

POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN EMERGENT DEMOCRACIES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN NIGERIA AND GHANA (1999 – 2004)

¹Ofuobe, C. and ²Anierobi, K. C.

¹Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of
Nigeria, Nsukka

²Programme Coordinator (SITP), Shell Petroleum Development Company,
Warri, Delta State

ABSTRACT

Political transitions to engender democracy are the current trend in Africa. Implicit therein is the exigency of elections, requiring institutions for the implementation. Their performance determines the success or otherwise of democratic transitions. Ghana's were more satisfactory and, therefore, the country had better democratic transition. Nigeria's electoral institutions had been problematic, accounting for her political troubles in democratisation. Thus, the electoral institutions need strengthening to perform satisfactorily so that the electoral processes become wholly efficient and transparent in Nigeria and Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Problematising Political Transition: Political transitions can be conceptualised as democratic transitions. Transition is then used in the context of the political change towards liberal democracy. The conceptualisation of democratic transition itself has tended to be restrictive - as the interval between one regime and another; for example, a process of change from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one (Osaghae, 1995). Accordingly, Osaghae (1995:187) contends that:

...the restriction of transition to the interval of change undermines the meaning of transition as a historical and continuous process rather than a state of being. What is required is a conception of transition which relates past transactions and their studies in frameworks of political and social change, rather than a conception which underplays or ignores the past...

been conducted twice in Nigeria and in Ghana (Nigeria – 1999 and 2003; Ghana – 2000 and 2004). Whereas the elections in Ghana have been adjudged smooth and successful, those of Nigeria have been anything but smooth. It is our intention to explore the electoral processes in these two important African countries so as to understand the basis of similarities and differences in their transition processes. In this direction, the following objectives will guide us in this study:

- To identify and compare the features of the electoral processes in Nigeria and Ghana in the period 1999 to 2004; and
- To examine the institutions involved in the conduct of elections in both countries and assess their performance of their roles.

FEATURES OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESSES IN NIGERIA AND GHANA

The examination of these electoral processes will be done by looking at the character of the main stages of the course of elections, namely, primaries and nomination of candidates; campaigns; and polling, counting of votes and declaration of results.

Primaries and Nomination of Candidates: The participation of politicians in the nominations and primaries in the 1999 elections in Nigeria was influenced by the experience of people under the military regime of Generals Babangida and Abacha. The military, then, had mobilised Nigerians for elections that were aimed at putting the country on a transition to a civilian rule. The military leaders subsequently severally truncated such democratic transition processes, with the attendant loss of faith by politicians on the genuine intentions of the military government.

In the run up to the 1999 transition, therefore, critical Nigerians did not believe that the military would fulfil the expectation for a credible election and democracy, and were, thus, unwilling to get involved. The result of this was that there were scarcely strong pressures to undertake qualitative screening processes for candidates by both the political parties and the electoral commission.

In the 2003 General Elections, the process of electoral primary and nominations went through another form of challenge; explicitly, the absence of thoroughness in the process. For instance, the ruling People's Democratic Party cleared all but one of its incumbent governors and affirmed them eligible to contest the elections. Other political parties that had incumbent office holders followed suit. Adeyemo (2003) notes that although the political parties are empowered by the Electoral Act 2002 to screen their candidates, the Act requires the parties to verify the claims of their candidates before submitting them to the Electoral Commission. He observes that during the screening process of these candidates by the Independent Electoral

Commission, there were widespread cases of inappropriate documentation and deposition of affidavits at courts other than those approved by the Electoral Act. Despite all these, the candidates scaled the screening processes and were accredited to contest the elections.

The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) (2003), a coalition of 170 human rights and civil society organisations, noted that the electoral process was undermined by the conduct of the primaries of many of the political parties since "godfathers" foisted their preferred candidates on the parties through undemocratic processes. Furthermore, the President and all Governors of the 36 states schemed to get second terms, and used their incumbency to intimidate any opposition; though, deploying state resources to win.

