

Overcoming the Challenges of Incumbent Regime's Grip on Power in Africa: the Case of the Nigeria's 2015 Elections

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Abstract

International democracy promotion, the collapse of authoritarian regimes, and economic growth in Africa all suggest that elections will be an enduring feature of politics for the foreseeable future. Yet the rise of electoral politics does not necessarily bring with it peace or stability. Incumbent regime's grip on power in Africa has produced a mixture of violence and voting that creates political orders lying uneasily between unambiguous war and peaceful politics. But is there no way out for the African electorate? After examining relevant literature and documents on issues that led to the victory of an opposition candidate who defeated an incumbent in Nigeria, three factors were outstanding. These include: the transparent nature of the election, the coalitions of several parties to form a strong opposition and international pressure from ECOWAS, the AU the US and the UK on the incumbent to respect the out-come of the election. This Suggest that the challenge can be overcome if the international community can mount pressure on incumbents, in addition to having a coalition of several parties to form strong opposition to ruling parties in Africa.

Keywords: Overcoming Incumbent regime's Opposition power Africa Democracy.

Background to the Study

Although, elections are by their nature adversarial as they are a contest for power. In advanced democracies it can be constructive as it provides a useful context within which voters and members of the public are able to question the current leadership, challenge progress, or the lack thereof, and make a decision about their own vote. However in most developing countries, any challenge to the incumbent often results to violence in pre or post elections. Whether in Kenya, Nigeria or other parts of Africa, electoral competition is intertwined with violence. Pro-state militias target the supporters of opposition parties, states use security forces to repress dissidents and intimidate the electorate, political parties build armed wings or thugs, insurgents attack voters and candidates, and local elites use elections as a front for pursuing feuds and rivalries. In fact, African democracies, are yet to perfect the art of regularly changing presidents. But the relatively peaceful election of Muhammadu Buhari as Nigerian president has prompted some fundamental questions; can the challenge of incumbents grip on power in Africa be overcome? Are there some salient issues that could be learnt from the Nigeria 2015 elections which led to the victory of an opposition party?

Statement of Problem

The underlying instigator of electoral violence in Africa is the slipping of an incumbent regime's grip on power; when threatened by opposition candidate. In this region, there is a dominant party system where the incumbent's advantages systematically bias electoral competition in its favor. Here the advantages helps dominant parties to virtually win elections before election day by forcing opposition parties to succumb and any challenge to the incumbent often results to violence in pre or post elections. This scenario creates a "virtuous cycle of dominance" as T. J. Pempel posits, and also alienates the electorates from the dividends of democracy. However, the Nigerian 2015 election has raised some fundamental questions: How can this challenge be overcome? What valuable lessons can learn from Nigeria's 2015 election?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore positive inputs and new initiatives that might help opposition parties to overcome incumbent's advantage position in Africa
2. To unravel those issues that brought about the victory of an opposition party in the Nigerian 2015 election.
3. To explore how these lessons might be of use to other African countries.

Literature Review

African democracies, are yet to perfect the art of regularly changing presidents. In Nigeria, no incumbent had ever failed to gain re-election, and given the patronage made possible through the 16 years of dominance at all political levels, unseating the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was always going to be a huge task.

However the 2015 election recorded one of the most significant political events on the continent since the 1994 election of Nelson Mandela in South Africa brought an end to white minority rule. For the first time in the country's history an incumbent president was beaten

at the ballot box along with the party that has governed Nigeria since the repressive rule of the military drew to a close in 1999. (Wallis,2015).

