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HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE AND IDENTITY POLITICS: NIGERIAN ELECTION OR SELECTION

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ABSTRACT

The end of military dictatorship in Nigeria brought forth a wave of optimism as citizens anticipated newfound opportunities and freedoms under democracy. However, this inaugural lecture acknowledges the complex interplay between human rights abuses and identity politics in Nigeria's electoral processes. The nation's diverse fabric of ethnic, religious, and regional identities has historically seen elections marred by manipulation and violence. This research explores how identity politics and its manipulation contribute to human rights abuses during the electoral cycle, shaping the trajectory of Nigerian democracy. Through the analysis of historical and contemporary examples and consideration of sociopolitical dynamics, the lecture sheds light on the challenges hindering inclusive and fair elections that safeguard citizens' fundamental rights. Beyond addressing a critical issue in Nigeria, this research contributes to the broader discourse on democracy and human rights. It distinguishes between genuine elections and mere selections, potentially influencing the direction of democracy and human rights in Nigeria and the wider region. The speaker hopes that the lecture will initiate constructive dialogue, scholarly exploration, and positive change toward a more just and equitable electoral process.

Keywords: Election, Corruption, Identity Politics, Human Rights Abuse, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and often considered the continent's giant, has faced persistent challenges in the conduct of its electoral processes. Democracy, which is heralded as a cornerstone of governance, is far from guaranteed in a country that boasts a diverse and intricate tapestry of identities. The intersection of human rights abuses and identity politics in Nigeria's elections has raised fundamental questions about the authenticity of the democratic system and its ability to safeguard the rights and aspirations of its citizens.

In theory, Nigeria, like many nations, aspires to uphold the principles of free and fair elections as a fundamental aspect of its democracy. However, the stark reality on the ground raises concerning doubts about the extent to which these principles are genuinely upheld.

Nigeria's recent elections have faced allegations of manipulation, violence, and widespread irregularities, raising questions about whether these electoral processes genuinely reflect the will of the people or are, in essence, selections disguised as elections. The manipulation of identity politics, where various ethnic, religious, and regional groups hold significant influence over electoral outcomes, plays a central role in exacerbating tensions and undermining fundamental human rights.

Elections are considered the cornerstone of democracy, serving the purpose of achieving peaceful changes in government and legitimizing the elected authorities. However, in a

diverse society like Nigeria, the electoral process often becomes a battleground marked by animosity and violence. Regrettably, it frequently falls short of meeting the standards of widespread popular participation and legitimacy. At the heart of this bitter competition lies the struggle for power by factional elite groups, often perceived as representing specific ethno-religious and regional interests. During electoral seasons, more than at any other time, the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the Nigerian state become glaringly evident.

The conduct of elections in Nigeria has been marred by allegations of human rights violations, which have cast a shadow over the nation's pursuit of democracy. In this lecture, we will explore the multifaceted issues surrounding Nigeria's electoral landscape, dissecting the obstacles, abuses, and the wider consequences for human rights in the country. Additionally, we will provide recommendations aimed at establishing a more democratic and rights-respecting electoral system.

This paper delves into the intricate connection between identity politics and human rights violations within Nigeria's electoral sphere. It will investigate the historical and contemporary dynamics that have influenced Nigeria's electoral environment, emphasizing the challenges of reconciling diversity with democratic principles. Through the examination of case studies, official reports, and the firsthand accounts of those directly impacted, we aim to illuminate the extent to which identity politics contribute to human rights abuses during electoral processes.

CORRUPTION

According to Transparency International (2013) corruption is the misuse of entrusted power for private gain. It also refers to any behavior that deviates from the formal rules of conduct governing the action of someone in position of public trust or authority because of private motives such as wealth, power or status (Onuigbo, 2015 cited in Oluwatusin, 2019:65). Corruption takes the form of the following: bribery, nepotism, extortion, gratification, absenteeism from work, misappropriation, embezzlement and stealing or looting, falsification of official records, inflation of contract value, diversion of funds and ghost workforce (Markson, 2017). According to ICPC Act [section2], corruption includes vices, like bribery, fraud, and other related offences. Our concern in this paper is electoral corruption which has become a major characteristic of Nigerian politics. Politicians offer money to the electorate to buy their votes; voters collect money to sell their votes to the highest bidder and politicians also offer bribe to the electoral officials to alter election results to their advantage. Thus, electoral corruption can be described as all actions or inactions of individuals, groups or institutions which encourage the manipulation/subversion of electoral process either by words, media, thugs, violence, money and state apparatus aimed at getting undue advantage for oneself or political party.

