of constructive engagements of the political class for accountability, transparency and good governance driven by free, fair and credible elections started lately. In this way and as it is still evident in most African nations, civil society presents varied contextual meanings. Despite the lingering fuss underlying the lack of definitional consensus on civil society by scholars from different geographical locations, Akpan (2011:64) cites the views of the London School of Economics Centre for Civil Society thus:

> Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from the state, family and market, though, in practice, the boundaries between states, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

In that vein, civil society is defined as a third sector existing alongside and interacting with the state and private industry. Non-governmental organizations constitute an important part of this group and involve an arena of both collaboration and contention. It can deploy a mix of the multidimensional skills of its members, and networks and mobilize resources to provide inputs into the policy-making processes of national governments. Hence, it is composed of the totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society, as distinct from the fore-backed structures of a state (regardless of that state's political system) and commercial institutions of the market (UNDP, 2001). However, it is important to offer a composite characterization of civil society according to various schools of thought as a way of dissolving their views into a consensual framework: (a) all observers agree that civil society refers to voluntary participation by average citizens and thus does not include behavior imposed or even coerced by the state; (b) for some observers, it only includes political activity engaged in through nonprofit organizations such as nongovernmental organizations NGOs; (c)at the other end of the spectrum, some observers include all forms of voluntary participation, whether in the public or private sector, political or apolitical; (d) civil society includes not just the individuals who participate, but also the institutions they participate in – sometimes called ''civil society organizations'' or ''CSOs'' (e) thus, civil society is strong to the degree that those CSOs are large and powerful (http://pages.britishlibrary.net/blwww3/3way/civilsoc.htm). From the foregoing, we can say that civil society is an aggregation of associations of nonpartisan people who share common ideological beliefs in society, perceive problems from the same lens, and voluntarily offer selfless commitment in seeking their solutions, and this category includes nongovernmental organizations.

Election. Scholars have written extensively on this subject and as well offered a plethora of definitions of the concept. However, the clusters of the meanings they ascribe to an election are somehow related within context and point in the same direction. In this category falls the opinion of the International Encyclopedia of Social Science Vol.5, on the concept (Ogu, 2011). It defines election as one procedure of aggregating preferences of a particular kind. Two key words (procedure and preferences) emerge from this definition; procedure refers to statuesque – a prescribed specific way of doing things while a preference simply denotes choice among

alternatives. On the other hand, Ujo (2000) underscores election as a procedure that allows members of an organization or community to choose a representative who will hold a position of authority within it. According to Vernon (1988), Government ‘‘by the people’’ is presumably government by all the people. The basic assumption is that in so far as possible, people should have the right to participate, directly or through a representative, in the decisions of the government that rules over them. The assumption is that they may thus be able to protect themselves against oppression and obtain consideration of their interests. The right to participate includes the right to vote. In that vein, an election is a process of reaching a consensus on the representative of the citizens of a particular state in public offices.

Categorization and Roles of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).

Civil Society Organizations can be classified according to the following features: (a) representation, (b) advocacy and technical inputs, (c) capacity (d) capacity building, (e) service delivery, and (f) social functions (www.wmd.org/...elections/civil-society-strategies-fr.). By structural composition, civil society organizations include a very wide range of institutions, including (a) non-governmental organizations, (b) faith-based institutions, (c) community groups, (d) professional associations, (e) trade unions, (f) media organizations, (g) research institutes, and (g) think tanks (ODI, 2005). By the scope of operations, civil society organizations operate at different levels: (a) global, (b) regional, (c) National, (d) local, and (e) community levels (ODI, 2005).

