

Post Election Peace Building: The Role of Civil Societies in 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

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Introduction

In reality, democracy as a liberal project emphasizes the formal, institutional and procedural elements such as multi-party system, periodic elections, and constitutional guarantee of civil and political liberties. Freedom of the people to exercise their franchise is fundamental to liberal democracy, so elections lie at the heart of representative democracy. According to Egwu, (2014), not only is the democratic character of a regime measured by the extent to which those who govern are chosen by means of free and fair elections, both the quality of voting rights and the sanctity of votes are strong measures of democracy.

The return of power from the military to civilians on May 29, 1999, marked the commencement of an expected civilianized, rather than militarized, transition to democracy, with consolidated gains of democratic development. Regrettably according to Jega ((2010), this was, however, constrained and further complicated by the fact that the 'civilians' who took over power from the military, were essentially not democrats, but merely 'militicians', i.e. politicians with closed, authoritarian and uncivil mindset, mostly acquired under patronage and tutelage by successive military regimes. No doubt, that the actions and attitude of these uncivil 'militicians' has manifested in our elections which are the cornerstone of liberal democratic practice, and which we purport to practice, have continued to be poorly organized, conflict ridden,

with restricted or obstructed participation and very unfair outcomes.

Nigeria's 1998 and 1999 transition elections were best seen in the contest of the broader impetus to end the military rule. Consequently, the flaws of the rushed electoral processes were largely overlooked. Successive elections with the exception of the 2011 and 2015 elections had been worse than the previous ones. The 2007 elections in particular, where electoral irregularities and malpractices were so profound and widespread that they created a severe legitimacy crisis and even the PDP presidential candidates, Late Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua who was declared winner by INEC, conceded that they were flawed. In order to address this problem, the Yar'Adua administration established the 22-person, election Reform Committee led by Justice Mohammed Uwais, whose primary task was to chart a new electoral path for Nigeria through appropriate electoral reforms.

The 2015 general elections recorded a level of improvement in the integrity of the electoral management body INEC and the process of the election, although there were pockets of irregularities and violence in some parts of the country, the international and domestic observers sees the 2015 as one of the best election organized in Nigeria and meets international and regional standards for democratic elections. However, the responsibility for a credible, free, fair and violent free election no longer to be solely that of the INEC, as the tide has shifted to include civil society organization. To this end therefore, it is important to state that the success story of 2015 general elections in Nigeria will not be complete without recounting the vital role played by civil society organizations in the process of the elections. This paper therefore, examines the role played by civil society organizations in the 2015 electoral processes towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Conceptualizing Civil Society

The concept of civil society is a 'space' whose function is to mediate between the individual and the state. There may not be a clear cut definition of civil society. It is more or less agreed that it comprises

institutions such as religious organizations, labour unions, charity organizations, community groups, non profits and the media organizations. In advanced and virile democratic systems, these institutions supplement formal processes such as voting and help citizens shape the culture, politics and economic of their nation. Arising from above, we can argue that civil society organization tends to strengthen and raise the capacity of citizens to address social, economic and political development challenges.

To the above, we deduced that civil society is the bedrock of any civilized country or society. It is called civil because it is mainly for both enlightened and the not so enlightened members of the society who are commonly united by a common bond and aspirations which presupposes the existence of the rule of law, good governance, demand for representative government and protection of the rights of the people among others. According to Larry Diamond (cited in Kukah 1999:44);

civil society is the realm of organized social life that is voluntary self-generating, self supporting, autonomous from the state and bound by legal order or set of shared rules... it involves people acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passion and ideas, exchange ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold state officials accountable. It is an intermediary entity standing between the private sphere and the state.

Political activity within civil society is diverse. Groups representing numerous different interests, naturally enough are not united in their demand. Politics within the civil society is competitive, just as it is high politics of the state. These different interests also influence how civil associations relates to the state. Some groups will cooperate with the government while others will voice their opposition. In any case, each groups attempt to influence state decision making with vary results. If however, a large gap exists between interests of civil society and the state with the state unresponsive to civil society demands, this may lead to citizens actually challenging the authority of the state.