Democratization and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

Elections ideally reflect and impact on the orderliness within society and the possibility of rejuvenating the political leadership through the change of decadent members of the elite and the advancement of the non-elite element. Properly managed elections provide a veritable platform for conflict resolution and transformation (Odukoya, 2007). Unfortunately, in Africa and Nigeria in particular evidences suggests that elections are fast becoming the very opposite of the above. Odukoya (2007) further pointed out that while much lip-service is paid to norms

of free elections, too often the reality is a travesty of democracy. Devoid of the attribute of freeness and fairness, elections become empty shells, lacking any real democratic content. Commenting on Nigeria's elections, Aluaigba (2008:2) maintained that credible election most relevant to the quality of democracy has been dented with terribly festering irregularities. This explains why the conduct of free and fair election has remained elusive and problematic in Nigeria since independence. He further argued that public polls held in 1959, 1964-65, 1979 and 1983 were all fraught with various levels of anomalies ranging from bribery, electoral violence, intimidation and harassment of voters, ballot box snatching and ballot stuffing, underage voting, vote buying, and so on.

Arowolo and Aluko, (2012) argued that electoral violence seems to be institutionalized since it emanates from the corridors of power and so politics and political activities become exclusive rights of the politicians who make politics dirty in the first place. The fact that political game in Nigeria is played at variance with set rules makes it a dirty game. They maintained that Politics in Nigeria must have been infested with greed, tribalism, intolerance, injustice and parochial instinct of political leadership.

While frequent, political violence in Nigeria does not generally occur spontaneously and is not an intractable problem. More often than not political violence is paid for, used as a tool by prominent Nigerians to bolster their own political positions. This fact is accepted at the highest levels of government and within Nigeria's security agencies. President Obasanjo has denounced this basic reality of Nigerian politics on multiple occasions, in one case referring to the combatants in Nigeria's myriad episodes of intercommunal violence as "foot-soldiers to the designs and machinations of power-seekers." In March, Obasanjo told a rally in Oyo State that God would "scatter the homes" of those responsible for electoral violence.

Despite such rhetoric, the government has done little to address the primary root cause of political violence: the impunity enjoyed by political leaders who orchestrate it. Nigeria's electoral act includes provisions that specifically criminalize any action to disrupt the electoral process through violence, including through the use of hired gangs or other proxies. These provisions are arguably not strict enough, but in practice this has been a moot point as they have not been enforced at all.

Human Rights Abuses and Electoral Violence

The abuse of human rights in Nigerian elections is a complex issue that encompasses a range of violations and challenges (Amnesty International, 2019). It involves the restriction of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and assembly (Human Rights Watch, 2020). During election periods, journalists may face censorship and physical attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2020), while citizens may experience restrictions on their ability to assemble, protest, or express their political views (Amnesty International, 2019).

The link between identity politics and human rights abuses becomes evident during elections. The competitive nature of Nigerian politics, exacerbated by identity-based mobilization, has frequently resulted in electoral violence, voter intimidation, and suppression of opposition voices. These actions undermine the fundamental human rights of Nigerian citizens, including the rights to life, freedom of expression, and peaceful assembly.

Elections and Political Participation in Recent Elections

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) serves as the autonomous electoral body responsible for overseeing and regulating the electoral process to prevent any misconduct. In the past year, INEC administered various elections, including presidential, National Assembly, State House Assembly, and local elections across all 36 states and the FCT. Additionally, gubernatorial elections took place in 30 states. However, there were instances where the military and security forces were implicated in intimidating voters, electoral officials, and election observers. This contributed to lower voter turnout and reinforced the perception that the army was utilized as a tool by the ruling party, particularly in the Southern regions. Notably, widespread violence and military involvement, including during the vote collation phase, marred the governorship election in Rivers State. Some of INEC's resident electoral commissioners (RECs) reported instances where the Department of State Services (DSS) personnel intimidated them when they tried to safeguard voting materials.