In Nigeria, the number of civil society groups presently stands in the neighborhood of 300 and it continues to add. Mention could be made of the under-listed few - Domestic Election Observation Groups which includes the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), Labour Monitoring Team (LMT), Women Environmental Programme (WEP), Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Alliance for Credible Elections, Citizens Forum for Constitutional Reform (CFCR) and the Electoral Reform Network (ERN), Women Awareness Organization (WAO), Gender Development Initiative (GDI), Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), Lawyers Alert (LA), Save Nigeria Group (SNG), Centre for Gender Education (CGE), Society for Human Development (SHD), etc (Olukoshi, 2001**).**

Nevertheless, the roles of civil society organizations vary in the same way their chosen areas of service vary. As of today, there are no aspects of human life that one civil society organization or the other does not cover. Notwithstanding the existing divisions of labour and specialization implied in their names, specialties and pattern of organization, these boundaries sometimes dissolve into common action through collaboration when there are matters of national importance such as elections. As noted by the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG, 2007) and Said (2007), the primary role of election observers in every democratic government is to strengthen a nation’s election processes and outcomes. This is realized by observing the management of the various phases in the electoral process and reporting strengths and weaknesses… The participation of civil society organizations in Nigeria in the observation and monitoring of elections since the early 1990s has been informed by the need to develop and sustain an electoral process in the country that is open, inclusive, free, and fair to all concerned.

In a more general sense, Emime (2000) listed their roles outside election monitoring but specifically in institutional developments and capacity building, to include: (a) serving as a watchdog to check the excesses of government and expose and curtail violations of human rights, and abuse of the constitution among the democratic political institutions. (b) supporting the role of political parties in stimulating political participation, increasing political efficiency and skills, and promoting appreciation of the obligations of democratic citizens.This conforms to the observation of Barrack Obama that recent years have shown that elections do not assure democratic rule. After free and fair elections, civil society engages in a daily struggle to head off repressive laws, expose corruption, and ensure the fair representation of all groups, interests, and ideas. It strives to compel government accountability and to assure that officeholders continue to play by the rules of the game (https://www.iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/).

Although civil society groups around the world face increasing restrictions from authoritarian governments, they are essential for the healthy growth of democracy and freedom particularly in Nigeria. Their activities in the monitoring of Nigeria’s elections have shown that a vibrant civil society, supported by a free press and other independent organizations, not only supports electoral outcomes when fairness, legitimacy, and compliance characterize the polling, it also supports post-electoral processes that do not betray the mandate vested in the government by the people (Charles, 2003). In addition, Jega (2006) buttressed this vividly when he asserts that civil society enhances (a) the promotion and defense of the constitution and rule of law, (b) the enhancement of the integrity and efficiency of the democratic institution and processes. (c) the development of a viable democratic culture in the polity.What becomes apparent from the foregoing composite values of civil society,

according to Achebe (2001), is that (a) they provide a crucial arena for the development of such democratic attributes as tolerance, willingness to compromise, and respect for opposing viewpoints. (b) they are an important channel of information dissemination and help citizens to collectively pursue and defend their interests and values. (c) when engaged in election monitoring, civil society organizations enhance voters' confidence and affirm credibility by exposing electoral fraud and other undemocratic activities.

In this way, civil society groups in Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere engage in the, (a) network with pressure groups and other civil society stakeholders to promote free and fair elections, (b) form domestic election monitoring and observation groups, (c) use civic and voter education and other outreach activities, (d) conduct research and advocacy on electoral reforms, (e) use alternative media to reach the electorate, (f) use community workshops, billboards, and flyers urging voters to exercise their franchise, (g) mobilize ordinary people for massive demonstrations and resistance activities, (h) monitor media coverage of elections, campaigns, and political party platforms, (i) disseminate targeted information using the internet and alternative media, (j) extend invitations to international nongovernmental organizations and observers to monitor particular elections, (k) coordinate and broaden democratic alliances involving broad sections of the populace, (l) monitor the use of state resources to influence the vote, (m) form a movement for political accountability, and (n) conduct coordinated training of electoral management agencies and civil society groups and organizations (Maina, et al, in www.world@ned.org).

