

# **Elections and Democracy in Africa: Restoring Nigerian Leadership\***

by

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Niall Ferguson, the Harvard University historian, identified three thresholds that countries seeking to establish consolidated democracies must cross: the non-violent resolution of political competition, the acceptance of alternation in power, and the supremacy of the rule of law. In assessing Nigeria's performance during its half-century of independent government, it is evident that progress has been made in establishing the supremacy of the rule of law. Despite shortcomings, Nigeria has one of the better judicial systems and legal professions in Africa. While the protection of rights and liberties is never certain, their abuse can be vigorously contested and redress often achieved.

It remains, however, for Nigeria to cross the other two thresholds: the non-violent resolution of political competition and the acceptance of the alternation in power. Alternation in power is understood here to mean the transfer of authority from a governing party to the opposition. On September 9, 2010, the American Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) posted an online article by former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, entitled "Nigeria on the Brink: What Happens if the 2011 Elections Fail?" Ambassador Campbell warned of the possibility of "postelection sectarian violence" and used words of alarm such as "bloody crisis" and "cataclysm". Nigeria's Foreign Minister, the Honorable Odein Ajumogobia, issued a rebuke of what he called a "doomsday analysis of Nigeria's 2011 elections and their aftermath." Ambassador Campbell's article was followed on September 21 by the posting of a longer report authored by him entitled "Electoral Violence in Nigeria". It presented ideas and arguments from a meeting organized by the CFR's Center for Preventive Action.

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I have no wish to exacerbate this controversy. My aim on this occasion, associated with Nigeria's golden jubilee, is to reflect on one of the major challenges this nation has confronted throughout its independent history, namely, organizing elections that are free, fair and credible. Conducting elections in a competitive party system is a difficult undertaking in a country of the size and complexity of Nigeria. Other large nations have successfully crossed these thresholds and enjoy political stability and sustained economic growth. They include Brazil, India and Indonesia. It is to this group of nations that Nigeria belongs as reflected in the repeated participation of its people in the formation of political parties and through voting in elections at all levels of the federation. Moreover, Nigerians have stoutly resisted attempts to shift the nation, overtly or covertly, away from an open, pluralist and federal political system.

During the first Chinua Achebe Colloquium on Africa convened at Brown University in October 2009, Ambassador Campbell called attention to the decline in the quality of Nigerian elections since the prolonged period of military rule ended in 1999. He suggested that if this downward trend was halted in the elections of 2011, Nigeria could begin the process of steadily improving the quality and credibility of its elections with each subsequent electoral cycle. I share this vision and aspiration. I am sure that most of you do as well. Professor Attahiru Jega, the new Chairman of Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is a longtime friend and colleague. He obtained his doctorate in political science from my university, Northwestern, in Illinois, USA. Professor Jega and I have participated with many of our colleagues, here and abroad, in consultations and collaborative research on the construction of a stable democratic political system in Nigeria. I applauded his appointment to this critical post by President Goodluck Jonathan. Once again, the challenge is squarely brought before the Nigerian nation to find ways of crossing the frontier to nonviolent political competition and the alternation of power in accordance with the federal constitution.

I will take a moment to say why Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary has a special significance for me. I have been closely involved with Nigerian affairs since arriving to take up a lectureship in political science at the University of Ibadan in February 1976. Just weeks before my arrival, a hopeful moment for Nigeria seemed to have been halted by the assassination of the Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed. However, under the leadership of his deputy, General Olusegun Obasanjo, the Supreme Military Council and the

Federal Executive Council, Nigeria regained its composure and a remarkable period of political and civic reform ensued. The connection for me goes further back. I was born in Trinidad and Tobago and my first political experience in the mid-1950s was the campaign for independence of the People's National Movement (PNM) led by the brilliant historian, Dr. Eric Williams. My first active political engagement began in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. At its core was the struggle for the rights of African-Americans to full citizenship and especially the right to vote. My doctoral dissertation a decade later at Oxford University was on the struggle for independence in Nigeria's eastern neighbor, Cameroon, led by the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) and its intrepid leader, Ruben Um Nyobé. I therefore bring to the subject of elections and democracy, and the restoration of Nigerian leadership, a long and often passionate engagement in defending the rights, liberties and aspirations of African peoples.