In the case of the 2000 election in Ghana, Nugent (2001) argues that the ruling NDC failed to capitalize on the advantages of incumbency, and attributed this to the failure of the party to permit primaries for the parliamentary nominations. According to him, the net result was that the NDC fielded a presidential candidate who did not enjoy the support of party headquarters, which was, itself, alienated from many grass-roots supporters. This is an indication of ineffectiveness, on the part of the NDC, in the performance of her role as a political party.

Campaigns: The Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (2000) monitored the campaigns for the elections in Ghana and reported a buse of administrative resources by incumbents during electoral campaigns. This abuse of incumbency in the campaigns came about in three ways:

- administrative resource abuse (use of institutional resources, both human and financial, for campaign, as opposed to governance purposes);
- budgetary allocation abuse (hidden allocations of public funds for projects not budgeted for); and
- state media resource abuse (biased information and advertising for the purpose of influencing the electorate to support one candidate over another).

The above contrasted much with the amount of resources provided contestants of opposition parties. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation's report on the Ghana 2004 elections revealed that the Government only provided vehicles to all the presidential candidates to support their campaign (Guri, 2004).

Generally, opposition parties did not get a fair deal in the elections, as a result of the fact that the ruling party as a contestant was not clearly separated from the Government of the day. This asymmetrical playing field meant that campaign issues were generally not substantive, as the ruling party employed state power in the competition and the campaigns became a matter

of use of power. The opposition was thus left in the lurch and campaign messages contained a large dose of complaints against the ruling party and its candidates.

Polling, Counting of Votes and Declaration of Results: Deegan (2003) observes that the 1999 elections in Nigeria were fraught with hitches. There were blatant vote rigging, fraud and violence. In the 2003 elections in Nigeria, many prospective voters across the country could not find their names on the voters' register on the polling day and were not allowed to vote. It was also observed that fraud, corrupt practices such as vote buying and electoral bribery, and violence at elections were generally not treated as crimes and so were not given appropriate sanctions. The INEC chairman informed the 2005 Nigerian National Political Conference that the Commission could only bring the registered political parties to agree on a Code of Conduct that addresses these vices, and that abiding by the code requires only moral persuasion of the parties and their members. Vote buying was, thus, rampant in the elections; party leaders and election contestants provided voters drinks, food, entertainment and small amounts of money in exchange for their electoral support. Consequently, party supporters participated in the electoral process not because of party loyalty or personal conviction, but only in exchange for money. Evidently, there is the powerlessness of the electoral commission as an institution in checking or bringing perpetrators of these acts to book.

In addition, TMG (2003) notes in its report that the electoral process was undermined by the shoddy conduct of the voter registration exercise which resulted in many prospective voters being disenfranchised. Equally, the PDP used its incumbency to ensure that the elections' sequence were organised in such a way as to achieve a bandwagon effect. Despite protests from the opposition, the electoral commission acquiesced to the position of the government that the presidential and governorship elections be held on the same time.

In the 2000 General Elections in Ghana, turnout figures for both the first (7th December) and second (28th December) rounds of the presidential elections were considerably lower than for the 1996 General Election (Smith, 2002). Voter turnout for the first round of the 2000 elections in Ghana was 59.2%, as against 77% turnout in the previous election in 1996 (Amoah, 2003:152). There were also reported cases of irregularities. For instance, agents of the opposition NPP refused to append their names to the tally sheets after the first-round voting in the Volta Region, known to be a stronghold of the ruling NDC. Election observers of the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) reported that of the 473 monitored polling stations in the Volta Region, nearly 6% had some kind of irregularity (Smith, 2002: 635). Furthermore, election observers reported that in one of the strongholds

of the ruling NDC, individuals were allowed to vote without any form of identification (Smith, 2002: 636).

In terms of the conduct of the elections, the 2004 elections in Ghana were generally regarded as a peaceful exercise even though pockets of violence were reported on the radio. Police presence was minimal while the ballot boxes used were transparent plastics improvised for the exercise. There was no restriction of movement for either persons or vehicles. Although the elections were declared free and fair by Ghanaians as well as the international community, it recorded a very high level of rejected votes. This was attributable to the low knowledge by the electorate on the casting of votes; hence, the Ghanaian Electoral Commission and National Commission on Civic Education have more work to do in terms of voter education.

