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Non-Violent, Free, Fair And Credible 2019 Election In Rivers State Of Nigeria

A Paper Presented During The Governorship Candidates Forum Of The Political Parties In Rivers State. At Lemeridien Hotels, Gra Port Harcourt On The 27th Of January, 2019.

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Abstract
The paper examined Non-violent, free, fair and credible 2019 Election in Rivers State. The argument of the paper is predicated on the fact that there are predisposing negative objective conditions militating against non-violent, free, fair and credible 2019 election and unless these predisposing negative objective conditions are eliminated or curbed, non-violent, free, fair and credible 2019 Election in Rivers State may be a sham. The paper relied on secondary data and adopted democratic Elitism as the analytical construct. One of the assumptions of democratic elitism is that the few who rule in society must rule in tandem with the general will of the people.
The paper is of the opinion that major stake holders in the electoral process should adhere strictly to the rules or laws guiding the conduct of elections. The paper recommended inter alia, that the campaign for political awareness should be intensified and democratic culture should be imbibed and demonstrated by Rivers people particularly during elections.
Keywords: Nonviolent; Free; Fair; Credible; Election; democracy.

Introduction

The conflicting interest of man in society has led to the emergence of state. The state in this context is seen as the highest point of consummation of human life. Aside from the harmonization of the ever conflicting interest of man, the state also protects lives and property, ensures that the State's scarce resources are fairly and equitably distributed and promotes the

welfare of the people. In performing these basic functions, the state engages in civilizing process through discipline by ensuring that laws are made and that these laws are enforced. The essence is to ensure that the people live fulfilled lives in a just, peaceful and egalitarian society.

It should be noted that the state derives its legitimacy from the people through democracy. The political sovereignty of the people can be demonstrated through democracy as they decide who becomes their leader through nonviolent, free, fair and credible elections. The conduct of election becomes a critical factor in the democratization process as the results of the election are expected to reflect the general will of the people. The more election results are allowed to reflect the popular choice of the people, the more the state or government becomes responsive and responsible to the felt needs of the people. It is against this background that the paper takes a critical look at non-violent, free, fair and credible 2019 election in Rivers State.

Theoretical Framework – Democratic Elitism.

In every society, particularly in representative democracy, few people rule, these few people or leaders rule in accordance with the consent and general will of the people. On the surface, there appears to be a paradox based on the fact that democracy is government of the majority whereas few people actually rule. This seemingly paradox is reconciled by the fact that in democracy it is actually the majority that decides and drives that process of governance. The few people who rule are subject to the dictates of the majority of the people. Thus, the political power or authority exercised by the few who rule belongs to the people. Consequently, the theory of democratic elitism is a bold step by Karl Mannheim and other scholars to reconcile the elite theory and the democratic theory. The elite theory is basically of the view that every society is ruled by few individuals.

According to Ikpe (2010), the elites are those who wield influence and make decisions for the society. The governing elites according to Pareto are those who directly or indirectly play an important part in government. For Gaeteno Mosca, the elites are the powerful minority in the society which perform all political functions, monopolise power and enjoy the advantage that power brings (Ikpe, 2010; see also Guaba, 1981). In his own view, Robert-Mitchell propounded his

famous 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' which implied that every organization, whatever its original aims, is eventually reduced to an oligarchy, that is, the rule of the chosen few.

In the other hand, democratic theory places premium on the participation of the people – the masses or the ruled in the process of decision-making. Democracy therefore, is a system of government whereby the people – the majority actively participate in governance. It follows that the few who rule did not just emerge from nowhere or impose themselves on the people by whatever means but were chosen or elected by the people through nonviolent, free, fair and credible election. The few who rule must be transparent and accountable to the people. The relevance of democratic elitism in this context stems from the fact that election is part of democratic process and the few who rule should reflect the popular choice of the people through an election that is devoid of violence, intimidation, rigging and other electoral frauds or irregularities.