In a country where elections have routinely been rigged in favor of the PDP presidential incumbent, opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari and his All Progressives Congress have won an astonishing victory. Buhari's support was nationwide, and his vote total was the largest in four of Nigeria's six geo-political zones. Unlike 2011, the electorate did not starkly bifurcate along north/south, Muslim/Christian lines. This is the first time that the Nigerian presidency has been won by an opposition candidate through broadly credible elections. This is an important step toward the establishment of a genuine, two-party system and starts to open up Nigerian politics in a new way.([Campbell](#),2015) Looking back into history and the voting pattern of Nigerians; religious, tribal and regional factors have been at play. From the first republic to now the 8th republic, Nigerians have maintained a single voting pattern, with few changes in 1992 and 1999 elections.

Since 1959, when elections were first held for the House of Representatives, the Nigerian People's Congress(NPC) which comprised mainly of northern Muslims dominated the federal government. Out of 312 seats, the NPC was able to secure 134 seats. The second largest party was the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a powerful party of mainly Igbos – Christian in the southeast; secured 89 seats. The Action Group (AG) was dominant in the south west; created by the Yoruba's. The party won 73 out of the total 312 seats. After that election, Nigeria's voting pattern was fully established. The NPC entered a coalition with the NCNC to form the then federal government.(Nohlen et al., 1999; KWJ post1964) After declaring a federal system of government in 1963, an election was held in 1965 and Azikwe emerged as the President. Already in the south west (NNDP) was gaining ground and the NPC later move to in cooperate the NNDP into the government.

The Federal Election of 1979

This election was similar to that of 1959 in some ways; the parties that were eventually registered for the 1979 election had strong ties with the parties of the first republic. The leader of the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) was Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe who led the NCNC of the first republic. The leader of the People Redemption Party was Malam Aminu Kano who was the leader of the Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) of the first republic. The leader of the Great Nigerian Peoples Party (GNPP) was the leader of the Bornu Youth Movement (BYM) of the first republic. Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was the leader of AG in the first republic led Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). Each of the parties that contested the 1979 election maintained dominance in their ethnic bases as it was in 1959.(*Nnabuihe; Aghemal & Okebugwu, 2014*)

The result from northern minority area does not display much of ethnicity as we found in the other areas. An explanation for this may be found in the fact that most of these states were not having one of their citizens in the presidential race. The GNPP an offshoot of the (BYM) Bornu Youth Movement still won in the area where it had dominance in the first republic, which is Borno State(present day Borno and Yobe states). A more rational approach for the states that were not fielding somebody for the presidential ticket was achieved, for example the NPP a predominately Igbo party won in Plateau state,(the present Plateaea and Nasarawa

states) NPN won in Benue State with a percentage of (76.39). The NPN also won in Gongola,(the present Adamawa and Taraba States) Kwara and Niger state. Apart from success of the GNPP in Bornu state, the party came second in Gongola state (34.09), losing first position to NPN (34.52) with just a margin of 1.43 percent (Joseph, 1991) The areas that were in conflict with the dominant parties in their regions pitched tent with parties, usually outside their region. This exemplified by Rivers State (a former part of the eastern region) which gave much of their vote to the NPN because of their dislike of fear of Igbo domination. While Plateau vote for NPP due to their dislike for NPN.

The Federal Election of 1983

The 1983 Federal election was an important one in many respects; first it represented a test of political maturity on the part of the political class. It was an election that would have midwife a successful transfer of power from an elected civilian leader to another or a successful return of incumbent in a free and fair election. The 1959 and 1979 elections were supervised by the colonial and military authorities. The Federal Electoral Commission registered one more party the Nigeria Advance Party (NAP) under the leadership of Tunji Braithwaite along side with the five that contested the 1979 election. Many things went wrong right from the preparation for the elections. There was widespread desire on the part of the politicians to win at all cost. Not only were there accusation of parties printing their own voter's card, there was multiple registrations of voters for the election. The final list of registered voters that were released for the election was a shocking 65,304,818 voters, greater than entire population below the minimum voting age of 18 years. The register implied a total population of at least 130 million. The exceeded reasonable estimates by 30 to 50 million (Larry Diamond, 1988, 69)