In contrast with the situation in Ghana where there were no reported incidents connected with the counting of votes and declaration of results, the case of the Nigerian 2003 election was different. The EU Election Observation Mission (2003) reports that:

... the manner and timing of the publication of the results and announcement of postponed or suspended elections added concerns about the credibility of the whole process. In many instances, the announcement of electoral results remained incomplete and insufficiently detailed. In particular, the publication of official results did not include the number of registered voters. In certain States where results were made available, substantial discrepancies were recorded between votes cast for the Presidential and for the Gubernatorial elections... Observers witnessed and obtained evidence of widespread ballot stuffing in... Benue, Cross River, Delta, Enugu, Imo, Kaduna, Katsina, and Rivers. INEC staff was observed thumb-printing ballots in favour of the ruling part....

PERFORMANCE OF ELECTORAL INSTITUTIONS

Mozaffar (2002) explains the patterns of electoral governance in Africa's emerging democracies through a systematic examination of election management bodies (EMBs), the formal units principally responsible for the organisation and conduct of elections. According to him, the effectiveness of EMBs as institutional linchpins of electoral governance depends largely on their autonomy from the government. Otherwise, argues Adejumbi (2000), both the structure and process of elections, the former being the organizational infrastructure for managing elections, and the latter, the precepts and procedures of elections, will remain largely perverted. Therefore, he attributes the problems of African elections to the failure of institutional structures involved in the electoral process. These institutional

structures impacting on the electoral process and politics we now address by analysing the performances of the political parties, the media, the electoral commissions, and the judiciary in Ghana and Nigeria.

Performance of Political Parties: Common to both Nigeria and Ghana was the participation of multiple political parties in elections. However, only two or three actually had any significant support among the electorates. For Nigeria, Deegan (2003) contends that the problems associated with the 1999 elections were attributable to the absence of transitional structures, as Nigeria only lurched into elections barely 11 months after the death of General Abacha. This partly explains the weakness of the Nigerian political parties. The Nigerian INEC Chairman admits that the three oldest political parties have merely taken part in two general elections, while others came into being in 2002, less than five months to the April 2003 General Elections (Guobadia, 2005).

In addition, there were inadequacies in the election primaries and candidates' nominations in both countries. Nigeria's in 1999 stemmed from the inability of the political parties to conduct a thorough screening process and to recognise quality candidates. The parties acted dubiously in the conduct of their primaries at the various conventions. The conventions were characterised by confusion and disinformation orchestrated by some elements in the parties as a strategy of preventing some of the delegates from voting during the conventions. There were also widespread bribery and intimidation of delegates, aided as in the case of the ruling PDP in 2003, by the use of serially numbered ballot papers, which undermined the secrecy of the ballot. The Transition Monitoring Group (2003) reports that the parties, especially the PDP, did not respect the democratic principle of equal opportunities and a level playing field for all the aspirants at their conventions. The PDP, for instance, allowed automatic delegates, namely, ministers, ambassadors, presidential aides and other appointees of the President, in a process carefully designed to unduly tilt the contest in favour of President Obasanjo.

In the case of Ghana, although it turned out to be a positive development for the whole transition exercise, the eventual loss of the election by the ruling NDC resulted from the quality of its presidential candidate and the manner in which the primary was conducted. For instance, as an institution, the ruling NDC at the time of the 2000 election, made mistakes in its conduct of the primaries and candidates' nominations. Those mistakes resulted in the presentation by the party of an unpopular presidential candidate. This issue, coupled with the ineligibility of Jerry Rawlings, vitiated the factor of incumbency as an advantage for the ruling party (Nugent, 2001).