In Nigeria, for example, the primary mission of the Transition Monitoring Group is to promote the development and practice of democratic values and to monitor democratic institutions and the electoral process. Its broad objectives include (a) developing integrity in the electoral process by monitoring and reporting on the prosecution of the political programme. (b) observe and monitor the conduct of elections in Nigeria. (c) encourage and promote the participation of citizens, especially women and marginalized groups in the political process. (d) assist in building capacity for member organizations. (e) provide civic education and democratic capacity building for public institutions. (f) encourage wider dissemination of voter education materials. (g) lobby and campaign for the promulgation of human rights and people-oriented legislation, and (i) assist in mediating and resolving disputes arising within the electoral process (www.tngnigeria.org). This shows the essentiality of civil society organizations in the entire gamut of governmental institutions and public administration, particularly in Nigeria where they continuously work to defend the citizens and protect the polity from collapse.

Problematizing Civil Society and Election Monitoring in Nigeria

Many Western scholars are of the view that the origin of election monitoring in Africa by groups outside the election management bodies is rooted in colonial factors. The colonial periods witnessed some levels of election monitoring by members of political parties, trade unions, labour unions, student unions, and other vested interests. The major attraction of the activity was to displace alien rulers and their local collaborators, whose styles of governance did not recognize indigenous interests and accommodate them in government policies and programmes. They usually refer to the earliest forms of protests, agitations, struggles, and confrontations against these alien political dominations in Africa, her economic exploitation, depopulation of her youths for slavery labour in Europe, social-cultural discrimination but most importantly the commitments to wrest power from the imperial government as typifying this perspective.

Ninalowo (2004) while justifying this viewpoint contends that "Civil society is that arena where individuals seek the actualization or activation of aspirations for self-determination, self-freedom, the satisfaction of expressions of personal idiosyncrasies, etc." This no doubt underscores agitation against the European form of political organization and the electoral system it applied in Africa during the colonial period that not only appeared vague but also bore no semblance of democracy, which leaders emerge through election other than forcible imposition by a tiny domineering cabal of European origin (Okibe, 2000). With the prevalence of an authoritarian form of colonial regimes in Africa and the quest for reform of some of her repressive policies, African elites formed themselves into interest groups, associations, congresses, unions/movements, and later, political parties (Coleman, 1958). The purpose was to use the platform and engage European authorities on constitutional and electoral reforms and vigorously canvass for inclusive government where an African will have a say in determining his affairs.

Though the struggles were to result in some outlandish political developments and the attainment of political independence in most African countries, the attendant consequence was the transfer of these colonial complexes and ambiguity to Africa, which has continued to belabor most of her nascent nations several decades after independence. For this similar reason, Akinboye (2005:294) observes that "Nigeria's chequered political history

is bedevilled with the gory tales of electoral malpractices, which have significantly had pernicious ramifying effects on the nation's polity". The reasons are obvious. Before the advent of colonialism, the composite tribes that constitute Nigeria practiced different systems of government and administration. They had peculiar processes and procedures for bringing about their leadership either on the bases of cultural heritage and guidelines or religious doctrines and beliefs, without undue rivalry and competition. Fusing these disparate entities and displacing their forms of government demanded much more than banding the drumbeats of liberal democracy with all the novelty in the method of constituting political leadership through an election which was at variance with their indigenous practices, and this was the cradle of disputed election outcomes and the consequent leadership crisis in most third world countries in Africa.

Though election has always been a subject of controversy globally, it is more so where the power premium is highly regarded and this is the bane of developing societies, of which Nigeria is a part (Taiwo, 1982). As a mechanism for capturing power for authoritative allocation of values, bordering on who gets what, when, and how to the exclusion of other challengers, each group vying for positions struggles to undo one another in the contest. This form of political behavior foisted on the people's new political culture that thrived on rivalry and competition in an economy that was exposed to unregulated distortions and exploitation. Immanent in the modern rivalry for power among the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria is a loss of trust and confidence in the electoral process, thereby showing virulent contests and its vulnerability to all manner of manipulations. The implication is that election in most developing societies has long ceased to serve the ultimate goal of being the medium of making choices amid alternatives (Achebe, 1983), thereby immersing the affected society(ies) in myriads of crises, and consequently, heralding civil society organizations.

