TRANSFORMING ELECTIONS IN WEST AFRICA INTO OPPORTUNITIES FOR POLITICAL CHOICE

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Introduction

Africa has been undergoing an intense period of political conflict and transformation over the past two decades. Central to this process of political recomposition are the struggles aimed at combating and reversing the continent’s authoritarian past and the construction of a democratic future. The ongoing struggles are intense and there are continuous gains and reverses. This paper outlines some of these changes, in particular, the struggle of the people to exercise political choice in a context in which most countries in the region lay claim to democracy, but have evolved sophisticated modes of negating foundational principles and practices of democracy. Our focus is on West Africa. What is the state of democratic transition in the region? Have the struggles for entrenching political pluralism, civil and political rights and effective popular participation in the political process made significant and durable progress?

Democratic Transition

The notion of democratic transition implies a passage from a non-democratic to a democratic situation. It is in essence a question that can only be posed in the long term because the establishment of a democratic system, however defined, would constitute a veritable transition only if it became a fairly permanent feature of political life. Diouf (1998) has outlined various arguments on the African debate relating to the question of whether the current situation on the continent should be considered minimally – as mere political liberalisation, or maximally – as genuine democratic transition. I believe that political liberalisation is part of the process of democratization but the process itself can undergo reverses. The essential attributes of democratic transition would include the following. At the formal level, the establishment of constitutional rule and the operation of a multi-party political system. It would also include a more profound socio-political transformation that allows freely elected rulers and the majority of the civil population to impose their supremacy over ruling oligarchies of the military or civilian ethno-regional cabals. This implies the development of a democratic political culture in which large sections of society internalise democratic values. Citizenship participation must therefore be effective and it should result in genuine choice.

The most immediate challenge confronting the process of democratic transition presently taking place in Africa is that of ensuring that democratisation is accompanied by the institutionalisation of constitutional rule. Constitutions, it is generally acknowledged, do not in themselves make democracy. Indeed, many so-called democracies, especially in Africa, are not based on constitutional rule. Most African constitutions are excellent documents; they have most of the right provisions about the rule of law, human, civil and political rights, elective institutions, governmental accountability, and separation of powers etc. The problem however is that these provisions are not followed. The political systems are characterised by excessive arbitrariness and abuse of power, the lack of basic freedoms and denial of popular sovereignty.

The year 1990 was an important threshold in Africa’s democratic transition. Between 1990 and 1994, thirty-one of the forty-one countries that had not held multi-party elections did so (Diouf, 1998:5). The transition has however not been smooth. In many countries, elections were not free and fair. Tensions increased after some of the elections due to widespread sentiments of injustice. As Fischer reminds us:

An electoral system is an alternative to violence as a means of achieving governance. However, when an electoral process is perceived as unfair, unresponsive or corrupt, its political legitimacy is compromised and stakeholders are motivated to go outside the established norm to achieve their political objectives. Electoral conflict and violence become tactics in political competition. (Fischer, 2004:6)

In countries such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, Togo, Kenya, Gabon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Niger, the Gambia, Cameroon, Liberia, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone, some elections have been so compromised that they have created the basis for major national political crises. Only Botswana, Mauritius and Senegal have been able to sustain the independence democratic regime that took over power. The result of these setbacks to the spread of democracy in Africa is that a significant proportion of the African people have not yet had the opportunity to experience democracy. The bulk of the participants in the democratic experiments of the early 1960s, both the leaders and the followers, have faded away. The current generation of Africans is yet to engage fully with stable democratic politics. Indeed, the encounter of the current generation of Africans with politics is tainted with bitter images and memories of repression and of authoritarianism. This is the political culture that Africans have had lived experi-
ences with. This is the political culture that needs to change.

Leadership and the Acceptance of Democratic Culture

Democracy has developed as a universal core value that most societies are striving to develop and consolidate. Responsible leadership in societies in transition to democracy must therefore reflect a deep commitment to, and a strategy to deepen democracy by proactive measures that avoid democratic erosion or breakdown (Schedler, 1995:91). This involves scrupulous respect for the constitution, rule of law and norms of democratic practice. The acceptance of multiple political parties and the role of opposition as part of the democratic project is part of this commitment. One of the real tests of democracy is the acceptance by those in power that others who criticise them and are indeed trying to take over their exalted positions are legitimate players in the system. This has been a major challenge in most African countries.

