

THE MARRIAGE BETWEEN THE ACADEMIA AND ELECTORAL FRAUD IN NIGERIA: A HISTO - RELIGIOUS APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The Nigeria electoral process since the return to democratic rule in 1999 has been characterized with various fraud which has made it difficult for people to experience dividends of democracy. What is obviously seen are litanies of mismanagement of public resource, infrastructural collapse, insecurity and increase in unemployment rate among the people. In the midst of these numerous challenges, it is observed that the academia is one of the catalysts responsible for the perpetration of these vices that rendered Nigeria impotent. This is because in many cases, the academia are usually the returning officers, supervisors and many other electoral officers who due to financial inducement manipulate the process thereby derailing the development of the nation. The resultant effect is the leadership failures that are being experience in Nigeria today. This is because most beneficiary of electoral fraud are mostly incompetent people that are not prepared for leadership but are aspiring the leadership post for the sake of wealth, fame and social status among others. Regardless of all the challenges, it is obvious that the involvement of academia in the electoral process has brought integrity to the election; however, much improvement need so as to redeem our society for good.

Keywords: Election, Politics, democracy, Academia, Religion

Introduction

When the military handed over to the democratic elected leaders on May 29th 1999, Nigerians had great hope, with expectations for dividends of democracy. It brought sign of relief to many who were maltreated and humiliated under year's military dictatorship. In this way, the electoral umpire - Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) became the object of attention and focus; yet, the task before them was herculean due to certain circumstances which may not be limited to - financial autonomy, appointment of the INEC chairman by the Presidency, and insecurity among others. In battling with these and many other enormous challenges, the electoral umpire was able to continue delivering the task before them though not without challenges. From 1999 till date, the Independent Electoral Commission has been headed by five different men of which only Professor Athahiru Jega has been the only one to conduct two general elections

though these elections had encountered a lot of criticism for lack of credibility as well as not meeting acceptable global standard.

Of all these INEC chairmen, it was Prof Attahiru Jega as the chief electoral umpire that increased high participation of the academia in the electoral process. For Prof. Jega, his aim is to restore and protect the integrity of our elections. This is because without electoral integrity, the confidence and purpose for democracy will be defeated. He argues that achieving electoral integrity needs the collective effort of people. He went further to call for continuous legal and administrative reforms, as well as sensitization and public enlightenment. According to Prof Jega, there is need for all stakeholders to strengthen their constructive engagement with the electoral process, with a view to improving, protecting and defending its integrity. In other words, all critical stakeholders engaged with the electoral process have to work together to eliminate or reduce to the barest minimum the range of all malpractices, which have bedeviled the electoral process.

And since Prof Athahiru Jega is a product of the Ivory tower - the University Community, he has the philosophy that Universities, as pinnacles of education, research, training and advocacy, need to constructively engage with the national quest for democratic development generally, and in particular with the desirability and necessity of entrenching electoral integrity in our political systems and processes. The concept of "Ivory Tower" generally represents elitism, detachment, eccentricity, self-preoccupation, if not self-centeredness. Universities in the classical sense generate and impart knowledge through teaching and research, literally pursuing knowledge and the truth as an end in itself. Although universities in the contemporary era have assumed the additional role of training needed critical human skill that is necessary for survival, reproduction and sustainability, as well as for progress and socioeconomic development; without being detached from their host communities. This is why the use of Vice- Chancellors as returning officers, lecturers, and graduates were introduced. The question is, what impact has this in our electoral process? Did it actually helped to curtail electoral fraud? Do the participation of the academia helped to improved dividends of democracy to the people? These are the issues this research will unravel.

Understanding key words:

Academia:

The part of society, especially universities, that is connected with studying and thinking, or the activity or job of studying. Describing the role of the academia in university community, Dunleavy (n.d) states that the task of a university is the creation of the future, so far as rational thought and civilized modes of appreciation can affect the issue'. He went further to state that a university is engaged in caring for and attending to the whole intellectual capital which composes a civilization. It is concerned not merely to keep an intellectual inheritance intact, but to be continuously recovering what has been lost, restoring what has been neglected, collecting together what has been dissipated, repairing what has been corrupted, reconsidering, reshaping, reorganizing, making more intelligible, reissuing and reinvesting.