Human Rights Abuses in Nigerian Elections

Electoral violence in Nigeria often leads to a range of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, assaults and violence, voter intimidation, and the displacement of communities. These abuses have profound implications for the democratic process and human rights in Nigeria. Human rights abuses during Nigerian elections are a stark reality. These abuses encompass violations of freedom of expression, assembly, and association. Peaceful protesters and opposition figures have faced harassment, arrest, and even violence. Women, who make up a significant portion of the electorate, often experience voter intimidation and harassment. Vulnerable minority groups also face discrimination and disenfranchisement.

IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, identity politics has deep historical roots, with the nation being home to over 250 ethnic communities, each characterized by its unique cultural and linguistic heritage. This diversity, while a source of vitality, has often fuelled political tensions, as Nigerian politics is frequently influenced by ethnic and regional associations that politicians exploit for support. This manipulation can lead to the marginalization of minority groups and the perpetuation of divisions along ethnic and religious lines. Identity politics in Nigeria is intricately woven into the country's societal framework, and its historical backdrop can be traced through different phases.

The pre-colonial era set the stage for Nigeria's diverse ethnic and cultural groups. British colonial rule further exacerbated ethnic divisions through indirect rule and the creation of artificial administrative regions. The struggle for independence brought ethnic and regional identities to the forefront, with leaders like Azikiwe, Awolowo, and Bello representing various groups.

Identity politics in Nigeria has a deep and complex history that significantly shapes the country's political landscape. This form of politics often revolves around ethnic and regional affiliations, leading to identity-based voting patterns, division, and polarization among the electorate. Rival identity groups compete for political power, and politicians exploit these divisions to secure support, creating a fragmented political landscape (Suberu, 2001).

One consequence of identity politics is the unequal distribution of resources, as politicians tend to favour their own ethnic or regional constituencies. This resource allocation can perpetuate economic and social disparities, infringing on development rights, including access to education, healthcare, and employment. The resulting economic inequality further exacerbates human rights challenges for marginalized groups (Omeje, 2007).

Identity politics in Nigerian elections: selection or election

The struggle of power is strongly driven by identity politics. This is a phenomenon that has been fuelled by a range of primordial factors, including Religion, tribalism, ethnicity, and regionalism. It often results in the formation of ethnic or regional voting blocs, the prioritization of identity over qualifications, divisive campaign rhetoric, and even violence. One of the key theorists that can help us understand the impact of identity politics in Nigeria is Samuel Huntington. The relevance of Huntington's work to Nigeria political landscape cannot be overstated. In Nigeria, identity politics has been a major source of conflict leading to numerous instances of communal violence, political instability, and even civil war.

Religion for example, has played a significant role in Nigeria political history, with the country divided roughly along religious lines. The Northern part of the country is predominately Muslim while the southern part is largely Christian. Similarly, tribalism and ethnicity has also played a significant role in shaping Nigeria politics. The country is a home to over 250 ethnic groups, each with its own cultural identity and history. These has led to a situation where Nigeria's politics is often defined by a zero- sum game with one ethnic group seeking to dominate the other.

3. Electoral Violence Driven by Identity Politics

Identity politics in Nigeria often revolves around affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, or other identity factors. This has led to a range of electoral violence, especially during the election season. Here's how identity politics contributes to electoral violence:

1. **Mobilization on Identity Lines:** Candidates and parties often mobilize supporters along identity lines, emphasizing shared ethnic or religious affiliations. This can lead to heightened competition and, at times, violence when supporters clash with rival groups.
2. **Voter Intimidation:** Identity-based intimidation tactics, such as threatening or coercing voters along identity lines, infringe on the right to vote freely and participate in the political process without fear.
3. **Hate Speech and Ethno-religious Incitement:** Politicians may use hate speech and ethno-religious incitement to rally support, creating a volatile atmosphere and increasing the likelihood of violence.
4. **Divisiveness:** Identity politics can exacerbate divisions between different identity groups, creating a fertile ground for electoral violence as supporters of rival candidates may resort to violence to assert their claims.

The Search for Inclusive Democracy

Human rights abuses during Nigerian elections are a complex and deeply concerning issue that poses a significant challenge to the country's democratic process and the protection of individual rights. These abuses encompass a wide range of violations, including restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom, restrictions on the rights to assemble and

protest, voter intimidation, ethno-religious discrimination, and abuses by security forces, among others.

These abuses have severe implications, both for individual rights and the broader democratic fabric of Nigeria. The restrictions on freedom of expression and press freedom limit the ability of journalists and media outlets to report independently and critically on election-related events. This, in turn, hinders the transparency and accountability of the electoral process.