I will illustrate this argument by drawing attention to the words of wisdom articulated by my President, Olusegun Obasanjo. In his analysis of institutional patterns in post-colonial Africa, he points out that:

In most African languages, the word opposition has the same meaning and connotation as the word enemy. Can we possibly conceive of a loyal enemy? Yet, the institutionalisation of opposition was one of the pillars upon which the structures and processes that were bequeathed to us were supposed to rest. (Obasanjo, 1993:109–110)

Obasanjo traces many of the challenges to democracy in Africa to the reluctance of political leaders to share power, strive to build consensus and show respect to those who challenge them. He therefore challenged African leaders to renounce their commitment to the over-centralisation of power and try to build legitimacy by promoting the principle that – “the people’s participation must find expression in the political process” (Obasanjo, 1993:111).

Obasanjo castigates the present crop of African leaders who tend to lose their bearing almost immediately they come to power:

The new crop of leadership that is emerging must avoid the pitfalls and undoing of their predecessors. I say this because recently, someone observed that while it took the former president, an African, ten years to begin to lose his bearings, his successor took less than six months to lose his own. (Obasanjo, 1993:117)

He added that while the first crop of African leaders had a vision rooted in nationalism, those that followed them did not.

Obasanjo strongly recommends democracy and good governance as the basis for our socio-economic development. The essential elements he identifies are as follows:

1. Periodic elections in which the electorate review the performance of their leaders and renew or terminate the mandate they had given them.
2. A real democracy is one in which people have choices between competing alternatives.
3. A viable democracy is one which is fostered and strengthened by effective and independent non-governmental organisations; the civil society.
4. An independent judiciary that imposes sanctions on unconstitutional transgressions of social and political norms and regulations and also puts a premium on that protecting the rights and liberties of citizens against overzealous and highhanded officialdom is necessary.
5. A free, independent and responsible press is a critical element. (Obasanjo, 1993:132-3)

Having articulated these essential elements, Obasanjo warns that:

An irresponsible, arrogant or careless leadership breeds disenchantment, antipathy and disenfranchisement in the followership. (1993:133)

He finally recommends very strongly that:

A democratic government protects the different and most times, conflicting interests of the various segments of society. Democracy must strive to include most, if not exactly all segments of society in the run of things. Consensus or compromise must always be sought. A society that is run otherwise risks antipathy from within it. (Obasanjo, 1993:135)

These are indeed the principles upon which our efforts to consolidate democracy should be constructed. Ironically, the crisis of the Fourth Nigerian Republic has been the total refusal of the same President Obasanjo, in power since 1999, to take these principles on board in the process of governance. Moreover, President Olusegun Obasanjo worked hard to change the constitution so that he could continue to rule after his two terms allowed by the Grand Norm of the country. There were reports in some Nigerian
newspapers, that huge bribes were offered to legislators to induce them to accept the change. At the same time leaders of the opposition were hounded by security operatives. The legacy of military authoritarianism is very difficult to reverse.

The Legacy of Military Authoritarianism

West Africa is one of the regions in the world that has been excessively marked by a high frequency of coups d’état and civil wars and my analysis cannot but place a lot of emphasis on the ways in which militarism has been impacting on democratic transition. The military have been at the centre of power in the region over the past two decades.

Indeed, the most significant characteristic of political life in West Africa in the 1990s has been that military regimes have sought to turn “democratisation” and “elections” into instruments for perpetuating their rule. In Liberia, Master Sergeant Doe carried out a coup against the ruling True Whig Party in 1980, massacred their top Americo-Liberian leadership and settled down to tyrannical rule. He instituted a regime of terror that eventually consumed him. Doe organised elections in order to enable him to continue in power and the only way to get him out was through armed conflict and a long and terrible civil war, carried out at great cost to the Liberian people. In Ghana, Jerry Rawlings was able to remain in power between his “second coming” in 1981 and 2000. In that period, he showed exceptional mastery of both the use of violence as well as civilian political manipulation. Rawlings won two elections and more importantly, was the first to elaborate extensive political reforms aimed at disenfranchising established political parties and creating a playing field tilted in his favour.

In Sierra Leone, yet another coup took place in 1992 bringing a young “militarist” administration to power. They started with a programme of democratisation and reconstruction of institutions and ended up trying to perpetuate their regime. Confronted with resistance by civil society and competing armed soldiers and groups, a ballet of changes in regimes occurred with the control of and the use of arms remaining the central issue. In the Gambia, another young member of the “militarist” organised a coup in 1994 and promised to hand over power after a four-year transition. He was pressured into reducing the transition period to two years; he “bowed” to the pressure, declared himself a candidate for the election and continued in power as a “democratically” elected President. In Nigeria, the military organised numerous programmes of transition to democratic rule between 1985 and 1999. After fourteen years of transition, the third military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, eventually organised elections and handed over power to an elected administration led by a former military head of state and retired Army General, Olusegun Obasanjo.