In the election campaigns in the countries under study, it is also observed that emotions rather than substantive issues dominated political debates. The factor of incumbency indeed exacerbated this phenomenon as

empowers the President to appoint the Chairman and all the National Commissioners. Certainly, this does not augur well for independence. Deegan (2003) reveals that on the eve of the 2003 elections, all the Commissioners in INEC were members of the ruling PDP of President Obasanjo. Similarly, Guobadia (2005), observe that the *ad hoc* staff of the Commission who are deployed during elections (Returning Officers, Presiding Officers, and Poll Clerks) are resourced from the civil service and are sometimes suspected of working in favour of incumbent government candidates. In 2003, electoral monitors in Nigeria reported cases of officials conniving with partisans to hijack ballot boxes and voting materials to places where they were stuffed with already printed ballots (TMG, 2003).

In both countries, the commissions were reported to be underfunded, with Ghana, for instance, depending much on overseas aid. The effect was that there were, for example, inadequate logistic resources for taking election materials to voting centres on Election Day.

Furthermore, although 82% of an expert panel saw the Ghanaian electoral commission as largely transparent, its performance at the 2000 election was, to some extent, criticised. Then, turnout figures for both the first and second rounds of the presidential elections were considerably lower than that of the 1996 general elections, when 77.1% of the registered voters cast valid ballots. This lower than anticipated turnout was attributed to the Electoral Commission's bloated voter register having ghost names. The number of the registered voters appeared unrealistic, especially when compared to the country's population. Ghana's official population is 18.5 million. The electoral commission registered 10.7 million voters, a figure exceeding 100% of citizens of voting age. Thus, cases of under aged voters abounded (Smith, 2002: 623).

On the other hand, the 2003 voter registration process in Nigeria was characterised by:

- printing of excess number of voter's cards, piles of which found their ways to particular candidates who distributed them among their supporters (70 million cards printed for a registered voter population of 60 million);
- corrupt election officials hoarded registration cards and sold them at time of scarcity;
- numerous cases of double, multiple, and underage registration;
- the number of registered voters at many polling stations was not known, making it impossible to calculate voter turnout; and
- the registration period ended with millions of voters not being able to register (TMG, 2003).

Consequently, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) (2003) concluded that the performance of the Electoral Commission with respect to the registration of voters was characterised by inefficiency, confusion and corruption. In addition, the European Union Election Observation Mission

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that there were obvious inadequacies in the performance of the statutory roles assigned institutions involved in the conduct of elections in Nigeria and Ghana. Inadequacies were visible in the conduct of the media, the security agencies, the political parties and the electoral commissions. The electoral commission in Ghana, however, performed better than its Nigerian counterpart. In addition, the judiciary in Ghana was not significantly involved in the elections, as was the case in Nigeria with many electoral petitions.

Thus, the problems that characterised the electoral processes in Nigeria and Ghana resulted from the poor performance of the institutions associated with elections in both countries. They are required by law to maintain impartiality and to act efficiently. Our findings show that, in most cases, none of these performance-requirements was fulfilled, except perhaps Ghana's electoral commission, which was generally adjudged satisfactory.

However, the deployment of state resources by the incumbent political actors for the prosecution of election campaigns was palpable. The lack of emphasis on substantive issues in the campaigns was also observed. In general, however, the negative features of elections were recorded more in Nigeria than in Ghana. In Nigeria, the institutions mostly failed to deliver on their responsibilities, and acted against their statutory responsibilities. They readily became instruments of the ruling political party and the incumbent political actors, in the contest for political power during the elections. As a result, justice was denied to opposition parties and candidates, leading to considerable disputes and litigations over the outcome of the elections.

In Ghana, some independent factors helped to mitigate the inadequacies of some institutions, leading to a more favourable outcome of the electoral process. For instance, the relative poor performance of the Ghanaian electoral commission in the area of voter registration (bloated voter register) during the 2000 election did not create problems because the political parties in Ghana did not exploit this, and so, the turnout reflected more the actual number of real voters (Smith, 2002: 645).

Finally, the problems observed in the elections in Nigeria and Ghana relate to the failure of the institutions involved in the conduct of elections in both countries to perform their roles as required. Their ineffectiveness emanate mostly from their lack of independence from the powers of the party in government. Consequently, institutional capacity-building to engender reasonable autonomy for these bodies is fundamental for the enthronement of democracy in Nigeria and Ghana.

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