I will now review the core agenda for achieving electoral progress in Nigeria. Despite the many challenges to be overcome, a consensus can emerge around key goals. The first of these is the conduct of elections in 2011 that are *substantially* free, fair and credible. They will not be perfect elections. Such a goal is not attainable in view of Nigeria's great size, the shortness of time before the elections, and the hurdles to be overcome in registering voters, installing the new data machines, training electoral officials, administering the vote, and tabulating the results. The drive to win political office is very intense in Nigeria, and the aim of many contestants is, unfortunately, victory at any cost. This time around, however, "victory at any cost" will incur too high a price for Nigeria and Nigerians. As we know from the attempted terrorist act in an airplane on Christmas Day as it approached the Detroit airport, and the bombing incidents that killed and maimed many on the streets of Abuja on October 1<sup>st</sup>, political and economic progress in Nigeria has implications for the security of us all.

There are critical moments when Nigerian leaders recognized that the country was at a critical junction and a concern for its survival transcended all divisions. When I say leaders I am thinking of not just politicians but also the heads of religious bodies, civic, professional institutions and business enterprises, and the top officers of the military and other security forces. I was able to witness one of these moments during the Sharia dispute that led to a walk-out and temporary halt in the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly in 1978. The second I observed from a distance, namely, the

prolonged illness of former President Umaru Yar'Adua and the delayed transfer of authority to his vice president, Goodluck Jonathan. In both instances, the country's national leaders hewed a path through the political thicket and made it possible for the nation's institutions to resume normal operations and avoid a major conflagration.

Many of you are familiar with my book, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. The Nigerian edition, published by Spectrum Books in 1991, has a picture on the front cover that shows the Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, standing with the five major presidential candidates - Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Alhaji Shehu Shagari, Alhaji Waziri Ibrahim, and Mallam Aminu Kano - following a meeting in Dodan Barracks in 1979. That picture conveyed a powerful message that the presidential aspirants were entrusted with ensuring the continuation of Nigeria as one political entity and the building of a democratic polity despite their valiant efforts to prevail in the forthcoming elections.

As Professor Jega and his team of INEC officials endeavor to conduct substantially free, fair and credible elections six months or so from today, and as the parties and contestants conduct vigorous campaigns for government office, there must arise in Nigeria a broad movement committed to building a bridge that will get Nigeria safely across the turbulent river of political contestation. A pan-Nigerian Movement for Fair and Credible Elections must emerge that transcends all political persuasions and sectional divisions. Such a movement would carry to a higher level the vital work done by the Transition Monitoring Group, the Alliance for Credible Elections, and other civil society organizations. And the electoral contestants themselves must have a dual commitment: to try and win as fairly as possible, and also to help the Electoral Commission and all ancillary organizations succeed in their historic task. For Nigeria, this idea might seem visionary and even utopian. All great nations, however, are ultimately inspired by such visions and especially when confronted with moments of great challenge, such as Nigeria and the United States in the civil wars that rend their nations apart and ended the lives of millions of their citizens.

I have just read an op ed article in the *Financial Times* about India in which the author, Kevan Watts, has written: "You cannot deny India its successful development of a political process that gives ordinary Indians a real voice in so many ways. India's democracy is an extraordinary achievement for a vast

populous country with considerable ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.” The first generation of Nigerian political leaders and activists would have imagined that, by now, similar comments would be made of their country. Nigeria was once viewed as a leader in the construction of democracies in Africa. Can it become such a leader again? Ghana, Botswana and South Africa are usually cited as models of democracy in contemporary Africa. Ghana is not only geographically closest to Nigeria but it has also followed a course most relevant to Nigeria. Can Nigeria repeat Ghana’s achievement over the past two decades in improving the quality of its elections and strengthening its democracy?