Electoral fraud:

Electoral fraud, sometimes referred to as election manipulation, voter fraud or vote rigging, involves illegal interference with the process of an election, either by increasing the vote share of a favored candidate, depressing the vote share of rival candidates, or both. Although technically the term "electoral fraud" according to Myagkov, Mikhail (2009) covers only those acts which are illegal, the term is sometimes used to describe acts which are legal, but considered morally unacceptable, outside the spirit of an election or in violation of the principles of democracy

Electoral fraud in Nigeria: Issues arising

Ani , Omeh and Ike (2013) see electoral fraud as an illegal interference with the process of election that interferes with the mandate of the people. They went further to state that it manifest but not limited to the following: using vote counts to change an election result, Increasing the number of votes for the favored candidate, Reducing the vote share of the opposing candidates or parties, under age voting, mass voting by unregistered citizens (neither qualified to register nor even registered to vote), snatching of ballot boxes to be stuffed with thumb printed votes for party candidates, and switching of results before or after collation to favor ruling party candidates. Others include intimidation at the polls using private militant gangs or even state security, scaring away of genuine registered voters from exercising their votes in polling booths located in an opposition favored constituency, deliberate one-sided and improper counting of votes, media manipulation to announce or publish the wrong results and the

wrong candidates as winners before the proper collation of results by the Electoral Commission. In recent elections in 2019 vote buying is the mostly used techniques by political actors. Onuoha and Ojo (2018) explains that though money and other valuables can be used to effectuate vote buying, political actors have adopted two main approaches to buying votes for election day.

The first is the Cash for Vote approach - This involves giving or promising the prospective voter some agreed amount of money well before the individual casts his or her vote at the polling station. The payment is done before the actual voting, and could be within the vicinity of the polling station or farther away. The settlement is made secretly or in the open. Often, the vote buyers demand evidence of ownership of a voter's card and assurance that the voter will vote for their party before offering the money. In this approach, trust is key to the contract. It is also known as the pre-paid method of vote buying.

The second approach is the Vote for Cash - This involves giving or rewarding the voter with the agreed amount of money or material compensation after the individual has shown evidence that he or she voted for the party. There are several ways the voter can prove to the vote buyer that he or she voted for the agreed candidate. One method is where the voter shrewdly displays the ballot paper showing his or her thumb print in favour of a particular party, so that the party agent standing strategically nearby can confirm compliance with the unholy contract as he or she emerges from the cubicle at the polling station. Another method is for the voter to photograph the thumb printed ballot paper to show as evidence. Thereafter, compensation in cash or kind can occur either immediately or at the close of balloting, and may take place within the precinct of the polling station or at an agreed place. In this approach, evidence is key to the consummation of the contract. This approach is also known as the "see and buy" or the post-paid method.

The report written on 2011 elections by the International Foundations for Election Systems (IFES) according to Aniekwe and Kushie (2011) showed that since the 1999 to the 2007 elections, the Nigeria electoral and political landscape has fallen from par to below par and has moved from violence to greater violence. The level and magnitude of electoral and political violence has risen and the political elites have often converted poverty ridden unemployed Nigerian youths into readymade machinery for the perpetration of electoral violence. This is linked to the political system and institution that in theory has

failed to political participation and in practice has seen the political elites forming bulk of the sponsors and perpetrators of electoral violence.

There were repeated scales of violence and political or religious rift between the Christian and Muslim on the one side and North and South on the other side. The pattern of violence in the former is such that cut across political, sectarian and electoral, while in the latter, the activities of the militant transcends just the struggle for the control of the resources to include both covert and overt participation in perpetrating electoral violence.

On his part Igbuzor (2010) sees electoral violence it as: “any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, including pre, during and post election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes”. Okolie (2004) stated that electoral fraud encompasses all forms of electoral malpractices, irregularities and rigging which have normal underlying animal intent and purpose . To him, it is electoral acts, which unduly sway electoral victory to be designed particular usually unpopular direction. He noted that electoral fraud connotes all forms of illegal activities perpetuated by desperate interest driven actors within the entire environment of electoral process. On the other hand, he averred that it could take the form of stuffing of ballot boxes with ballot papers or hoarding of electoral materials, manipulation and fabrication of electoral results, use of law enforcement agencies to intimate, mime and disenfranchise eligible voters and candidates, or murder of political opponent.

Given the above, Okolie (2004) is of the conviction that electoral rigging and irregularities do not qualify to be classified as electoral fraud if such practice is devoid of criminal acts or embedded in criminalities. He stated that even though electoral fraud is in all-encompassing phenomenon, it could be differentiated from irregularities occasioned by unconscious short coming emanating from electoral system. Hence, the underlying ingredient of electoral fraud is that the actions are deliberate, illegal criminal and design to truncate democratic principle and popular will. He summed up Nigeria’s general elections as being characterized by violence, intimidation and use of coercive suppression and disenfranchisement of eligible voters.