Civil societies play important roles in the development of a democratic and peaceful state. This is because of the important roles and functions played by civil society organizations; hence, we identify these functions and needs for civil societies as follows:

- (i) curtailment of the excesses of government institutions;
- (ii) dissemination of information to the mass;
- (iii) promote constitutionalism and rule of law;
- (iv) develop viable democratic culture and promote popular participation;
- (v) election monitoring;
- (vi) enhance efficiency in democratic institutions and process, for national stability and development.

The above taken together, could further be stated that an optimal civil society exerts force throughout political conjunction. In its more modern characterization, the nature of civil society or more contemporarily in democratic governance, protecting civil liberty within the context of political pluralism. A core characteristics of a democratic governance (civil society) essentially assist the government to be honest in disseminating government policies and ideas. Such decentralization engenders active political participation, invites competitive energies, policies and ideas between citizens and government officials. Because of the framework of constitutionalism that necessarily operates in such system, public dialogue are encouraged and enhanced by public policies that promote tolerance of opposition and differences for national stability and developmental process of the nation.

It is obvious, that civil society organization should not be isolated in the efforts towards the attainment of a viable and sustainable democracy. As rightly observed by Jega (2006), a synergy should be grossly encouraged between civil society organizations and other international and government institutions and parastatals in the pursuit of sustainable democracy in conflict prone environment like ours.

Electoral Politics in Nigeria 1999 – 2015

The demise of General Sani Abacha in June 1998 paved the way

for the yet another transition to civil rule in Nigeria after over thirty years of military rule. The succeeding regime of General Abdulsalami Abubakar, after declaring all the elections conducted under General Abacha invalid, got set to take Nigerians through yet another electoral process by dissolving all the political structures put in place by the late ruler. These included the Transition Implementation Commission (TIC), which was by law empowered to supervise NECON. The National Reconciliation Committee (NARECON) and the Devolution of Powers Committee (DPC) which were also organs established by General Abacha as part of his manipulative and authoritarian self-succession agenda. The regime also moved to reconstitute another electoral commission by prefixing President Ibrahim Babangida's NEC with "Independent" to form Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), perhaps to serve as a confidence restoring measure for Nigerians who had just gone through a long period of transition (Jibrin and Dauda, 2010).

The emergence and the perceptible doggedness of the General Abdulsalami Abubakar government to restore democratic rule in Nigeria, gave mileage and invaluable credence to INEC, and the whole transition process. The appointment of the well respected and elderly justice (Late) Ephraim Akpata as the head of electoral management body (INEC), conducted the 1998/99 general elections under the power conferred on it by military decrees. Despite some obvious flaws, INEC was adjudged to have done relatively well, especially in the context of the very short time it had to plan its work and given the magnitude of the task itself.

A profound statement that can be made about elections since 1999 is that it has been characterized by irregularities. This is evident in the 2003 and 2007 elections where widespread irregularities, illegalities and malpractices was perpetuated by the then ruling party People Democratic Party (PDP) at the local, state and federal levels. As rightly observed by Egwu (2014) voters in Nigeria were always eager to exercise their popular sovereignty and have their votes determine the winners of elections, yet the political class had a different agenda as it corrupt the process and rig its way into elective offices. This he attributed to 'poverty of

the political system' as a key defining element of electoral authoritarianism, where party system is largely conditioned by patronage politics, the institutional weaknesses of election management body, absence of internal democracy, entrenched culture of impunity and lack of respect for the rule of law.

It is imperative to point out here that Nigeria's democracy appears very fragile, illiberal and infested with severe stress. The sources are diverse; too many cases of 'stolen' elections and mandate; weak democratic institutions and a growing culture of impunity; ethno-religious violence sometimes fuelled or exacerbated by elections which invariably stands as a threat to our democracy.

A major setback in the bid to consolidate democracy in Nigeria has been the challenges of conducting elections and post-election peace building. The integrity and credibility of the electoral process is determined by the extent to which the outcome of electoral contest reflects the will of the people or the electorate. The winner-take-all syndrome in the fight to control political power has greatly affected the conduct of elections in Nigeria, which from 1999 to 2011, has increasingly become difficult as it suffered many inimical acts detrimental to it. It is a fact that so many of the elections in the period ended up in tribunals and courts. The consequence of this was the escalating voter apathy by Nigerians who no longer have confidence in the electoral process and Nigeria's negative image of fraudulent elections.