Let us briefly review the political and electoral experiences of these two countries. After assuming power in June 1979, Flt. Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council oversaw elections and the transfer of power on September 24, 1979 to an elected civilian government led by Hilla Limann. Just a week later in Nigeria, General Obasanjo’s Supreme Military Council transferred power to an elected government led by Alhaji Shagari. Rawlings and his fellow officers overthrew the Limann government exactly two years before the Shagari government fell to military putschists in December 1983. But Ghana broke decisively with these tendencies that political scientists call praetorianism, that is, of the military moving in and out of power. This decisive break in Ghana has now been consummated over the course of five electoral cycles beginning in December 1992.

Ghana’s 1992 presidential elections were not perfect. Indeed, they had many irregularities. I speak reliably on this subject because I directed the Carter Center’s electoral mission for those elections. The main opposition party, the New Patriotic Party, hotly disputed the results of the presidential election, and boycotted the subsequent parliamentary vote. However, thanks to the formidable work of the Electoral Commission of Ghana, under the leadership of Professor Kwadwo Afari Gyan, and the determined efforts of pro-democracy organizations and the assistance of all the political parties, Ghana has experienced the steadily increasing quality and credibility of its elections. Ghana has also undergone alternations in power on two occasions from the governing party to the opposition, in 2000 and 2008, which political scientists consider the benchmark of a consolidated electoral democracy. Few African countries have crossed this threshold once, not even Botswana, a country often cited as one of Africa’s foremost democracies.

Although they were matched as praetorian states three decades ago, Ghana has now gained a two-decade head-start on Nigeria. And it has reaped the benefits including a visit by President Barack Obama in July 2009, his first return to the continent of his father's birth since his election in November 2008. We can expect to read daily reports of problems and disputes connected to the forthcoming elections in Nigeria. What must be called forth is a broad and earnest commitment to the conduct of substantially free, fair and credible elections. And then for this process to continue to bring about significantly improved elections in each subsequent cycle: 2015, 2019, and 2023. The river of political contestation in Nigeria will grow ever more turbulent in the months leading to the inauguration of federal and state governments in May 2011. A bridge must be built to get Nigerians safely across. Nigerian citizens should not be at the mercy of the unrestrained political jostling, and sometimes mudslinging, of the various parties and their spokespersons. What I say here applies also to my own country, the United States, which is currently in the midst of electoral combat not always of an uplifting nature.

The 240 days between October 1st and May 29, 2011 is like a bank account that Nigerian political gladiators can draw down to zero. Or the Nigerian citizenry can invest in it more than is taken out so that a large balance of legitimate political authority is conferred on the President and Head of State during the inauguration ceremonies on May 29, 2011. I came to Nigeria to witness the 1999 inaugural events that were so full of hope after 16 long years that included four military regimes and one short-lived military-civilian interim government. After a period of profound political uncertainty, which was captured in my co-edited article with Alexandra Gillies, "Nigeria's Season of Uncertainty" – a title for which we borrowed Guardian Editor, Reuben Abati's, wonderful phrase - the doors are again open to a future that no one can confidently predict in Nigeria.

All Nigerians – in government, business, the media, universities, religious organizations, civic groups, NGOs, trade unions, women's and youth's organizations – should commit themselves to this deeper transition process as took place in other neighboring countries, such as the Benin Republic during its sovereign national conference in February 1990. That historic event laid the basis for a constitutional democracy that has persisted through all subsequent electoral cycles. It is not likely that Nigeria will conduct such a conference despite the repeated demands of some of its citizens. However,

like Benin and other countries such as Mali and Ghana that succeeded in transiting to a genuine constitutional democracy, Nigerians can use the 240 days from its 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee on October 1, 2010 and the inauguration of its president on May 29, 2011, to seek to entrust authority to a government brought to power, as has not occurred in the living memory of most of us, on the basis of a substantially free, fair and credible election. I call this proposed broad-based effort, comparable to the struggle to achieve independence in the 1950s, and to overcome dictatorial rule in the 1990s, Nigeria Project 240. Just as there are 24 hours in each day, so also Nigerians have 240 days to build an electoral bridge that includes two spans: an official one represented by INEC and ancillary state operations, and a civic one represented by a pan-Nigerian Movement for free, fair and credible elections in 2011.