The academia and electoral process in Nigeria:

There is no doubt that the participation of the academia in the electoral process bring about a dramatic transformation and restored sanity with integrity to the electoral system. Looking at it from a historical perspective, it is obvious that the choice of universities academics and national youth service corps members became inevitable because of several irregularities that characterized the 2007 general elections which spate of rigging was aggravated to an appalling magnitude that even the late President, Musa Yar'adua who was the product of the election openly acknowledged that the elections was mired with electoral irregularities (Kowale & Ikedinma 2021). In view of these glaring evidences of illegalities and loss of electoral integrity, it becomes pertinent that a change is inevitable. What then is electoral integrity? Electoral integrity is any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is processional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle.

It was this that prompted Prof Athahiru Jega to involve the university community in the electoral process. He drew up a roadmap and one of the highlights was appointing serving Vice-Chancellors as collation and returning officers. Proffessor Jega also convinced the Commission to recruit new university graduates as polling agents.

Prior to this, Kowale and Ikedinma (2021) observe

Before the appointment of Professor Attahiru Jega in 2010, the practice was to recruit temporary staff of INEC from members of the public whose 'identity' is hidden. Such ad-hoc staffs are difficult to be held accountable for irregularities perpetrated by them then. Incumbent political office holders equally influence the selection of ad-hoc staff that sometimes compromised the integrity of the electoral process. However, INEC shifted the recruitment of its ad-hoc staff to national youth service corps members (returning officers) and academic staff from federal universities (presiding officers and poll clerks). With the new option, there is a growing improvement capable of deepening the electoral process, although not without its challenges.

This is to rescue the deteriorating integrity in electoral administration. These fresh graduates are members of the National Youth Service Corps. For instance, the 2019 general election witness the involvement of 35 Vice-Chancellors as returning officers. This academia presided over the counting of votes taken to collation centers.

The above position tallies with Verje, Kwaja and Onubogu (2018) that posited that young corps members will not want their future to be jeopardized on the account of compromising electoral integrity, while, the lecturers know that their employment can be terminated if found guilty of committing electoral infractions. Mr. Sayuti Adeniyi equally noted that Nigeria electoral process has been better compared to previous ones where people that cannot be tracked were used as ad-hoc staff. The lecturers engaged in this noble cause can easily be traced to their respective place of work. They are, therefore, unlikely to compromise the process of election when in charge, so as not to tarnish their image. The universities academics and national youth service corps members appeared more neutral in the electoral process.

However, there involvement is without controversy and allegation of corruptions with electoral fraud. According to Guardian Editorial on 24th April, 2019 in Guardian Newspaper, some University teachers who served as returning officers were fingered as being used by some politicians to rig the election. A case of a Mr Ogban, a professor of soil science, University of Calabar, and a returning officer in the 2019 general elections in Akwa Ibom North-West District, was charged for manipulating the election results of two local government areas - Oruk Anam and Etim Ekpo. Imukudo (2021) stated that the court, found Mr Ogban guilty of fraudulent manipulation of election results, publishing and announcing of false results, also asked the professor to pay N100,000 fine. He went further to say that Mr Ogban had told the court how the results of the election were falsified to give the All Progressives Congress (APC) an unfair advantage over its main rival, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). For instance, some 5,000 fake votes were added to the APC's score in Oruk Anam, in the election. Godswill Akpabio, the Minister of Niger Delta Affairs, was the APC candidate in the election. He was seeking a return to the Senate, after he defected from the PDP. The PDP candidate, Chris Ekpennyong, a former deputy governor in Akwa Ibom State, defeated Mr Akpabio in the election, which was gripped by pockets of violence. Mr Ogban was prosecuted by the Independent National

Electoral Commission (INEC) in the landmark case. In such a matter, where lies the future and the integrity of the Ivory Tower.

This is not the only case as Onuegbu (2020) stated that the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, in Akwa Ibom State has arraigned a lecturer, Professor Ignatius Uduk, for alleged involvement in electoral fraud during the 2019 polls. Uduk, who was a Collation and Returning Officer for the state House of Assembly election in Essien Udim state constituency during the last general election, is the second lecturer to be arraigned by INEC for electoral fraud in the same election. He was arraigned, yesterday, before a state High Court, Uyo on a three- count charge of abandoning his assigned duties as the Collation and Returning officer of the state House of Assembly election and unlawfully generating scores and entering same in form EC 8E(II), thereby committing an offence punishable under section 122 subsection 1 of the electoral act of 2010 as amended.