The voting- pattern of the minorities in the north has tended to maintain what it was in 1979 except in cases of Borno State, which the GNPP had in 1979 that the NPN claimed. The case of Plateau state, which the NPP had in 1979, that fell into the hands of the NPN while Cross Rivers went back to NPP. The Western Minority State as was the case in previous Federal Elections (1959 and 1979) gave their vote to the UPN an offshoot of the AG of the first republic

The Federal Election of 1993

The two party systems were experimented at the local government election in the last quarter of 1990. In 1991, election was held into state legislature and executive. These elections were done using the option A4 that is the open ballot system, which helped a great deal in checking electoral malpractices In the presidential primaries that were held by both parties, Alhaji M.K.O Abiola a southern Muslim emerged as the candidate for the SDP and Alhaji Bashir Tofa a northern Muslim, emerged as the candidate for the NRC. The election according to observer was the freest election in the history of Nigeria. The result of the election was not fully released officially but it was a break from the result of past elections in Nigeria, the religious divide was greatly reduced.

The Federal Election of 1999

The presidential Election like the other elections that took place in the fourth republic was conducted using the secret ballot system, and General Olusegun Obasanjo emerges victorious. Observers believe that the election was seriously rigged. This accusation was

leveled against all parties hence the conclusion that the best rigger emerged the winner. Each of the parties perpetrated this act especially in their area of influence. The eventual winner of the presidential election General Olusegun Obasanjo achieved his victory with votes from parts of Nigeria other than his. He lost even his home state to his opponent Olu Falae. The Yoruba states gave their votes to Olu Falae and seem to have their back against Obasanjo who is also their son. Apart from the fact that the two contestants were Yoruba's, they are also Christians by religious inclination. The fourth republic gave a result that can be said to be akin to that of its immediate predecessor, aborted third republic.

The Federal Election of 2003

The 2003 election could have been perceived as a contest between a northern Muslim against a southern Christians. But the election went on peacefully, though a lot of malpractices were recorded. Obasanjo the PDP candidate was re-elected in 2003 against General Muhammad Buhari of the ANPP.

The Federal Election of 2007

In 2007, the voting pattern was somehow distorted, as both candidates were Northern Muslims and from the same state. Like the election before it (that of 2003), it was mired with a lot of irregularities.

The Federal Election of 2011

In 2011, the divisions and inclination of Nigerians further widened in such a way that over 1000 people perish to post election violence in 2011. Just like in 2003, the 2011 election was between a Christian southerner of the PDP and a northern Muslim candidate of the CPC. The ruling PDP candidate scored over 22 million votes, over 58 percent enough to form a government without a re-run election. While the CPC candidate scored about 35 percent. Other like ACN and ANPP scored the rest of the votes. (Adam, 2011; Carson, 2011) The above voting pattern shows that religious and ethnic factors determined candidates that won elections from the various regions in the country. It could also be observed that incumbents have always being reelected as well.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Democracy, or democratic government, is "a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representatives to a parliament or similar assembly," "Oxford English Dictionary". Democracy is further defined as "government by the people; especially rule of the majority, a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.

Opposition

Although political factions have always been with us, the concept of an organized opposition that is recognized as legitimate by the government of the day is one of the great achievements of politics in the democratic world. The term opposition stems from the Latin word *oppositus* which means positioned against. However many other definitions exist, but Robert Darl's universal approach fits with the above definition. His method of deduction

assumes that A rules and therefore has predominant influence on the running of the state. At the same time B does not rule and positioned itself against A. This means that B is the opposition. It however does not preclude that in a different time, B comes to power and A becomes the opposition. (Darl, 1966) For the purpose of this article, we are concern with party A or B only when such party performs that role in a different way .