Enormous sums have been expended to try and create a viable electoral system in Nigeria. Many energies have been invested by devoted citizens in various electoral commissions only to see the results of their labors crumble. Democratic ideals in Nigeria belong to no particular subgroup of the population. As the only true federation in Africa, Nigeria has a major role to play among democratic nation-states in Africa but also in the global arena. Nigeria is the only major nation in the world in which Islam and Christianity have a roughly equal number of adherents. It therefore has much to contribute to bridging this growing divide in international affairs. Nigerian Muslim leaders are as strongly committed to constitutional democracy as their non-Muslim compatriots, and the same could be said of prominent members of the country's ethnic and sub-regional groups. So there is no fundamental dispute in Nigeria over the desirability of a stable and consolidated electoral democracy. But something has to be given up to acquire it, and that something is the pursuit of electoral victory at any cost. "Do or Die" are words that should never be uttered regarding the conduct of elections in any nation seeking to strengthen its democracy.

I will conclude by briefly discussing four major considerations that pertain to the journey to a fully consolidated electoral democracy.

### ***1. The Imperative of Enlightened Leadership***

As Nigeria, Brazil experienced many years of military rule, some of it very authoritarian and repressive. That tradition was decisively broken in Brazil in the late 1980s and the country has since enjoyed successive peaceful

elections and power transfers. The most recent of its presidential elections took place two days ago. Although I am writing this lecture before that event, there is no need to speculate about the observance of Niall Ferguson's criteria – the rule of law, non-violence, and the alternation of power. The governing party is expected to win the presidential election. No one expects that the election will not be peacefully conducted, that the rule of law will be observed before, during and following the vote. In the event that the opposition wins [we now know it did not], power and authority would have been smoothly transferred to the victors as occurred when Lula da Silva and his party first came to power in 2002.

A recent article in the *Financial Times* on September 27 compared the achievements of Brazil's outgoing president, Lula da Silva, with South Africa's Nelson Mandela. Gideon Rachman writes that, in both leaders, "a moving personal story has merged with a compelling national story, turning a single man into a potent symbol of a whole country's transformation." Although "Brazil grew richer and more powerful during his presidency", Rachman continues, "like Mr. Mandela, Lula resisted the temptation to cling to power. He has not tried to rewrite the rules to get a third term in office."

These comments resonated powerfully with me and I am sure they will with you as well. Across Africa, we have seen the opposite phenomenon of leaders of new electoral democracies rewriting constitutional provisions that limit the number of consecutive terms of office. In his keynote speech during a conference on election reform at the Shehu Yar'Adua Centre in 2005, I heard former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, Princeton Lyman, plead with then President Olusegun Obasanjo, to emulate Nelson Mandela and endow Nigeria with an efficient electoral system. According to Ambassador Lyman, such an action would rank as one of Obasanjo's greatest achievements. Well, you know what subsequently transpired with the failed attempt to amend Nigeria's constitution to make possible a third presidential (and gubernatorial) term, and the awful elections that ensued in 2007. Each of these episodes has set Nigeria further back on its political calendar.

The mantle of foundational leadership, which South Africa will forever celebrate in Nelson Mandela and the United States in George Washington, waits to be assumed in Nigeria. All executive office holders in Nigeria take a pledge that they will faithfully uphold the constitution and the office of president or governor. Nigerians need to find a way to extract more binding pledges to strengthen the key institutions of their democracy including the

conduct of free and fair elections. How such a commitment can be accomplished could be taken up in public meetings across the breadth of this land. Such consultations can involve political aspirants, electoral officials, and a wide range of pro-democracy forces. In a poignant moment during the Achebe Colloquium last year, after his organization had been pummeled by the audience for its alleged misadministration, an INEC official bluntly stated: “The problem, as you all know, is not just with INEC but the corrupt behavior of Nigerian politicians.” No one in the audience demurred.