Historical Ambiguity of Elections and Civil Society in Nigeria

From the independence elections of 1959 to virtually the elections witnessed thereafter in post-independence Nigeria with minor dissimilarities in form and character, empirical evidence shows that individual and groups' proclivities to win an election at all cost with an undertone of ''do or die'' has persistently engendered elastic trend of electoral malpractice in the country. Election rigging, vote buying, violence, falsification of election results in some instances, flagrant violation of electoral laws, and installation of leadership with doubtful legitimacy or authority have been the hallmarks. The consequence is inextricable disability on the part of the leaders to steer the wheel of the nation in the direction of growth and national integration (Kalu, 1994), or better still, provide roadmaps for sustainable developments, economic stabilization, national security, transparency, accountability, and good governance, unity of purpose in action, peace, and unity. This, therefore, beckons civil society organizations for an urgent remedy.

According to Jega (2006:13), "In almost all democracies, civil society as the conscience of the society through the various instrument of advocacy is the pride of social change, public accountability, and good governance. It is impossible to anticipate accountability, transparency, and good governance in any electoral process without the active collaboration of civil societies". This collaboration, to a large extent, became a desideratum at the peak of military dictatorial regimes in Nigeria. More so with the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections which birthed the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and other nonpartisan groups that resisted continued military acts of insurgency in the nation's polity. Worthy of note is the fact that transitions to democracy and all the drumbeats for the leadership transfer process rendered the political system porous for civil society groups. To a large extent, democratic election has remained a big challenge in Nigeria.

Although the challenge breeds all manners of systemic problems resulting in weak public institutions and perceived illegitimate government characteristic of elections flawed in credibility tests, Alexis de Tocqueville cited in Hilal and Andi (2013:143) argues that "democracy does not provide a people with the most skillful governments, but it does that which the most skillful governments often cannot do. It spreads throughout the social body, a restless activity, superabundant force, and energy never found elsewhere, which, however little favoured by circumstances can do wonders. Those are its true advantages". This explains why the roles of civil society in promotion of democracy and election in Nigeria became more noticeable from the general elections of 1999 to the present day. It is the effort to curb the devastating impact of the defective institutional framework and poor election handling in Nigeria that necessitates the interventionist activities/roles of civil society groups in election monitoring, which forms the thrust of this study. However, civil society will not be discussed separately but collectively as an organization that shares identical philosophies in their operation for society's common good and adopt various strategies, however dissimilar, in pursuit of their core goals and mandates.

The Roles of Civil Society Groups in Nigeria's Electoral Process

Since the emergence of military transitions in Nigeria, civil society groups have been strategic in campaigning for free, fair, and credible elections. At the earliest stage of the transition programme under Ibrahim Babangida, the government floated Mass Mobilization for Self Reliance, Social Justice, and Economic Recovery (MAMSER) on July 25, 1987, which embarked on an enlightenment campaign, voter education, and mass mobilization subsumed in the role of civil society organizations, preparatory for any electioneering process in a democratic polity. A central goal of MAMSER was to cultivate support for the transitional programme of the Government. It was also an avenue to educate the citizens about the political process, mobilize them to participate in the upcoming elections and political debates, and also inculcate dependence on locally made goods and Nigerian products (www.en. wikipedia.org/wiki/MAMSER).

It was an exercise in political orientation in Nigeria undertaken by President Babangida as one of the recommendations of the Political Bureau headed by Samuel Cookey. The Bureau's task was to consult with thousands of Nigerians and recommend to the Armed Forces Ruling Council, a respectable and methodical transition programme. However, as events unfolded, i.e., the recurring manipulative undertones of the electoral process that climaxed in the annulment of the presidential election in 1993, the spirit of collective action by the civil society groups against the drifting government of Babangida heightened. Civil society organizations and indeed Nigerian masses took several measures to fight for the restoration of their mandate, which they freely donated to the presidential candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) Mushood Abiola, the supposed winner of the botched election by resisting the military's ploy to perpetuate her stay in office.