One of the basic outcomes of decades of militarism has become manifest - the decomposition of state and society with the widespread growth of private armies and armed bands. The military is losing or has lost control of the means of violence in many of the countries or parts thereof. Numerous warlords with a stake in war have entrenched themselves and are fighting for the control of power and natural resources. Côte d’Ivoire, the Niger Delta and large parts of the Sahara desert are examples of the rise of this phenomenon. Given this context, it is not surprising that elections in the region have often been rigged, marked by violence or marred by uneven playing grounds for contestants. Elections are organised frequently, but they do not usually lead to the installation of popular candidates in power. The electorate is often convinced that elections do not offer real political choices. At the same time, the struggle for free and fair elections has become the fulcrum of the struggle for democratic transition. We shall start our illustration of this phenomenon by examining the Ghanaian model.

The March to Free and Fair Elections: The Ghanaian Model

Ghana is one of the countries that have made a successful transition from military rule to democratic governance. Although it started with the military ruler successfully transforming himself into a civilian politician – an example that was followed by General Joseph Momoh of Sierra Leone, Colonel Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia, Captain Blaise Campaore of Burkina Faso, Colonel Bare Mainasara of Niger and was attempted by the late General Sani Abacha of Nigeria, until his sudden death in June 1998. The Ghanaian model is based on the ability to transform an authoritarian militarised state into a legitimate one. It is a narrative about the rebuilding of institutions, re-establishment of the rule of law, proper conduct of pluralist elections, the promotion of press freedom, reconstitution of effective local government, development of effective oversight functions and effective public probity in a state
that had previously suffered considerable decay. It is therefore a model about the gradual improvement of state efficacy, democratic governance and respect for human rights.

The lowest point in the history of Ghana’s political development was the Acheampong regime of 1972–1978. The regime had taken over from the Busia elected regime, which it had accused of corruption and mismanagement. The Acheampong regime however, turned out to be even more corrupt than the preceding ones. In July 1978, a palace coup by General Akuffo led to the removal of General Acheampong. The ban on politics was lifted and a Constituent Assembly was put in place but no serious punishment against the corruption and abuse of office of the previous regime was instituted. On 5 May 1979, an attempted coup by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings occurred, it was foiled and he was detained. On 4 June 1979, he was rescued from jail by junior ranks of the armed forces and he took over power in a “spontaneous revolution”. The coup makers defined their political objective as establishing justice before elections and hand-over to a civilian regime.

When Rawlings took over power, the economic crisis had reached a catastrophic level. The intake of calories per capita for example was only 68 per cent of the minimum required (Sandbrook and Oelbaum, 1997:612). The Ghanaian people desperately needed a redeemer and Rawlings played that role because he was considered to be a man of the people (Verlet, 1997:43). Rawlings started a crusade for moral discipline, for probity in social and economic life and for accountability. The essential ingredient of Rawling’s initial charisma was his insistence that no one was too big, or too small, to be punished for his faults and crimes. The initial targets of the corrective punitive measures were senior military officers and their civilian collaborators. The circle however quickly widened to include smugglers, hoarders, tax defaulters, lodge members and so on. The policies seemed to represent a profound critique of the existing social structure and a cry for transformation; this was the source of the Rawlings charisma. That charisma however had a thin veneer that covered a reign of terror:

It embodied the type of terror to end all fears, because the circumstances that called for such terror were going to be eliminated. (Assimeng, 1986:152)

Kwame Karikari (1998) reminds us that the worst Nkrumah ever did was detention without trial but that with Rawlings, liberal use of the death penalty and frequent incidents of extra-judicial killing led to the terrorisation of the population.

In 1992, Rawlings movement – the PNDC – transformed itself into a party, the National Democratic Congress and contested elections. Opposition parties were so upset at the irregularities during the presidential elections that they boycotted the parliamentary elections. The transition process was clearly an undemocratic one (Ninsin, 1996:10). The PNDC had monopolised political space and refused to allow other parties the possibility of operating freely. The regime refused to even dialogue with other political forces on arrangements for elections. The state maintained all the repressive PNDC laws that had been enacted, appointed all the members of the electoral committee and maintained a tight control over the mass media. As a leading Ghanaian political scientist put it, Ghana has a long tradition of civilian and military authoritarianism and the so-called 1992 transition was just another “transition without change” (Gyimah-Boadi, 1994:78). Although a Commonwealth Observer Team had pronounced the 1992 presidential election “free and fair”, many observers were of the view that it was seriously flawed. Indeed, the New Patriotic Party issued a report that had detailed allegations of irregularities in 100 of the country’s 200 constituencies. The report was very influential and was entitled – The Stolen Verdict: Ghana November 1992 Presidential Election. The opposition political parties had therefore decided to boycott the parliamentary elections as a form of protest against the “stolen verdict”.