Election And Democracy

There appears to be an inextricable nexus between election and democracy. Election is the heartbeat of democracy as it legitimizes governance and reinforces the political sovereignty of the people. It follows that if anything happens to elections may be through violent and electoral fraud or irregularities, democracy becomes a mirage. Election is the process through which the people elect their leaders. Election is characterized by rules and regulations in other to ensure certain degree of fairness and justice to all concerned.

According to Alapiki, (2010), elections are institutionalized procedures for the choosing of office holders by some or all of the recognized members of an organization. Election enables the people to decide who their leader should be. Election conveys two attributes to the people – equality and freedom. Equity in the sense that each voter has one vote no matter your status. There is also freedom to choose among alternatives without any form of inducement, coercion or undue influence. These virtues of election – freedom and equality are also encapsulated in democracy.

In other words, democracy abhors coercion and undue influence. This means that individuals should be free to exercise his or her franchise and vote for candidate of his or her choice. Election is a

veritable means through which the people participate in the process of making decisions. According to Dye and Wadsworth (2003) democratic thinking reflects the following ideas:

1) Popular participation in the decisions in a society shapes the lives of individuals in a society.
2) Government by majorities. These rights include the freedom of speech, press, assembly and petition and the freedom to dissent, to form opposition parties, and to run for public office.
3) A commitment to individual dignity and the preservation of the liberal values of life, liberty and property.
4) A commitment to equal opportunity for all individuals to develop their capacities.

In the views of IDEA, (2000), a culture of democracy must reflect norms and values that place emphasis on the freedom of the individual freedom from state abuse and from infringement of rights by other individuals. It further guarantees equality before the law, as well as providing opportunities for all citizens to have equal access to the material and cultural resources and guarantee their basic livelihood. Furthermore, democracy does not allow political leadership to wield absolute power; it must draw up policies with aneye on gaining a larger support of the electoral than its opponents can obtain (Guaba, 1981).

For elections to be non-violent, free, fair and credible, it should be conducted in the environment of democratic values. Such democratic values include – equality, freedom, justice, tolerance, transparency and the spirit of sportsmanship. Furthermore, other conditions that can facilitate, non-violent, free, fair and credible election include:

1) Independent Electoral Commission
2) Independent Judiciary
3) Comprehensive Voters Register
4) Proper Delimitation of Constituencies, Ward and Senatorial districts – No Gerry Mandering.
5) Upholding rule of law
6) Avoid Money Politics.

7) Strict adherence to Electoral laws, rules and regulations.

Impartiality of Electoral Commission Staff and Security agencies.

8) Efficacious Internal Party Democracy.

However, it should be noted that for elections to serve as policy mandates – that is, for voters to exercise influence over public policy through elections, four conditions would be necessary:

1) Competing parties and candidates would offer clear policy alternatives.

2) Voters would be concerned with policy questions.

3) Election results would clarify majority preferences on these questions.

4) Electoral officials would be bound by their campaign positions.

It is also important to note that for the masses to influence policy through elections not only would the parties have to offer clear and divergent policy alternatives to the voters, the voters would have to make their electoral choices on the basis of their policy preferences (Dye and Wadsworth, 2003).

The State, Violence and Election in Rivers State.

Rivers State is one of the thirty-six States of Nigeria. As part of the larger Nigerian society, within the purview of structural –functionalist perspective it is influenced by the nature and character of Nigerian State. The State in this perspective is a political organization conferred with the authority to make laws, decisions, formulate public policies and implement same in order to facilitate a mutually beneficial, peaceful egalitarian and conducive society. Consequently, in keeping with the Aristotelian teleology, the state is the highest form of development of society where individual potentials can be achieved. In affirming the sacrosanct nature of state and its importance in ordering society, Hegal sees the state as"the March of God on Earth". (Guaba, 1981).

For the liberal-democratic theory, the state is treated as a product of the will of society, an instrument of "conflict – resolution" and securing the common interest. It authorizes society to constitute a government by free choice, and demands that the government should be responsible to

the people, and should work with the continuous consent of the people (Guaba, 1981). On the other hand, Marxist theory attributes any imperfection of government to the state itself.