The general elections of April 2011, was adjudged as better than the preceding ones, but the present electoral environment is markedly different from what it was in the countdown to the 2011 general elections. The INEC's change in leadership and its desire to reform itself led the institutions to put in place measure to ensure better conduct of the 2015 elections.

While some changes had been made in the electoral environment, not necessarily changes in the political economy that constitutes the drivers of Nigeria's electoral democracy. The yearnings of Nigerians had not been met yet. As observed by Egwu (2015), Nigeria still retains a ruinous patronage system grafted on a political economy driven by oil revenues, distinguished by

phenomenal situation of elite capture of power and resources. The high dependence of the state on rent from oil rather than taxation extracted from citizens, fuels a culture of impunity and lack of demand for accountability on the part of the citizenry. Patron-client networks, often ethnic and region-based continue to undermine the basis of effective governance.

Good governance is a mirage in the context of the present Nigerian political situation; the levels of corruption and outright impunity are at wanton heights. The failure in good governance has now created a high level of insecurity which plagues the country. The mismanagement of the economy in midst of falling oil revenues shows how much the country will face difficult challenges in the coming years ahead. The private sector is growing; the public sector suffers as workers continue to go on without salaries. Public administration is at its lowest ebb as high level acts of corruption are perpetrated in public institutions to the detriment of the citizenry (CDD, 2015).

The economic challenges the country faces are enormous. In face of high expectations by the Nigerians electorates and the fact that Nigerian people were still dissatisfied with the country's electoral democracy, it is imperative to recognize the role of a robust and increasingly mobilized civil society. It played to a large extent the role of manufacturing the moral consent for governance, serves as a rallying point in demanding for accountable governance, respect for constitutional terms of office, the reform of the constitution and setting the governance agenda for the entire society. In addition, making the electoral process inclusive, credible, and transparent has become a pre-occupation of civil society in consolidating democracy in Nigeria. The next section of the paper attempts the increasing involvement of civil society organizations in the 2015 electioneering process in Nigeria.

Civil Society and 2015 Elections in Nigeria: Towards Democratic Consolidation

The civil society organizations the world over advocate for democratic governance and credible elections. It does so through greater public accountability, in the fields of civil/voter education, election observation and post-election building.

It is evident that civil society in Nigeria has played a vital role during the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 elections. During these periods, civil society organizations began to loom very large in Nigeria's democratic space. And as such, they became not only strong but played constructive role in the country's continued transition toward democracy but also in the democratization of the political space and electoral processes. This section therefore, examine the role of civil society organizations in the 2015 elections and political stability in Nigeria.

The countdown to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria witnessed the most active mobilization of ethno-regional constituencies and groups with claims and counter-claims that neither focused on performance of the ruling party PDP, nor the policy options to be pursued by the leading candidates in the elections. The civil society organizations collectively took up the task of engaging with stakeholders to ensure a free, fair and credible electoral process for peaceful elections and democratic consolidation. Most of them trained and deployed election observers in various states and embarked on voter education activities, organized debates to ensure issues based electioneering campaigns.

The 2015 election campaign was extremely unpleasant in recent Nigerian political history. The attacks made by contending political parties were in some cases distasteful. Rather than embarking on issue-based campaigns, the political parties engaged in a shallow and hateful rhetoric meant at tarnishing the image of opponents. Concerned about the foul language and mild hinging that fill the air waves during campaigns and a trigger for violence that they constitute, the civil society organizations embarked on monitoring speeches made by politicians and other regional socio-cultural associations to identify hate speeches and generated awareness on these. For instance, the threat made by some ex-militants in the Niger Delta region, that the nation will be plunge into chaos if President Goodluck Jonathan loses the 2015 presidential election. The Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) President Akeregha reacted this way,

Having understudied the situation of things in the build-up to the elections, it has become pertinent to let those who are into the drumbeat of war be ready to face the music if crisis breaks out after the general elections, and CLO is currently compiling a list of people who are making hate speeches, insidious and inciting statements (in Daily Trust, Wed. Feb. 4, 2015).