Another important factor concerning the 1992 elections were persistent reports that Rawlings had brought in a lot of arms:

... which PNDC thugs, commandos and other ragamuffins were going to use to destabilise the country in case the NDC lost. Thank God, through means, foul or fair, J. J. Rawlings won and the thugs were denied the opportunity to be of service to their patron and master. (Ansah, 1996:90)

Indeed, it appears that many people decided to vote for Rawlings to allow him to have his experience of “elected governance” and leave the scene after that.

According to Gyimah-Boadi (1994:85), the 1992 return to a liberal democratic constitution was a step towards democracy despite its numerous flaws. Political liberalisation, constitutionalism, the rule of
law, judicial independence, press freedom etc. were all put on the political agenda. By 1996, the conditions under which elections were held had improved significantly. According to Ernest Dumor, a member of Ghana’s Electoral Commission:

The 1996 Election indicates that by paying attention to the techno-structure, the structural and functional arrangements of government apparatus and process which allows for an effective participation and competition through multi-party system, the foundation is being laid for a stable society. (Dumor, 1998)

The 2000 elections saw the exit of Rawlings from the presidential contest. He had served his two terms and he did not try to change the Constitution to continue in power. The elections were a straight contest between the ruling National Democratic Congress represented by John Atta-Mills and the opposition New Patriotic Party whose presidential candidate was John Kufuor. After the first run-off in Ghana’s history, the NPP candidate emerged as Ghana’s new President, thus initiating the transfer of power from the ruling to the opposition party. In improving the conditions to enhance political choice, the following measures were taken:

1. The Electoral Commission was reconstituted and given significant autonomy in the organisation of elections.
2. An Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) was established by the Electoral Commission to negotiate and propose modalities for the organisation of elections. They also drew up a code of ethics for political parties.
3. The registration of voters was cleaned up and made more transparent and parties were empowered to monitor the registration process. In addition, all parties were provided with the voter’s register for their scrutiny and eventual petition before each election.
4. Ghana moved away from thumb-print voter identity cards to cards with embossed photographs.
5. Party agents were allowed to be present at polling stations to monitor the voting process.
6. Transparent ballot boxes were introduced.
7. A significant role for civil society in civic education and election monitoring was encouraged.

The 2004 elections were also very successful. The voter turnout was 80 per cent and the NPP retained power with 52 per cent of the Presidential vote and 128 parliamentarians while the NDC got 45 per cent of the Presidential vote and 94 seats in Parliament (Oquaye, 2004). Ghana has therefore matured into a polity with two dominant parties contesting in regular free and fair elections. It is hoped that this will be confirmed by the 2008 elections.

One important aspect of the Ghanaian narrative is the significant role played by civil society. Ghana’s civil society has played an important role in the struggle for democracy. Civil associations and professional groups have been playing a particularly active role in the struggle for democracy in Ghana (Amankwah, 1996:130). When Acheanpong tried to impose Union Government in 1977 for example, the Ghana Bar Association and other sectors of the Ghanaian elite came out and fought against it and demanded a multi-party liberal democratic model (Jonah, 1987).

There has been an intense and passionate debate over Ghana’s political trajectory with different, sometimes contradictory, views expressed on whether Ghanaian democracy is advancing or regressing (Ninsin, 1996). It seems clear today, however, that liberalism is advancing and the political system is stabilising. The Ghanaian model is the preferred path to free and fair elections and is the model other countries in the region should follow. It however has a requirement that other countries often do not have. Rawlings gradually shifted his position and allowed the necessary reforms that led to credible elections to be implemented. In many other countries in the region, the political leadership have resisted such reforms.

Resistance to Reform and the Struggle for Free and Fair Elections

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is one of the countries in which the leadership resisted movement towards free and fair elections for a long time. Sierra Leone got its independence from Britain in April 1961 under the leadership of Milton Margai and his Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP). From the First Republic, the question of military intervention negating political choice has been posed in an acute manner in the country. In the March 1967 General Elections, Siaka Stevens of the opposition All People’s Congress (APC) won the polls and he was called upon
by the Governor-General to form the government. Brigadier David Lansana however staged a coup to prevent political alternation and Siaka Stevens fled to Guinea in exile. Two days later, junior officers staged a counter-coup and declared Siaka Stevens winner of the elections after an inquiry but they did not hand over power to him. On 18 April 1968, warrant officers and other ranks of the army staged another coup and invited Siaka Stevens to come and take over power. In 1971, there was a very bloody attempted coup by Brigadier J. Bangura in which many people were killed, including the coup leader. Since that period, political violence has been a central feature of Sierra Leonean politics.