The election and the aftermath no doubt accelerated the growth of civil society groups, created widespread protests and agitation, and ushered networks of activities that subsequently became pathfinders to exposure of our inept leadership and inchoate polity to the international community. This was fueled further by the activities of the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) notwithstanding the government's penchant for violence that culminated in most of her members being sent on forcible exile. Through the mass action of the civil society groups, Babangida was coerced to step aside. The development served as a morale booster, showing the power of unarmed groups in wresting power from an autocratic regime. This in effect is because people around the world want to have a say in their governments to have control over their lives and make sure their elections have real integrity. In this vein, civil society groups were not unmindful of the fact thatstrong civil society organizations in a transition can provide constructive channels for democratic participation. It can help rebuild citizens' trust in government, promote their rights and interests, and encourage the inclusion of minorities and disenfranchised groups (www.wmd.org/...elections /civil-society-strategies-fr).

Incidentally, these were vigorously pursued during Babangida's transition to a civil rule programme courtesy of the undaunted efforts of civil society organizations. During Sani Abacha's experiment in self-succession bids, the courageous roles of civil society organizations demonstrated their capacity in averting the imminent invasion of Nigeria's democratic state by dissidents. Although Abacha's transition program witnessed the registration of five political parties by the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria NECON (i.e. United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), and Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM); these parties compromised her statutory functions in fielding candidates for election by surrendering to Abacha's gambit whom they unanimously adopted as a consensus candidate.

Consequently, they lost credibility, thus leaving civil society groups as the last hope for the sustenance of the country's democracy. The civil society's standpoint was that any form of transmutation of Abacha to a civilian president violates both the rights of Nigerians to make a democratic choice in a free and fair election and in addition, usurps the institutional roles of the electoral umpire by legitimizing lawlessness in the conduct of governance. Eric (2011:317) rationalized the logicality of the argument, stating that civil society groups organize around the idea that they want to have democratic elections. They want a certain set of rules, then to make sure those rules are respected. It, therefore, works to promote free and legitimate elections through monitoring, election administration strengthening, and support for democratic political parties.

In that order, they proceeded to defy the contagious bandwagon effects of fear borne out of terror attacks that became commonplace to assure once more that it is the cornerstone on which the survival of the system rests. The period from 1998 to the inception of the 2011 electioneering campaigns witnessed the birth of many civil society groups. It accelerated collaboration with international civil society organizations, which electrified interests in the elections and established the vitality of nonpartisan organizations in bridging the nebulous gap existing between the political class and the masses of Nigeria.

In the 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011 general elections, therefore, it was evident that civil society organizations played key roles. Although the 1999 elections witnessed proof of mass reluctance to embrace the transition jingles by the government of General Abdulsalam Abubakar on accounts of the preceding political maneuvers, civil society groups did not relent in their campaigns for mass participation and transparency in electoral management (Darren, 1999). They followed up the transitional elections from the points of party registration, the release of election guidelines, party primaries, and convention, to the monitoring of the conduct of the various stages of the elections, at the local, state, and national levels. The successful conclusion of the elections led to the swearing-in of Olusegun Obasanjo as the President and Commander in Chief of the Nigerian Armed Forces on 29 May 1999. Even at that, excessive malpractices and violence characterized the elections and both the local and international observers adjudged it not free and fair but treated it as a learning phase (http://www.cartercenter.org/news/ducuments/doc891.html).

In 2003 therefore, the stage was ripe for a civilian-to-civilian democratic transition. Civil society organizations had an uphill task contending with the overbearing challenges of the election. These had to do with sensitization of the masses for turnout during voter registration, how to secure wider coverage for the education of the electorates, how to surmount the barrier created by the government to hinder their watchdog roles and resolve problems posed by the activities of the political parties (TMG, 2003). Altercations, inter and intra-party conflicts, deployment of state apparatus for the prosecution of inter-group rivalries, litigations, unwarranted restrictions on the activities of observation groups, visible partiality of the electoral umpire (Independent National Electoral Commission INEC), and desecration of known global democratic culture and principles, were rife. Civil society organizations intensified campaigns for the rule of law, peace advocacy, canvassing for press objectivity and freedom, admixed with seminars and workshops for voter education including conferences for political actors and stakeholders on the implications of mismanaging the elections. They felt the need as encapsulated in the admonitions of President Barack Obama in his speech in Cairo in 2009 that while winning an election is imperative and the utmost goal of each political party and the individual contestants,"You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy". (www.iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/).