In the same vein, to address a major weakness of candidates' campaigns process and their failure to concretely address main social and economic problems affecting the lives of Nigeria, the CSOs, NLC and the media took a giant step to organize political debates. The NLC in collaboration with African Centre for Leadership, Strategy and Development (CLDS), Action Aid and Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC) among others, organized a joint debate for political parties and candidates to tell the electorates in Nigeria how they will address the problem of public administration in the country. To this, NLC general secretary Ozo-Eson, argued that,

Candidates need to show concrete strategies and plans for improved policy and planning co-ordination, improved human resources systems and skills and improved budget transparency, consultation, oversight and credibility. Nigeria is beset with huge challenges in public administration, cost of governance is very high and there are huge challenges of policy planning and co-ordination (Daily Trust, Wed. Feb., 4, 2015).

Furthermore, to enhanced and encourage issue-based campaigns, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) initiated the Nigerian Political Parties Discussion Series (NPPDS). The programme brought together the PDP and the APC, major contenders in the 2015 elections in a series of discussion for both parties to lay out their strategies they tend to deploy for good governance and sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

To consolidate democratic principles and sustainable democracy, the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) took the issue of electoral violence seriously during the 2015 electoral process;

they raised awareness that drew the attention and eventual intervention of not only the International Criminal Court (ICC), but also the International Community. The ICC issued a statement warning Nigerian Leaders on hate speech and electoral violence. In the statement, ICC's Fatou Bensouda stated that:

The election is expected to be the most contested since the end of military rule in 1999. Experience has shown that electoral competition, when gone astray, can give rise to violence and even trigger the commission of mass crimes.

The statement went further that:

Any person who incites or engages in act of violence including by ordering, requesting, encouraging.... crimes within ICC's jurisdiction is liable to prosecution (Daily Trust, Tues; Feb. 3, 2015).

This proved to be a strategic move by the CSOs towards post election peace building, because the fear of the ICC became a deterrent.

With the experience of the 2011 post election violence in mind, and the tensions generated as 2015 elections approached, the need for peace became imminent. As part of the efforts to enhance peace, the CSOs worked collectively for signing the Abuja Peace Accord by then President Jonathan and Mohammed Buhari and commitment to it by the major contenders. For instance, the Human Right Monitor and other civil society groups advised the presidential candidates and stakeholders who signed the peace pact to abide by the terms of the pact, saying it is necessary for democratic consolidation and national unity. The Executive Director of the Human Rights Monitor, Barrister Festus Okoye stated that:

We would monitor and document compliance with the pact before, during and after the elections, the fact that, this particular election will be the most competitive election since Nigeria returned to democratic rule in

1999. That imposes a burden on political parties, the candidates and the handlers of the candidates to act with decorum and civility. So we want to state emphatically that adherence to the Abuja accord is not a mere piece of paper that can be tossed away after the signing it is a bound between the candidates and the political parties and also with the Nigerian people. It is the affirmation of the sanctity of votes and disavowal of violence (Daily Trust, Fri. 23, 2015).

The role of election monitors/observers has become an important variable in measuring the free, fairness and credibility of the polls. During the 2015 elections, Civil Society Organizations and other monitoring groups (whether local or international) were accredited by INEC to monitor the elections. On election day, the various CSOs deployed election observers to various states of the federation, with little presence in some states in the North East due to the security situation in that zone created by the activities of the Boko Haram insurgencies. All deployed observers were given checklist designed to report on security of the poll environment; card reader performance; voter's behaviour and turnout; compliance and irregularity; quality of the voting procedure; collation and transmission of results; violence and conflict.

The above checklist, were set out for observers to monitor the activities of INEC staff, security agencies, party agents and the conduct of electorates to measure compliance with the electoral process in all the elections. While the election was still going on many of the observers sent first hand information from the field to the Civil Society Situation Room especially on issues that require urgent attention. For instance, Logistic challenges, the performance of PVCs and card reader, late arrival of election officials and materials; that requires quick intervention of INEC in some polling stations.