The 1977 elections were conducted with the state of emergency still in force and the APC government used its incumbency to bulldoze its way to “stealing the verdict and mandate”. The elections were held “amid widespread violence, harassment, killing and destruction of rural settlements” (Rashid, 1977:29). The opposition SLPP could not organise effective resistance to the state sanctioned thuggery organised by the APC government, which took most of the seats. The APC was therefore able to perpetuate its rule on the basis of state terrorism. In consecration of that status, the APC organised a fraudulent referendum in 1978 that enabled it to impose one party rule.

In 1978, Siaka Stevens declared a state of emergency and turned Sierra Leone into a one party state. This move made formal and open opposition to the regime impossible. At the same time, the level of corruption of the regime became very high and its unpopularity skyrocketed. Although Siaka Stevens had promised to resign after the 1981 elections, he did not do so until 1986. When he vacated power in 1986, Stevens refused to hand over to the incumbent Vice President, Ibrahim Koroma as the constitution stipulated, instead, he handed over power to Major General Saidu Momoh. The new Head of State, Momoh, was even more inept than his predecessor and opposition to the regime grew:

Beleaguered by a crumbling economy, a divided party and attacks from different angles, the Momoh regime ceded to multi-party politics and elections in 1991. As the elections drew near, there were indications that the government intended to rig the elections. (Rashid, 1997:38)

It was in that context that the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led by Corporal Foday Sankoh attacked Sierra Leone from Liberia with the support of Charles Taylor in May 1991. The origins of RUF have been traced to the Freetown based lumpen culture “array boys” from where recruits for a “popular army” were found and sent to Libya for training (Abdullah and Muana, 1998:177).

General Momoh sent a dispirited and poorly trained and equipped army to go and combat the RUF insurrection led by Foday Sankoh. It was not an easy task as the RUF were not holding on to territory, but were rather, using guerrilla tactics. On 29th April 1992, General Momoh was overthrown by a group of young, unpaid and disgruntled soldiers under the leadership of Captain Valentine Strasser who established the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) as the ruling organ. Most of the new leaders were very young, in their early twenties. The new military leaders benefited from the limited opposition that was offered by a rather narrowly based civil society.

A Peace Agreement was signed on 30 November 1996 between President Tejan Kabbah and Corporal Foday Sankoh of RUF but the rebel leader was unable to get his forces to abide by the agreement. Sankoh was finally incarcerated in Nigeria shortly after the accord. In fact, the peace accord signed was very tenuous. Most of the parties involved, except President Tejan Kabbah, were not interested in peace. They were making a lot of money from the diamond mines and from looting from the civilian population. Even the peace accord was just an additional political advantage for them because it led to the official recognition of the RUF. The rebels obtained a role in the new army that was to be constituted, in the new electoral commission and they also got immunity from prosecution (Bangura, 1997). The concessions to the rebels did not guarantee peace.

On 25 May 1997, a rag-tag group of soldiers marched into Freetown, chasing out the legitimately elected regime of Tejan Kabbah. The determined effort of the people of Sierra Leone to elect a government of their choice was once again frustrated. The putchists released a jailed coup plotter, Major Paul Koroma and installed him as leader of the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), the new ruling organ. The putchists called on the RUF to join them and declared Foday Sankoh, then in detention in Nigeria, to be their deputy chair. Some regular Sierra Leonean soldiers were involved in the putsch. These “sobels” – soldiers by day and rebels by night – had become a basic feature of the collapsed state in Sierra Leone. Apart from the “sobels”, many soldiers,
20 per cent by official 1994 estimates had gone beyond this straddling and were in full time banditry (Gberie, 1997:150). The coup led to massive killing, widespread rape, torture, looting and arson leading to over 400,000 people fleeing from the country. The war had started in March 1991 and led to the displacement of half of the country’s population and resulted in at least 30,000 deaths (Abdullah and Muana, 1997:172).

The government of Tejan Kabbah was restored in March 1998 through the intervention of soldiers sent to Sierra Leone by the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). A majority of the ECOMOG soldiers were Nigerians. While General Abacha was not willing to allow democracy in Nigeria, he devoted a significant part of Nigeria’s resources for the re-instatement of constituted authority in Sierra Leone. The presence of ECOMOG in the country was not enough to guarantee peace.

On 6 January 1999, RUF rebels and elements of the former military invaded Freetown for the second time in less than two years. They killed over 6,000 civilians in the capital and abducted thousands of young men and women (Bangura, 1999:1). It was a terrible blow for democracy in Sierra Leone. ECOMOG intervened yet again and the Kabbah regime was forced to accept a compromise agreement with RUF. In the Lomé Agreement of 7 July 1999, the RUF were offered eight ministerial posts including the number two post and absolute immunity for all the crimes they had committed against the people of Sierra Leone in return for peace. The RUF leader, Foday Sankoh was even given control of mineral rights, seemingly in recognition of the fact that the control of diamonds has been central to the activities of the warlords. In essence, the control of violence by the rebels has imposed its logic over the democratic mandate that the Kabbah regime had received from the people. The persistence of the international community in keeping an intervention force to the end of 2005 finally stabilised the situation and the next elections are due in 2007.