The transformation that has taken place in Brazil and South Africa from authoritarian systems to electoral democracies required leadership of a high order. I know that such leaders exist among the political class in Nigeria. They must be encouraged to be resolute in seeking to win office fairly and credibly and then to devote substantial attention to entrenching the democratic system itself. President Goodluck Jonathan has made such a pledge. Others should follow and also articulate the specific actions that would follow their noble words.

## ***II. Claiming Democracy: Rights and Responsibilities of all Nigerians***

My colleagues, Michael Bratton and Carolyn Logan, in their chapter in my 2009 book co-edited with Alexandra Gillies, *Smart Aid for African Development*, advanced an apt expression, “claiming democracy”. The Afrobarometer program, in which they are involved, have demonstrated how the demand for democracy in Africa exceeds the supply. In other words, the aspirations of the African people, as shown in survey after survey including in Nigeria, have not been matched by what politicians actually do once they are elected. Democracy is therefore compressed into a voting act performed every four or five years. In view of the declining quality of elections, even these acts can be drained of meaning. The outcomes are often sham or pseudo-democracies. At best, they are what political scientists call “delegative democracies” in which, once elections are over, office-holders do pretty much as they choose with little input or influence from the electorate.

Nigerians can embrace the notion of “claiming democracy” in all its dimensions. Claiming democracy would involve the insistence on honest and efficient elections. It would include what in Nigeria is called “mandate protection”, namely, insisting that the official voting results actually reflect the preferences expressed by voters at the polls. Several organizations have

emerged to make use of modern cell-phone and other technologies to transmit promptly voting decisions in farflung communities, thereby narrowing the time and space for manipulation and fraud. Nigerians, who are so adept in the use of these technologies, can be expected to contribute significantly to their innovative use.

Claiming democracy enthrones representation and accountability as the central features of a democratic system. If offices are filled through processes of intimidation and fraud, the vital link between citizens and representatives is severed. Chief R.A. Fani Kayode, the acerbic Nigerian politician in the 1960s, is reported to have once said of a forthcoming election: “Whether or not you vote for us, we will remain in power.” The collapse of civilian governments in Nigeria over the past five decades can be traced to such cynical attitudes. Putting Nigeria right in so many ways depends on making sure that rules and procedures truly count. And there is no rule or procedure in a democracy more fundamental than the equal value of each individual’s vote. That is the bedrock of citizenship in a democratic system.

### ***III. June 1993: Never Again***

To avoid repeating the past you have to know the past. Following the ending of the Cold War, pro-democracy movements swept through the former soviet states of Eastern Europe. They also swept aside single party and other authoritarian regimes in Africa. In 1993, Nigeria should already have completed four electoral cycles after the 1979 elections and be well on its way to becoming a consolidated democracy. On June 12, 1993, a substantially free and fair election did take place. What is more, the election results –never officially announced – demonstrated that there was broad national support for the party led by presidential candidate, Moshood Abiola. Then the election was annulled and the country collapsed into five years of dictatorial rule. Olatunji Dare has recently published a book that further documents this tragic episode: *Diary of a Debacle: Tracking Nigeria’s Failed Democratic Transition (1989-1994)*.

Had the 1993 elections not been annulled, and had Nigeria found a way to overcome its difficulties within the framework of the constitution rather than outside it, we might today be talking, not about Restoring Nigerian Leadership, but celebrating its democratic achievements. In all countries that make a decisive break from praetorianism, as is apparently now taking place

in Turkey, the very idea that a properly conducted election would be quashed, no matter who the victorious candidates and parties are, would be unthinkable. What happened in June 1993, therefore, must be consciously addressed by Nigerians. We cannot run from the tragedy of June 12 and its sequels, or sweep them under the carpet. Nigeria and its people have paid too great a price for those derailments of democracy.

In 2011 Nigerians will have the opportunity to avoid repeating 1999, 2003 and 2007, all increasingly flawed elections. In view of the commitments made by President Goodluck Jonathan, and under the leadership of INEC by Professor Jega, and with the vigilant actions of civic and professional groups, the 2011 elections can be an occasion to repeat the achievement of 1993 with regard to the performance of the electoral system. If that happens, and the decisions of the electorate in federal and state contests are honored, then the nation can start putting June 12 1993 and its unfortunate sequels squarely behind it, and begin building for the future.