Another high point of Civil Society Organizations was monitoring of the collation and transmission of election results at various polling units across the country. Feedback from the CSOs across the country, shows that collation of votes in many instances

started very late in the evening, with some spilling into the following morning, some cases and reports of incidents of disruption of the collation. The peak of the protest was witnessed at the official collation centre for the presidential election, at the International Conference Centre (ICC), when a PDP chieftain Elder Godwill Orubebe, publicly protested the results, accusing Professor Attahiru Jega, the chairman of INEC, of being biased in favour of the APC candidate (CDD, 2015).

In light of the above, the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room issued a statement 'A call to protect the sanctity of our votes' with a stern warning as follows:

The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room is concerned by reports of attempts across the country to undermine the integrity of the collation of votes and outcome of the elections. The Situation Room has received disturbing reports that politicians using various arms of the national security apparatus are attempting to fiddle with the collation process and pass off results that undermine the credibility of the elections and the sacrifice of millions of Nigerians from all walk of life, who against all odd trooped out to cast their votes (Civil Society Situation Room, March 31, 2015).

The Civil Society Situation Room called on INEC, politicians, security agencies, the citizens and the international community to be vigilant and defend the course of democracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is no doubt that Civil Society Organizations in Nigeria have had considerable influence on democracy and electoral process in Nigeria, since the return of democratic rule in 1999. The ultimate destiny of Nigeria's electoral democracy lies in the Nigerian people and their voices including the Civil Society Organizations; which stand out enthrone accountability and responsiveness in governance as well as democratic consolidation.

The oversight functions performed by CSOs during the pre-election, election and post-election phases have been one of the

highlights of the 2015 elections. The CSOs were engaged in citizen's education, engagement of elected officers, ensuring internal democracy in political parties, respect for opposition political views and enhancing voter's confidence and affirms credibility by exposing electoral fraud and other undemocratic activities.

Several civil society organizations had played important roles in minimizing electoral fraud and violence during the 2015 elections. Groups like Democracy Vanguard and Enough Is Enough Nigeria (EiE) conducted voter education campaigns; others like the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), CLEEN Foundation and the Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), were very active in building the capacities of various actors and developing more effective poll monitoring mechanisms; yet others including the National Association for Peaceful Elections in Nigeria (NAPEN) and the Niger Delta Civil Society Coalition (NDCSC) engage various community and youth groups. For instance, in August 2014, TMC launched its Quick Count project, a citizen-fed data system that provided information on election day processes and independent results verification (Daily Trust 26th August, 2014).

Broadly, civil society organizations in Nigeria need to intensify civic and voter education to mitigate violence. They must expand their programs, particularly targeting low income and unemployed youths in urban slums and rural areas, and reach out more effectively to women who could moderate passions and prevent violence. These could encourage community-based initiatives, such as peace councils and inter-faith youth forums where community and religious leaders can discourage violence and agree on preventive arrangements. They must also engage more proactively with youth leaders in volatile areas, expand and strengthen early warning and early response networks, and support efforts to identify, apprehend and prosecute instigators and participants in election-related violence. Civil society organizations developing election risk and security assessments should also develop channels for communicating their forecasts formally, preferably collectively, to INEC and security agencies to prevent post election violence.

While CSOs did their best to ameliorate the electoral process, however, the need for professionalism, capacity building and specialization must be improved on in future elections. The wholesome reliance of funding from foreign donor organizations was a major challenge for CSOs. They hardly survive outside grants and donations. Most of the activities and roles played in the 2015 elections were supported by donor agencies, which are inadequate. In this context, CSOs must start looking at other ways of generating revenue locally, and not having to rely solely on international donor agencies.

Finally, as observed and documented by CSOs, the challenges during 2015 elections that need to be addressed to further improve the electoral environment; include the failure of relevant government agencies and political parties to undertake adequate civic and political education evident in the high numbers of invalid votes, incidents of collusion between INEC staff at local levels and sections of the political class, and the integrity of the result collation process. These issues can be addressed by strengthening the organizational capacity of INEC and the entire electoral process for subsequent elections.

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