Liberia

The Liberian story is similar. Liberia was declared a sovereign state in 1847 and is therefore Africa’s oldest Republic. It was established as an American outpost for freed slaves that had been released after the abolition of slavery. It developed as a divided society with the Americo-Liberians who constituted only five per cent of the population being the local elite controlling the polity and the economy while the indigenous population were completely marginalised and indeed despised. The party of the Americo-Liberians – the True Whig Party – held sway over the Liberian people with William Tubman ruling from 1944 to 1971 and William Tolbert at the helm from 1971 to 1980 when he was overthrown. Since then, the country has been plagued by violence and war.

Master-Sergeant Samuel Doe seized power in 1980 in a bloody coup that ended the control of the Americo-Liberians. The move was welcomed by a large part of the indigenous population who assumed political participation would henceforth be extended to them following the ouster of the Americo-Liberians. The thirteen leading members of the Americo-Liberian ruling oligarchy were hastily tried and executed. Samuel Doe did not however open up Liberian political space. In fact, he narrowed it. He appointed members from his own Krahn ethnic group into key military and security positions. At the same time, he could not really do without the services of the Americo-Liberian elite and many of them were appointed into top cabinet and administrative positions in the regime. Samuel Doe essentially disarmed the army and delegated security to paramilitary units controlled by his ethnic allies. He got rid of his rivals in the military by accusing them of plotting coups against him. He then concentrated on enriching himself by looting public corporations. The Cold War that characterised the international political situation of that period provided him American protection because of his strong anti-Soviet and anti-Libyan rhetoric. He was the good boy of the Americans.

His American backers encouraged him to organise multi-party elections, an idea he accepted in 1984, especially because of the American offer of $400 million to fund the transition. The elections were organised in 1985 and Doe who had become exceptionally unpopular, lost the popular vote. He however rigged the results and gave himself 51 per cent of the votes. Days later, his main rival and former Army Chief of Staff, Thomas Quiwonkpa, launched a coup attempt:

Doe’s ferocious response against his former friend led to acts of savage brutality by the Armed Forces of Liberia against the Gio and Mano of Nimba County where, four years later, Taylor found fertile ground for rebel recruitment when his NPFL invaded Liberia. (Sesay, 1996:414)
The ethnic divide was therefore worsened and the survivors in Nimba County were forced to form the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF) to defend themselves. They regrouped in Libya where they received military training and came back to Liberia to conquer state power.

In December 1989, the NPLF fighters under Charles Taylor launched a war with one hundred and fifty troops in Nimba County and they were able to gradually capture most of the country. After the war started, no functional state existed in Liberia. Taylor’s war was widely welcomed because most of the society had become completely disenchanted with Samuel Doe. Charles Taylor set out to take over the executive mansion in Monrovia and in a few months, he had captured most of the country.

Samuel Doe’s forces could not fight the NPLF so he entrenched himself in Monrovia. The then Nigerian military president, General Ibrahim Babangida was alarmed at the ease with which a fellow military dictator was being routed by a civilian force and canvassed for an ECOWAS intervention. He could not stand the idea of civilians humiliating a military regime out of office (Ellis, 1998:2). The role of Libya as well as the Francophone countries, Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso in supporting Charles Taylor was also worrying to Nigeria and some other West African countries. The intervention force – ECOWAS Monitoring Group or ECOMOG – moved into the country in September 1990. ECOMOG encouraged the establishment of various militias to help fight the NPLF and thereby extended and deepened the war atrocities in the country. About 200,000 people, eight per cent of the Liberian people died in fighting or were massacred in Liberia (Reno, 1998:79). Samuel Doe himself did not survive. In September 1990, Prince Yomi Johnson, a former Taylor adviser and breakaway warlord captured Doe, tortured him brutally and killed him, recording everything on a gory videocassette. The war ended in 1996 following the Abuja Peace Accord. By that time, half of the country’s population of 2.5 million had been killed, maimed or displaced.

In July 1997, Charles Taylor, a notorious warlord was elected president of Liberia in elections that might have been one of the most free and fair in the history of the country. The understanding of most observers was that the Liberian people had to vote for him to get peace. They did not get it as war resumed. Charles Taylor was eventually persuaded to go into exile in Nigeria and elections were organised in October 2005. The National Electoral Commission was able to register voters, political parties and candidates in a reasonably credible manner and the two leading candidates that emerged were George Weah with 28.3 per cent of the votes and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf with 19.8 per cent. A run-off election was organised on 8 November 2005. In a remarkable narrative about political recovery, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, was inaugurated as the first elected woman President of Liberia (and in Africa) on 16 January 2006. From the terrible depths of brutal civil war, Sierra Leone and Liberia have returned to relative political stability and respectable elections. It is a sign that political recovery and the deepening of democracy is on the West African agenda. There might well be reverses in the near future but countries in the region have shown that their citizens have a capacity to bounce back and struggle to create possibilities for making their political choices. Even political parties in the region have shown a capacity to cooperate and successfully implement a strategy of forcing an authoritarian leadership to return to free and fair elections as we saw in the case of Niger.