Unfortunately, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under Abel Guobadia became metaphors in the matrix of forces that threatened the conduct and success of the election either by commission or by omission. The elections were marred by irregularities and excessive use of security (Army) by the sitting government to frustrate the opposition and intimidate their agents, supporters, and civil society groups too.In the same vein, the elections of 2007 witnessed a replication of the same absurdity in election management by the tacit connivance of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under Prof. Maurice Iwu. The civil society groups again criticized the conduct of the elections as falling below acceptable democratic standards. Besides ensuring that all eligible citizens in the country were made to realize the importance of registering to vote and coming out to vote on Election Day; many abstained due to odd experiences in 2003 elections where their votes did not count. Arising from the queer peculiarity of the elections, i.e. the introduction of malfunctioning electronic data capturing and voting machines, inadequate preparations, and poor management of the entire electoral process; the civil society groups, in particular, influenced the removal of Prof. Maurice Iwu as INEC boss ahead of 2011 general elections.

It was indeed during the 2011 elections that the deepening impact of civil society organizations permeated the entire fabric of the political system. INEC collaborated extensively with them and organized several seminars to sensitize and stimulate their commitment to the election projects. The increasing interests and participation of international civil society organizations that collaborate in election observation and monitoring became more entrenched. Over the years, their activity has evolved from an informal one to an international norm that is included in many international agreements. The National Democratic Institute, for instance, has worked closely with Nigerian democrats to support the development of the country's nascent democratic institutions, and strengthening Nigeria's electoral processes has consistently remained one of her main goals. It has trained domestic election monitors and deployed international observers for every general election since 1999, (www.ndi.org/nigeria). As awareness of the importance of free, fair, and credible elections as the panacea for accountability, transparency, and good governance grew, many citizens volunteered to serve as change agents in the country's electoral process by reporting irregularities at any stage of the election, protecting their votes and insisting on declaring their choices as expressed in the ballots. This was in line with the advocacy of civil society

groups, especially in the places where they could not extend their monitoring due to insecurity or geographical barrier but more so of the paucity in the number of their personnel.

Besides, in many instances, the civil society groups tracked the movement of election materials and kept the public updated on the activities at the polling units, the level of voter turnout, the security situation, and accreditation/voting procedures through media reportage. These instantaneous media reports provided information concerning incidences of under-age voting, stuffing or snatching of ballot boxes, electoral violence, non-compliance with electoral laws, acts of connivance or compromise on the parts of INEC officials, security or party agents, and in some cases, those that are the culprits (www.electionsituationroom.wordpress.com). These were amidst a series of threats on their members by party loyalists, security agents, and candidates contesting elections.

Challenges of Civil Society Organizations in Election Monitoring in Nigeria

Election monitoring is a crucial exercise in every advanced democracy but much more in an emerging democracy like the one we practice in Nigeria. It is therefore challenging for civil society organizations to assume such roles in a semi-autocratic structured political system. This is because they are both looked at as foes by the government in power and as compatriots by the opposition. Maina, et al (n.d) and Shola (2006) capture these varied perceptions that have accounted for the, (a) attempts by the government to create divisions within civil society groups and organizations and/or to form civil society groups and organizations subservient to its policies and programs, (b) attempts at reducing political space by use of political forces that gained their legitimacy through free and fair elections, (c) the sponsorship of domestic and international election monitors and observers by the government, (d) the restrictions imposed by some governments to frustrate foreign observers attempting to monitor elections, and (e) clamping down on private media houses that are suspected to be anti-government.