#### ***IV. The Road to a Developmental Democracy***

My friend and colleague, Dele Olojede, Chairman of 234NEXT, shared an important insight with me a year ago. According to Olojede, better governance in Nigeria depended on better elections. If elected officials do not really owe their positions to the electorate, they are unlikely to regard public service as the main reason for holding office. Improving Nigeria's deplorable electoral system was therefore critically linked to tackling the many problems caused by decades of misgovernance. Olojede's argument was straightforward and compelling. We are all aware of how the natural wealth of Nigeria has not been used to better the lives of its people, and how much the nation's progress has been blocked by the failure to make progress in providing services that are taken for granted in many countries, such as the provision of a stable and adequate supply of electric power.

We have seen how government leaders such as Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola SAN of Lagos State has radically transformed awareness of what can be done to improve the lives of Nigerians and build the physical infrastructures required for accelerated growth. If office-holders do not believe they will be held accountable by the electorate for how they perform, then all the self-serving prebendalist practices I discussed in my book on the making of Nigeria's second republic will be manifested.

There is a sense that real progress will now be made in the handling of Nigeria's finances as evidenced by the leadership demonstrated by Mr. Lamido Sanusi, Governor of the Central Bank. Genuinely enterprising corporate leaders have emerged in many sectors, and a young generation of Nigerians is rearing to invest their talents and energies as occurred in many of today's rising economies. In addition to becoming an electoral democracy, Nigeria therefore has the prospect of becoming a *developmental* democracy. I was intrigued to read Yusuf Maitama Sule's recollections in the *Financial Times* special supplement of September 30 entitled *Nigeria@50*. Mr. Maitama Sule described how, as a minister in the first post-independence government, he read a report that identified three countries that were likely to join the industrialized nations of the world: India, Brazil and Nigeria. Goldman Sachs, the major international banking firm, has identified Nigeria as one of the Next 11, that is, countries likely to join the rising powers of Brazil, Russia, India and China. Over a decade ago, the *Economist* magazine reported that if Nigeria had used the vast earnings from the export of petroleum wisely, it would now be an economic colossus. How long will we keep hearing what Nigeria could have been and what its prospects are? When will we begin celebrating how much it has met and even exceeded expectations?

Nigeria will not get its economics right until it gets its politics right. Its political system must be democratic, and federal, for reasons of its own history and its diverse composition. In the foreword I wrote for Olatunji Dare's *Diary of a Debacle*, I quoted a statement Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka made at a conference convened at my university in November 2006: "The Nigerian people have always approached democracy and the elites have always pushed them back." Nigerian citizens will approach those gates again in a few months time. At home and abroad, Nigerians often declare how much they desire governments that will truly lead the way in building their nation, reduce its appalling levels of poverty, and nurture a productive economy. The road to such a future passes through the gates of the 2011 elections. If those elections are substantially free, fair and credible, Nigeria can experience a new birth of freedom.

To conclude: The dignity, integrity, and high purpose of national elections in Nigeria must be restored. They have been brought low in many places with ballot boxes stuffed with ballot-papers already thumb-printed, or snatched at gunpoint; election monitors and journalists chased away and sometimes beaten; and voting results announced for polling stations where no voting

had taken place. Such actions are never uniform across the nation and so, even when the elections are as terrible as they were in 2007, there are also localities in which peaceful and efficient balloting took place.

I conclude by echoing words from the Second Inaugural Address of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln: Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray that Nigerians will be empowered to use the rights and privileges conferred by universal suffrage to choose the finest and most honorable men and women to represent their wishes, their dreams, their interests, and their future while in office, and to hold them accountable to those solemn commitments.

We know the way forward for Nigeria. We know the roads to be taken and the ones to avoid. The question is not what must be done in 2011, but will it be done.

Thank you.