Habit of Free and Fair Elections: The Success Story of Niger
In 1987, Seyni Kountché died, ending one of the most tyrannical periods of political rule in Africa. Five regime changes were to occur in quick succession, first, from military dictatorship to the Second Republic in 1989. Then, following the collapse of the Second Republic that lasted for only three months, a Sovereign National Conference and transitional institutions were set up. The next regime came with the establishment of the Third Republic and democratic institutions in 1993. The Third Republic was overthrown in January 1996 following the coup d’état of Bare Mainasara. Finally, in July 1996, Mainasara imposed a new Constitution and organised presidential elections that were massively rigged.

On 27 January 1996, the then Col. Ibrahim Bare Mainasara carried out a coup d’état that ended the turbulent but promising life of the Third Republic in Niger. The coup leaders presented themselves as saviours of democracy who had intervened to correct the institutional ills of the Third Republic and return the country to healthy democratic rule. The international community objected strongly to the intervention by the military and intense pressure was put on them to return to the barracks immediately and allow democratic institutions to sort out
the problems that had emerged. The pressure was maintained until Mainasara shortened the transfer date to civilian democratic rule from December to July 1996.

On taking over power, the junta replaced all prefects (governors of the regions) with military officers. Mayors and sous-prefects (district governors) were also changed. Mainasara drew up electoral and constitutional propositions that were rushed through committees and put before a constitutional referendum, which was held on 12 May 1996. The new Constitution was approved by 90 per cent of voters in the referendum, although only 35 per cent of the electorate voted. Presidential elections were announced for 7 July 1996 and Col Ibrahim Bare Mainasara promoted himself to General and then announced his intention to contest for the presidency as an independent candidate, despite an earlier promise to relinquish power.

Meanwhile, the political playing field was not level because candidate General Mainasara was campaigning in office and setting up local support committees for himself while political activities were banned and his rivals were held in detention until 23 May. In April, Mainasara had changed the electoral code so that he would not be obliged to resign from the army to contest for an electoral office. A few weeks before the elections, Mainasara changed the composition of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, which had powers to validate candidacies and election results by decree. While his major rivals were still under house arrest, he established a High Court of Justice with jurisdiction to try former office holders for crimes committed while in office. Although the Court did not sit, it was a permanent threat to his rivals, all of whom had held state offices. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) had, on three occasions, asked for the elections to be postponed because the voters' list and election materials were not ready; the Government ignored them. On election-day, voters' registers and cards were not ready in a lot of voting booths.

The July 1996 elections are popularly known as the 'electoral coup d'état' as distinct from the 'military coup d'état' that took place six months earlier. It is the story of an electoral farce. On 6 July, the Government announced that the impending presidential elections would be spread over two days – 7 and 8 July instead of the 7 only. In the evening of the first day of voting, the regime announced it had abolished the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), the body organising the elections, because they had leaked results to the press indicating that Mainasara might not win the elections. That night, a new organisation, the National Electoral Commission (CNE), was established to take over the elections. The army was called in to collect the ballot boxes and take them to town halls where the votes were counted in secret by the new CNE, without candidate representatives and independent observers. Analysis by the American National Democratic Institute (1996: 3) revealed that on the first day of voting, General Mainasara had 29 per cent of the votes cast with a voter turnout of 61 per cent; on the second day, Mainasara's fortunes went up with his votes jumping to 72 per cent with a 92 per cent turnout. The following day, CNE declared him the outright winner in the first round.

The three candidates who had contested against Mainasara were arrested on the first day of voting and only released on 22 July, after the Supreme Court had confirmed the results. Mainasara called a press conference on that day to say that he hoped "the politicians have learnt their lesson" (Reuters, 22/7/96). The two private radio stations in the country were also closed down for announcing what was going on. Many journalists and politicians were arrested on those two days during which General Mainasara turned himself into an elected president. On 9 July, demonstrations and public meetings were banned. On 10 July, anti-riot police teargased hundreds of demonstrators in front of the CDS (the former ruling party) headquarters, protesting against the electoral coup. The central labour organisation, the USTN, called for a general strike for 11 July, but it was only partially successful, probably due to the high level of intimidation.