A typical example occurred under Prof. Maurice Iwu who on assuming office in June 2005 announced that foreign monitors would not be allowed during elections, but only foreign election observers (www.ng.undp.org/dgd/CSO-profile.shtml). Politicians and civil society groups who called for his immediate removal from office condemned this decision. Most civil society organizations rely on government funding for their various operations, which is not a healthy phenomenon as it breeds the loyalty of civil society organizations to the government (Boadi, 1995). The issue of funding is a major challenge to the roles of civil society groups, not only in Nigeria but also across the globe. It was on account of this that on February 16, 2011, the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, launched the "Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society" at the State Department in Washington D.C. Amongst various contentious issues, the group resolved that it was not proper for NGOs to depend on government for funding, as whoever pays the piper, dictates the tune. Instead of seeking funding from the government, they should seek an enabling environment for them to operate and deliver their mandates to the people (Bartholomew, 2011).

Nonetheless, Osaghae (1998) argues that the poor economic conditions of the Nigerian state have also led to the emergence of civil society that states inclined because members of such groups believe strongly that by showing loyalty to the incumbent government, material resources are assured. Many of Nigeria's new democratic civil associations turned out to be nothing more than political actions committees and proto parties that have more in common with politics than civil society''. Closely related to the foregoing and dependent on it is the paucity of manpower at the disposal of civil society organizations needed to grapple with the wide range of issues associated with the diverse nature of the country. It requires much more personnel to monitor elections in Nigeria and form an opinion on whether it is free, fair, and credible using a broader scale. Most acts of rigging in the present-day elections in Nigeria occur in the interior parts of the country. These are locations the parties and some dubious electoral officers are sure that the eagle eyes of election monitors would not detect them.

Such critical lapses could make validation of the outcome of elections with mere random monitoring sampling conducted in the urban areas and communities around it, suspect. Besides, insecurity seems to be another major hindrance. With the volatility of many rural communities resulting in hostage taking, assassinations, violent attacks, suicide bombing, robbery, and other forms of crime, many members of civil society organizations are scared from venturing into those areas for election-related activities. In the same vein, Jega (2006) cites this inhibition as a ''lack of sensitivity to the plural nature of Nigeria''. The heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state has largely strained civil society organizations, a problem that has far-flung solutions. This is compounded by the fact the Nigerian administrative structure, ethnicity, religious bigotry, greed, corruption, and their contagious effects present serious operational challenges to civil society organizations.

Civil society organizations, by their sense of objectivity, insightful skills, and exposure to relevant knowledge in their areas of advocacy, present a credible alternative to the domineering posture of the state and hold a high potential to make the state accountable to the people (Solomon & Samuel, 2007; Anifowose and Tunde, 2003). In the face of the reality of ineptitude and failure of the institutions of the state like the Independent National Electoral Commission and the Police to guarantee the conduct of free and fair elections, civil society organizations become a better and more reliable organ of society to provide voter's education and mass mobilization, development of political consciousness, human rights and civil liberties as well as monitoring of the electoral process (Moru, 2005).

Policy and Actionable Plans

Several policy recommendations exist, regarding how to reposition and strengthen civil society organizations to function properly in a democratic political system. The ranges of these recommendations show the strategic roles of the group in enhancing and deepening democratic practice through free, fair, and credible elections. Jega (2006), working closely with and observing the limitations of civil society organizations in Nigeria recommended, (a) the acquisition of basic facilities and equipment, which are necessary for organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and measurable output, (b) the promotion of increased and focused network among civil society groups, (c) training of cadres of grass root mobilization and advocacy, (d) training of cadres for the acquisition of leadership and good governance skills (e) promotion of collaborative joint programmes of advocacy and mobilization, (f) diversification of sources of funding through creative revenue generation activities, (g) the need to coordinate and control the NGO phenomenon to reduce reliance on foreign grants

In other words, the government should cease treating civil society groups as opposition parties. Such development breeds suspicion and mistrust and juxtaposes them as antagonistic forces. Each has specific roles; while the government is concerned about governance including administration of resources and dispensation of justice, civil society has of late become a major source of venting public opinion, canvassing public welfare, and social security, and mobilizing mass action against the excesses of government.