Incumbent

The incumbent is the existing holder of a political office. He is A person who holds a particular office or position It is usually used in reference to elections where races can often be defined as being between an incumbent and non-incumbents. Incumbents have structural advantages over challengers during elections. The percentage of incumbents who win reelection after seeking it in the U.S. House of Representatives has been over 80% for more than 50 years, and is often over 90%. Additionally, shifts in congressional districts due to reapportionment or other longer-term factors may make it more or less likely for an incumbent to win re-election over time. A race without an incumbent is referred to as an open seat because of the lack of incumbency advantage and they are the most contested races in an election.

Incumbent Candidate

That is a candidate that is already in office and is running again for the same office.

Political Parties

Contemporary scholarship views a party as a team of politicians whose paramount goal is to win electoral office. A political party can be viewed as a specific form of organization which like many other types of organizations pursues a variety of goals. Müller and Strøm (1999) argue that political parties seek three basic goals: votes, policy, and office. Although all political parties are expected to strive for electoral support, parties are likely to differ in the degree to which they value policy or office. Some parties are largely policy-seeking aiming to present and ultimately implement their vision of society, while other parties are more office-seeking in nature making the pursuit of political office a central party goal in and of itself.

Theory of Coalition

In his influential study, T. J. Pempel wrote that successful dominant parties create a “virtuous cycle of dominance” to reinforce their rule (1990: 16) In this perspective there is a dominant party systems where the incumbent's advantages systematically bias electoral competition in its favor. Here the advantages help dominant parties virtually win elections before election day by forcing opposition parties, if they form, to compete with policy appeals that are extremist relative to the preference of the average voter. As a result, challenger parties seek both personnel and votes from among the most anti-status quo constituencies. This is the case with most African party systems where the incumbent's advantages systematically bias electoral competition in its favor. In Nigeria the PDP became a dominant party systems where the incumbent's advantages of winning elections was visible. Proponents of electoral reform argue it is only fair that parties which receive a minority of the popular vote should have to share power. They also argue that coalition government forces parties to compromise and that compromise leads to better and more effective public policies.

Opponents argue that coalitions undermines electoral accountability by giving politicians rather than voters the power to decide which party or parties should form a part of the government. They also argue that coalitions give extremist parties an opportunity to enter government and that they give a disproportionate and unfair influence to often very small parties. Finally they suggest that coalitions are prone to instability. A Down (1998) reiterate this and argues that politicians seek to maximize the total number of votes that they receive. For this reason politicians will seek to forge as broad an electoral coalition as possible composed of voters with potential different views. The primary reason for forming, joining or building a coalition is to gain more influence and power than the individual organization has on its own.

However one cannot dismiss the tenets of coalition, which can be done by combining votes in an elected body or by combining resources during a political or civic campaign. Working together, the groups or parties are able to accomplish more together than they would on their own. This is precisely how several parties resolved to merge forthwith and become the All Progressive Congress in Nigeria. The merger involves the ACN, led by Nigeria's former anti-corruption chief Nuhu Ribadu, the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), headed by former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari, (now President) as well as the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) and All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA).

Lessons from the 2015 Elections

With the above voting behavior therefore, what factors might have been responsible for the change in voting pattern to the extent that Nigerians are beginning to remove incumbents through peaceful and violence free election? In a speech at the Royal Institute for International Affairs (Chatham House) in December 2014, Professor Kuna (Special Assistant to Professor Attahiru Jega, Chairman, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), said that concerns about the upcoming 2015 elections in Nigeria are well founded and relate to two broad groups of challenges. The first group consists of structural factors concerning the nature of political competition, such as the fact that many politicians consider elections 'theatres of war'. The institutional weakness of political parties, civil society organizations and the media also informs structural concerns.

The second group of challenges consists of process-related factors. These directly affect preparations for the elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). He stated that while INEC has some capacity to confront process-related issues, it is not well positioned to address structural problems. He argued that the structural challenges Nigeria faces are fairly typical of states that have recently transitioned from authoritarian regimes, and so should be examined within the context of transitional democracies. If the structural challenges that Nigeria faced prior to the 2015 elections were typical of states that have recently transitioned from authoritarian regimes and in this case like most African states, then INEC's solution will be valuable for the entire continent.