According to the Marxist, so long as society is divided into dominant and dependent classes, any government is bound to serve as an instrument of the dominant class. Thus, Marxist theory regards the state itself as an instrument of class exploitation, and advocates transformation, and ultimate withering away of the state in order to restore, "authority" to a classless society.

Going by the political history of Nigeria, the Nigerian State seems to approximate the Marxist theory of State. Aside from the wide chasm between the few rich and the larger poor Nigerians, the primitive accumulation mentality of the political elites has adversely affected elections in Nigeria. The state and its institutions are seen as means of amassing wealth and ascendancy to power has become a do-or-die affair and politics has become a zero – sum game (Ake, 1996). This obviously is the "mother" of all electoral fraud and irregularities in Nigeria.

Consequently, rigging and falsification of electoral results, thuggery and political assassination, snatching of ballot boxes, cloning of electoral materials, vote buying (money politics), partiality of electoral officers and security agents and hate speeches have become the order of the day. In addition to this plethora of election 'viruses' are the dangerous concepts of Godfatherism and loyalty which have eroded internal party democracy. These predisposing negative objective conditions are also replicated in Rivers State.

For instance, Joab – Peterside, (2016), noted that the failure of the leading political parties in the state to faithfully subscribe to rules and regulations intended to ensure internal party democracy within them have had negative and destabilizing spillover effects on the polity, resulted in violence and constricted irredeemably the democratic space. The centralization of political activities around individuals – the political Godfathers and concomitant ego of the political Godfathers exacerbated political violence and imbroglio in Rivers State, particularly during the 2015 general elections.

Furthermore, Joab – Peterside (2016) in his words observed that:

> *The rumbling in the state generated a deep sense of anomie and desperation of the political elite to either capture or maintain their grip on power. Most Rivers citizens hold the view that the last general elections will go down in the history of the state. The politicians failed to behave responsibly; vote buying was used to mobilize parties' own strongholds while the two leading political parties also targeted vote- buying and threats towards specific ethnic groups and areas, potentially to weaken the support base of their political rivals.*

Joah – Peterside (2016) also averred that the electioneering campaigns were not issue based as leading political parties failed to provide the electorate clear policies and programme directions. It is obvious that almost all the conditions necessary for non-violent, free, fair and credible elections were violated particularly with regard to the 2015 general elections. These predisposing negative objective conditions if allowed to thrive or prevail would scuttle our effort or desire for non-violent, free, fair and credible election in Rivers State.

The Need for Non Violent, Free, Fair and Credible Election in Rivers State.

It should be reiterated that democracy is about the people which finds expression in the general will of the people. Thus, democracy entails the wielding of political power by the people (Noah, 1999). Election in democracy guarantees or restores the political sovereignty of the people as they (the people) determine who becomes their leader, in most cases, through elections. It is expected that elections results should reflect the popular choice of the people. According to Wayande (as cited in Wayonyi, 1997:10).

> *The key to mass participation in democracy is the electoral process. Elections represent a way of making a choice that is fair to all - one that leaves each member of the electorate reasonable hope of having his alternative elected.*

Wonah (2010:102) captures the essence of election succinctly when he noted that:

> *Democracy consequently is seen as a system of governance which enables the people to participate in the process of decision-making by guaranteeing the freedom of the people to choose who their leaders*

> *become. These leaders or representatives must be answerable to the people on whose mandate they (the leaders) were elected into public offices. Representative democracy is therefore a modern democracy that emphasizes the need for the people to periodically elect their representatives in a free and fair election for the purpose of making and implementing decisions on behalf of the people. The representatives exercise their authority within the context of the legitimacy given to them by the people, and must form a government that is responsive and responsible to the yearnings and aspirations of the people.*

Another obvious need for non-violent, free, fair and credible election in Rivers State and indeed in any other society is the need for peace and political stability. It is axiomatic that no meaningful development can take place in an atmosphere of acrimony, bitterness and rancor. Peace is also a function of justice. Justice demands that people should be treated fairly according to the stipulated laws, rules and regulations. Violence undermines peace and political stability and it is a clear indication that justice has been prevented by not adhering strictly to the laws, rules and regulations.