Okon (2020) quoted the Akwaibom State Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC), Mr. Mike Igini, as decrying the attitude of these lectures and said that these academics were engaged because they were presumed to be individuals of high integrity who would not indulge in illegal act of deliberate electoral manipulation or falsification of election results during the process of collation. According to him, the commission was unequivocal that there would be severe consequences against any and all, no matter their status, who engage in acts capable of undermining the commission's efforts to give meaning and purpose to the ballot as the best means of expression of the will of the people in a democracy.

The questions remains why did these academia descend so low to void the trust the nation put on them? One may ask if university dons and administrators cannot be relied upon to deliver free and fair elections, who else can be trusted, in the circumstances? Sadly, to some degree, that faith appears to be misplaced due to the act that ubiquitous Nigerian politicians were said to have penetrated some academics and severely compromised them in some states in elections. Why and how did some academics descend to such depths of ignominy?

The answer may not be unconnected to the fact that many people who stick their neck to the Nigeria project have died without proper compensation to the family and justice being done. For instance, after the 2015 elections, the Resident

Electoral Officer in Kano died with his entire family in a mysterious fire outbreak in his house. Till date no one has been brought to book for arson. Also, in Rivers State, a don, Dr. Ferry Gberegbe, an electoral officer in the elections was allegedly shot dead by soldiers. Nobody has been prosecuted for that dastardly act. These experiences make it difficult for operatives to stick out their necks on points of principle. As a result we are not surprised that academics in some states allegedly danced to the tune of politicians. Politicians are the real problem with elections. As long as politicians have access to idle cash running into billions, officials will be highly susceptible to being compromised. Some academics who served as umpires vowed never to participate next time. The threat of violence was palpable. What can one say about the case of Mr Ibeabuchi, a professor, who was “forced” to declare the results at the Imo West election collation centre in Orlu INEC office. According to Onyeji (2019) Mr Ibeabuchi, a professor, stopped the collation after announcing nine out of the 12 local governments in the district, saying he had been directed to “return to Owerri, the state capital. He was however held up at the centre by supporters of Mr Okorochoa who insisted he must complete the announcement and under duress he announced the winner. It is obvious that when citizens feel vulnerable in times of desperation they are more likely to toe the path of safety – by compromising. Considering these ugly scenario, Jega (2015) maintains that it is a huge challenge to get best of hands in term of human workforce to handle general elections in Nigeria and this may be the reason James (2014) concludes that in this nation electoral integrity is often undermined by human error.

Histo – Religious appraisal

Historically ever before the advent of the colonial rule, religion has been a part and parcel of every human activities in Africa which the tribes that formed the present Nigeria is part of. For instance, in pre-colonial Yoruba time, the source of political activities was religion and the king (*oba*), the Ooni of Ife, and the Alaafin of Oyo respectively possessed both the political and religious authority (Afe 1999; Afe and Ibitayo Oluwasola 2009; Johnson 1960). They were the chief executive and the religious authority thereby combining spiritual and temporal functions. While in the pre-colonial Igbo people religion is important but it does not dominate all the affairs of politics. Religion may dominate at the family level, but not the political level as it has been with the Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani. Priests of the divinities are highly respected but they do not enjoy any superiority in the

communal decision making because they are just part of the political complex (Sampson 2014, 311-339).

Religion as a potent force in Nigerian society has affected every sphere of Nigeria development since independence. In view of this, Adamo (2018) admitted that elections in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious people like Nigeria can be a serious practice with many risks. They can also be marked by violence, corruption, intimidation and deceit and without doubt the history of Nigerian elections appears to reflect the above characteristics. On this note, Familusi (2012) said that incontrovertible religion must have been a serious factor in every stage of Nigerian elections because at every stage in Nigerian elections religion has had some input-whether covertly or overtly p.23-32). The role of religion in elections manifested from the early days of elections, especially in the northern part of Nigeria as early as the 1950s where it reflected in the ideology and membership of the parties. No wonder the three northern political parties, the Northern People's Congress (NPC), the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), and the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC) displayed religious character with their leaders being Muslims and the parties seen as representing consensus Muslim communities (IJMA). While the NPC represented the upper-class Muslims, the NEPU represented the lower class down-trodden Muslims. While the UMBC, created by the non-Muslim societies, was opposed to the dominance of the NPC; but Christians and missionaries embraced it to counter the perceived Fulani-Hausa Islamic hegemony in the North (Onapajo 2016). In the midst of these one wonders how the electoral process of such elections would not be affected considering the fact that human personnel's with different religious inclinations will be used to conduct the election.