Key Reforms that Might serve as valuable Lessons

A summary of Seven out of 10 key reforms introduced in the period were direct responses to problems generated by the nature of political competition, the role of political elites and the weakness of political institutions. These according to Professor Kuna include; (1) the

creation of a new voters' register in 2011 to replace the register used in 2007, which was not considered credible(2) more defined voting procedure, wherein voters are accredited simultaneously at polling units across the country, to prevent people from voting at multiple stations, as had happened in previous elections(3) Election materials now customized to particular polling units to prevent ballot-snatching(4) launched a new framework for the recruitment and training of staff for elections such academic staffs and NYSC members who are unlikely to be involved in malpractice.(5) increased cooperation with critical stakeholders, and meetings with political parties and civil society organizations on a regular bases.(6) organized meetings between traditional rulers and political leaders in order to send messages of peace and non-violence during the elections. (7)The most important is the introduction of the controversial Card reader. This has restored peoples trust in the electoral process, knowing that their votes will count since the card readers helped to reduce rigging to a barest minimum in the 2015 election.

The fact that that violence is often worse in areas where people have little trust in election procedures and related bodies, including INEC call for the body to restored peoples trust in the electoral process. Thus in spite criticism of INEC, For the first time report from over 90 observers from 25 EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland, including a delegation of seven Members of the European Parliament, headed by Javier Nart (Spain), stated that no centralised systemic fraud was observed. However "The highly competitive elections were marred by incidents of violence, abuse of incumbency at state and federal levels, and attempts at manipulation. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) made commendable attempts to strengthen electoral arrangements, however systemic weaknesses leave the process vulnerable to abuse by political contenders,.(Daily Trust 2015) Theodore Ekechi the Director of Election Planning and Monitoring in the All Progressives Congress (APC) Presidential Campaign Organization. Told Premium Times that they were lucky when "we saw an electoral umpire in INEC which was willing to have a free and fair election where every vote will count in the outcome of the election. That was also another thrust of confidence for us. We were also lucky that we had a Jega who was also very committed and unwavering in his commitment that every vote will count"(Premium Times, may 2015).

The report showered that INEC had gained credibility since the appointment of the new Chairperson in 2010, but it was not clear to what extent the institution had been reformed. During the 2015 elections, INEC, it stated, 'appeared to have performed impartially in challenging circumstances' despite increased criticism following both election days.

Other strategic lessons from the political parties was captured ex-Foreign Minister Tom Ikimi of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) party that ""At no time in our national life has radical change become more urgent," "And to meet the challenge of that change, we.... have resolved to merge forthwith and become the All Progressive Congress," he said The second important lesson is with political parties "At no time in our national life has radical change become more urgent," said a joint statement read to reporters by ex-Foreign Minister Tom Ikimi of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) party.

"And to meet the challenge of that change, we.... have resolved to merge forthwith and become the All Progressive Congress," he said. (BBC News Africa 7 February 2013) Previous opposition initiatives to unite have failed, as rival leaders fought to be the presidential candidate and bickered over policy. The merger involves the ACN, led by Nigeria's former anti-corruption chief Nuhu Ribadu, the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), headed by former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari, as well as the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) and All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA).

Formed in February 2013, the party is the result of an alliance by Nigeria's four biggest opposition parties - the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) - merged to take on the People's Democratic Party (PDP)

Conclusion

Based on the above, other African countries have a lot to learn from the Nigerian 2015 election if we are to overcome incumbent's regime's grip on power. First political parties in oppositions should be able to form strong coalitions that could compete favorably with ruling parties. Secondly the international community can mount pressure on incumbents, to respect the out-come of elections. Finally the credibility of election management body can be improved through the introduction of card readers. This will go a long way to reduce election malpractices and election violence in the region.

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