Man is the fulcrum around which development revolves and it is important that man participates in the development process by making and implementing decisions that affect his or her life. This can only take place in a society devoid of exploitation, intimidation, oppression and subjugation. Man must be free to participate in making decisions that affect man, especially as it concerns the election of their leaders (See also Yoroms, 1994).

Furthermore, non-violent, free, fair and credible election in Rivers State can lead to the consolidation of democracy. When people freely participate in election, it can uphold the ideals of democracy which can engender good government and development in Rivers State. In the views of Wonah (2010:107)

> *Consolidation of democracy simply means the entrenchment or upholding of the values of democracy. These democratic values are identified as tolerance, social justice, and equality especially in terms of participation in the process of decision-making, equity and good conscience. Put differently, democracy is said to be consolidated*

> *when these values of democracy are strictly observed not only as an integral part of the electoral process but also as a way of life of the people. It means that these democratic values must form part of the political culture of the people.*

Also included as part of the democratic ideals is the freedom of the people to choose from among alternatives. This means that democracy abhors coercion or any form of undue influence on the voters. Democracy ensures that the will of the people prevails and this guarantees government based on rule of law and respect for human dignity. The primacy of the will of the people was reverberated by the United Nations Universal Declaration of human rights which states in its articles 21 (3) that:

> *The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government. This will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be made by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or equivalence free voting procedure.*

Another consequence of non-violent, free, fair and credible election is that government becomes transparent, accountable, responsive and responsible. This is predicated on the fact that the people have veritable means of checkmating the activities of the government. Aside from the constructive criticisms through the media houses and other relevant fora, the use of recall, impeachment and exercise of the peoples' franchise in the next election compels the government to be transpant, accountable, responsive and responsible. This means that a non-performing government can be voted out in the next round of election. This view was corroborated by Berman and Murphy (2005:346) when they assertedthat:

> *In modern representative democratic systems, the core of popular participation is the vote. If all citizens can easily register to vote and exercise that right, then those candidates who are elected will represent the choice of the populace. Conversely, if most citizens do not have a chance to vote, then leaders will ignore them, leading to mass discontent and long-tern disaffection from the political system.*

The exercise of the peoples' political sovereignty can promote good government which can bring about the much needed development in Rivers State.

The Way Forward

There is the need for political elites particularly those from Rivers State to restructure their mindset by not seeing the state and its institutions as means of amassing wealth. As a corollary effect, ascendancy to power should not be seen as a do-or-die affair and politics should not be a zero-sum game. There is also the need for the eradication of electoral fraud and irregularities. Issue based campaign and not hate speech should be reinvigorated and political Godfathers should be relegated to the background. Civic education which is the process of understanding the ideals and values of democracy should be encouraged. There is the need to have statesmen who are civic minded.

Democratic institutions should be strengthened and Nigerians, particularly Rivers State indigenes should imbibe and demonstrate democratic culture. It is not enough to have democratic institutions but what is more important is for the people to imbibe and demonstrate democratic culture. In addition, the laws, rules and regulations guiding the conduct of elections must be strictly adhered to by all the relevant stakeholders. The electoral body and the securing agencies must not be partisan and not be seen to compromise their rules of engagement.

Concluding Remarks

It should be noted that violence has increasingly the significant tactics of political action by groups within a system seeking redress of the imbalance which political participation, through the electoral process could not afford them meaningful access to political power (Yoroms, 1994 see also Okanya, 1999). It is imperative that peace is needed in Rivers State in order to bring about the much needed development. Consequently, there is the need for reasonable or cohesive politics which can afford the people the opportunity to decide who becomes their leader in a non-violent, free, fair and credible election. There is therefore the need for political awareness and the need for Rivers people to imbibe and demonstrate democratic culture. It is our undistorted belief that if the predisposing objective conditions are eliminated, election in Rivers State and indeed in Nigeria will be non-violent, free, fair and credible.

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