Furthermore, Onapajo (2016) maintains that the influence of religion in party formation and voting was not limited to northern Nigeria, but also to southern Nigeria. The National Muslim Party was formed in Lagos in 1953 to oppose the Action Group (AG). However, they did not win any elections in the 1954, 1956 and 1959 elections. In 1957 another Muslim party was formed, namely the National Muslim League (NML). In the second republic, religion did not disappear from politics. It was preceded by an intense debate between Christians and Muslims concerning the establishment and the inclusion of a Federal Saharia Court of Appeal. This led to a serious rivalry between Muslims and Christians.

The majority of the popular parties (NPN, UPN, PRP, and NPP) were either associated with Christians or Muslims.

Religion is also an issue when it comes to campaigning and trying to persuade voters for support or dissuade the electorate from voting for a particular candidate. Johnstone (2001) was of the view that widely recognized point of religious influence over politics is that of people's voting preference and behavior. Such interest gives very explicit recognition to the correlation that exists between religious affiliation and commitment, on the one hand, and voting behavior, on the other. That there should be a correlation is exactly what would be expected, of course, if religious affiliation and commitment mean anything at all. While for Clarke (1991) "the annulled 1993 election was a political contest between Islam and Christianity, ending possibly in the breakup of the federation. He went further to quote Abubakar Ahmed Gumi as saying that the reason is that no Muslim on grounds of faith will join a Christian-led party; or if the Christians refused to join a party led by a Muslim, then there would appear to be a two-party system and the two-party system would not be South against North, but Islam against Christianity. The academia as being part of this religious community, will be influenced to work towards the inclination of his religious faith. By so doing the electoral integrity will be greatly affected.

On the other hand, there are many reasons to suggest that religion in the electoral process is a threat to political instability given the level manipulation of religion. As earlier noted, choosing candidate on religious grounds is nothing but an expression of religious sentiment as there is no means of determining how committed those people are. This is because such people may not act according to the precepts of their religion as we have seen various leaders Nigeria has produced.

In other words, electoral fraud and violence is a variant of Machiavellianism, and evidence that morality has been removed from politics in Nigeria. Machiavelli believes that the essential thing in politics is to try to grab power by all means, fair or foul and having grabbed it, all means must be used to retain it. Those who belong to this school of thought will not think of the imperative of morality in politics. Moreover, electoral violence is a negation of religious moral values. No religion preaches violence; involvement of practitioners notwithstanding; as Familusi (2010) is of the position that the three religions advocate credibility, decency and transparency at all stages of elections. Hence, it is expected that the

academia would follow the dictates of religious inclination or decency, credibility, transparency and manifest great virtues that will ensure electoral integrity.

Religion, being an agent of social control, helps to keep people with the norm of the society, which is the real basis of politics. In Adeleye's view:

Religion breeds an ideal heart in man to be able to be conscious of the need to have a clean heart. By this, he will grow to have a philanthropic or patriotic thought before venturing to lead or represent his people in government of the state. In another words, religion will prepare the mind of man to be a good politician who will constantly fall back upon his religion to guide him. The teachings or threats of religion are expected to guide him to be able to lead his people aright as a politician with fear of God in him. He will never consider himself first, rather he knows that he is the servant of the electorates (sic)-his people. Religion in an idealistic set up, therefore, serves as oil to lubricate politics. This is to say that religion bears peace and love, both of which are vital ingredients that can sum the interests of societies together for an ideal and a very healthy and purposeful politics.

Therefore, one should expect a violence-free electoral process given the religious inclination of many stakeholders on the electoral process which the religious ethics of the three major religions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion abhors. The fact has been established that electoral violence is an offshoot of electoral malpractices

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in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion will be used as our guide in analyzing electoral violence in Nigeria. The fact has been established that electoral violence is an offshoot of electoral malpractices. The position of Familusi (2010) is that the three religions advocate credibility, decency and transparency at all stages of elections.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that about the changes that have taken place in Nigeria electoral process ever since the involvement of the academia. It has brought some level of sanity, decency and improvement; notwithstanding some bad elements among the academia who were easily coerced with material gifts, to distort the integrity of the election. The recent introduction of electronic voting will go a long way to make it more efficient and reliable. In the same vein, there is need for sufficient security, enough compensation in case of accidents and death, and also ensuring that justice done on those who default the process for personal gains. These will help the academia to ensure that the right thing is done and by so doing right leaders that will transform the society will emerge.

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