Moreover, limitations on the rights to assemble and protest peacefully weaken citizens' ability to express their political views and participate in the democratic process. Voter intimidation, often involving violence and coercion, undermines the integrity of elections by depriving citizens of their right to vote freely and fairly.

In the broader context, these human rights abuses have profound implications for the democratic institutions of Nigeria. They erode accountability, weaken democratic foundations, and contribute to a culture of impunity where violations go unpunished. Vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as women and minority communities, are often disproportionately affected by these abuses.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing the safeguarding of press freedom, the protection of the right to assembly and expression, ensuring accountability for human rights violations, and promoting a culture of tolerance and inclusivity during electoral processes. By addressing human rights abuses during elections, Nigeria can strengthen its democracy, foster greater political participation, and build a more inclusive and accountable political system.

Nigerian Election or Selection

Nigeria's electoral history is a complex journey marked by transitions from colonial rule to independence and subsequent efforts to establish a democratic system. However, it has been punctuated by periods of military rule that have left lasting impacts on the country's electoral landscape (Suberu, 2001).

Nigeria's electoral framework reflects both progress and setbacks in its democratic odyssey. Although significant headway has been made towards democratic governance, the legacy of military rule and issues related to electoral transparency and integrity persist. The country's history underscores the enduring struggle to establish a dependable and credible democratic process (Suberu, 2001).

Elections, when conducted appropriately, serve as cornerstones of democracy. They provide a platform for citizens to express their preferences, elect their representatives, and hold leaders accountable. Free and fair elections promote political inclusivity, encourage civic participation, and empower the electorate. The legitimacy of elected leaders is rooted in the consent of the governed, making them more inclined to uphold and safeguard human rights and freedoms (Ikelegbe, 2001).

The differentiation between elections and selections holds profound implications for human rights and the rule of law. Free and fair elections uphold essential human rights, including the

right to vote and engage in the political process, freedom of expression, and association. Elections are vital for upholding the rule of law and ensuring that all individuals are treated equally under the law. In contrast, selections can lead to the infringement of these rights and undermine the rule of law, often entailing legal or procedural irregularities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

Genuinely free and fair elections serve as the cornerstone of a thriving democracy, embodying the collective voice of the people, providing a peaceful avenue for citizens to select their leaders, and acting as a bulwark against authoritarianism. In Nigeria, where democracy is still in its formative years, the ability to conduct truly transparent and equitable elections represents a critical gauge of the nation's democratic maturity. The transition to democracy in 1999 was a pivotal juncture, offering the promise of a future marked by democratic principles. However, the journey towards credible elections has been strewn with challenges, raising questions about the nation's dedication to these principles.

The Way Forward

Moving forward, it is imperative that all stakeholders - government institutions, civil society, political parties, and international partners - work collaboratively to implement the following measures:

- Encourage civic engagement and responsible citizenship to actively involve the public in shaping the democratic process through voter education and mobilization.
- Invest in community-based peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives to proactively prevent electoral violence.
- Promote interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue to foster understanding, tolerance, and unity among different identity groups.
- Foster civil society organization and media literacy to counter the spread of misinformation and disinformation during elections.
- Advocate for political reforms that prioritize merit-based candidate selection and enhance transparency in campaign financing.
- Engage diplomatically with Nigerian authorities and provide support for capacity-building initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions.
- Enforce regulations against hate speech and incitement to violence to discourage divisive rhetoric.
- International oversights and legal reforms

We need creative, competent broad minded and audacious leaders at all levels to move to country in different direction. We need to reinvent an equitable and compassionate nation where no one will be stereotyped, killed or left behind simply because where he/she were born. These measures collectively aim to mitigate human rights abuses and minimize the adverse effects of identity politics on Nigerian elections, ensuring a more inclusive and peaceful democratic process.

The nexus of identity politics and human rights abuse in Nigerian elections presents profound challenges, but it also holds the promise of a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable electoral process. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that Nigerian elections genuinely represent the will of the people and contribute to the nation's growth, stability, and progress.

As we embark on this journey towards a more inclusive and democratic future, let us remember the words of Nelson Mandela: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." May our efforts to address identity politics and human rights abuse in Nigerian elections bring us closer to this noble ideal.

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