During a summit convened by the civil society groups from Friday 28th to Saturday 29th September 2012, Salisu, (2012) notes that the civil society groups used the occasion to articulate critical observations and raised discerning concerns about the government, which indicated that: (a) since 1999, Nigeria's democratic governance scorecard presents a disturbing reality of the failure of most of the current actors in the political space to establish good governance, public accountability, and commitment to meeting the socioeconomic needs of Nigerians, (b) the current national crisis affecting virtually all facets of our national life calls for urgent political intervention by patriotic Nigerians through active partisan engagement, especially in electoral contests, (c) the operative political environment in Nigeria and especially within existing political parties presents limitations in a narrowed democratic space and is a direct reflection of the challenges undermining growth and diversity in Nigeria's democracy characterized by weak institutions, legal framework, negative character, paucity of individual and collective virtue, values and lack of goodwill and resources to mobilize, inspire or encourage well-meaning Nigerians to participate in politics, etc.

Strong civil societies empower healthy democracies. By assuring fair elections and then holding the victors to standards of good governance, they cultivate the political conditions within which democracy can thrive. With enabling environments and protective legislations to spice their commitments in election monitoring, civil society groups will be catalysts in consolidating democracy and good governance and building public trust and confidence in elections and their outcome. The government should embrace civil society organizations as partners in the election project to transform the electoral process and every aspect of democratic governance in this country. In Nigeria, these organizations have played great roles in the campaign for the restoration of democratic order, its sustenance, and consolidation. Government should also open up the political system for easy access and redirect its energies to providing dividends of good governance to the Nigerian masses. By so doing that civil society groups will freely contribute their quota in nation-building.

Conclusion

The relevance of civil society cannot be overemphasized. Though civil society groups grapple with mountainous hurdles posed by authoritarian regimes in most African states, there is no denying the fact that their activities midwife a transparent election culture and legitimacy of political leadership. In other words, election monitoring and certification of the process strengthens public confidence in political structures and roles, safeguards minority-voting rights who feel that their votes do not count, ensures adherence to the rule of law and encourages dialogue on matters concerning public policy. What is paramount in policy formulation revolves around defining

the forms and limitations of voter education. It requires defining electoral mobilization, and monitoring of balloting to ensure compliance with the extant laws of the game by all and sundry. It also involves constant checks on the sitting government to ensure it is accountable, transparent, and responsive to public choices in the ballot during elections. The study corroborates these when it submits that besides Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organizations also play very important roles in election monitoring in Nigeria and should be encouraged notwithstanding their numerous challenges. It, therefore, recommends some plausible actionable policy measures (as indicated above), for improvement in the roles and services provided by civil society, believing that the wave of democratic transformations across the continent will sustain these progressive elements.

Recommendations

There is no doubt that the arena of civil society operations and the enormous duties of serving as an alternate watchdog over elections and activities of the government in Nigeria are overbearing and require some solutions. (a) The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be practically independent, exercise the powers vested in it by the 1999 constitution, as amended, be wholly accountable to Nigerians and not become a rubberstamp of the Executive. (b) The nomination and appointments of the members of INEC should cease to be done by the executive; instead, the parliament should exercise the powers on behalf of Nigerians. (c) There is a need for the Nigerian election management body to show commitment to upholding the principles of democracy and election and cease problems by not colluding with government, political parties and influential persons to truncate due processes in elections. (d) Civil society groups should increase their commitment to election monitoring roles and not allow the political class the opportunity of watering down the integrity of elections and their outcomes in Nigeria. (e) Civil society should set up monitoring and disciplinary committee among its members to curb the incidences of corrupt practices resulting in compromising public trust and expectation and engaging in undue connivance or collaboration with the political class to derail elections in Nigeria. (f) There is a need to increase sensitization and public awareness programmes, including political/voter education of the citizens and thereby exposing them to becomea vanguard of credible elections in Nigeria.

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