Immediately after the electoral coup d’état of July 1996, the eight leading political parties in the country established a democratic front to organise resistance against the new dictatorship – Front pour la Restauration et la Défence de la Démocratie (FRDD). The FRDD exposed the manipulative and fraudulent nature of the presidential elections and insisted that Mainasara should vacate the presidency. From mid-1996, they organised numerous pro-democracy demonstrations throughout the country together with trade and student unions. In January 1998, over 4,000 people demonstrated against the dictatorship in Niamey. Three FRDD leaders – former President Mahamane Ousmane, former Prime Minister Mahamadou Issoufou and MNSD leader Tandja Mamadu as well as fifty-eight other
persons were arrested (Camel Express Telematique, 11/1/1998). Demonstrators had been repeatedly teargassed and beaten up by the police and the gendarmes.

The response of Bare Mainasara was the reconstitution of the police state in Niger and the increased use of “unidentified armed men in military jeeps”, to intimidate people. In his speech commemorating the 39th anniversary of the country’s national day on 18 December 1997, Mainasara alleged that the opposition was fomenting a plot against him. In April 1998, the FRDD once again called for the resignation of Bare Mainasara and organised demonstrations all over the country. A police station was burnt in Zinder and General Mainasara’s RDP party office in Maradi was destroyed. At least twenty-seven people were seriously wounded. In Niamey, over 3,000 students joined the demonstrations. The former Prime Minister Hama Amadou and eight other FRDD leaders were arrested and armed men were sent to machine-gun the house of the FRDD co-ordinator in Niamey, Ali Sabo (AFP, 24/4/1998).

The media were one of the main targets of state terrorism. In 1997, one of the most assiduous and effective critics of the new dictatorship, Souley Adjii, a columnist with the Alternative newspaper and lecturer at the University of Niamey, was kidnapped by unknown assailants, driven twenty kilometres out of town, stripped naked, thoroughly beaten-up and left for dead. Other journalists such as Saadou Assane of the Républicain, Moussa Tchangari of the Alternative and Keita Suleiman, local correspondent for the British Broadcasting Corporation were also beaten up or arrested repeatedly. On 15 April 1998, armed men poured kerosene on and set fire to a private printing house, ‘Nouvelle Imprimerie du Niger’, and the proprietor, Maman Abou, publisher of the Républicain was arrested.

The press in Niger refused to be intimidated by the above repressive measures so in 1997, the Mainasara regime enacted the ‘liberticide’ press law. The law stipulated that all journalists must be re-registered and defined new conditions for registration including a clean police record and a university degree or five years continuous journalistic practice. The law also prohibited publishing or broadcasting messages that were offensive to the President. In October 1997, for example, El Hadji Boukoukou, the President of the Ligue Nigérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (LNDDEH) was sentenced to two years in prison for issuing a press statement that General Mainasara was imposing dictatorship in the country. Even the ‘liberticide’ law did not succeed in silencing the press. At the end of April 1998, Radio Anfani and Radio R & M were formally directed to stop reporting on the activities of the opposition or they would be closed down for good. On 13 May 1998, ten newspapers were closed allegedly for non-payment of taxes (Camel Express Telematique, 16/5/1998). The forces for democracy in Niger were able to sustain an intense struggle against dictatorship for almost three years. Then General Mainasara was assassinated by the head of his Presidential guard and Niger returned to its habit of free and fair elections. Apart from the 1996 elections, no elections in the country have been marred by significant electoral fraud. The political class in the country has very little experience of or propensity for rigging votes. The same cannot be said of their neighbours, the Nigerian political class.

The Nigerian Challenge: Resisting the Culture of Competitive Rigging

I will conclude these remarks with some comments on my country, Nigeria, which provides one of the most difficult conditions under which elections can be turned into opportunities for political choice. The Nigerian case is difficult because the political class has built up a vast repertoire of techniques of electoral fraud. The very serious report of experts prepared by the National Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies just before the 1983 elections, correctly predicted that the elections could not be conducted without massive electoral fraud because the parties in power were not ready to allow others to come to power (NIPSS, 1983:3). The report also showed that only the 1959 and 1979 elections were held without systematic rigging and that those two elections had one point in common: they were held in the presence of strong arbiters, the colonial state and the military, who were not themselves participants in the elections and who desired free and fair elections at those instances. Indeed, it has been observed that rigging is almost synonymous with Nigerian elections (Kurfi, 2005:101). Are elections doomed to the machinations of fraudsters who frustrate the democratic aspirations of the Nigerian people?

According to Ben Nwabueze (2005:1), election rigging refers to:

... electoral malpractices which are palpable illegals committed with a corrupt, fraudulent or sinister intention to influence an election in favour
of a candidate(s) by means such as illegal voting, bribery, and undue influence, intimidation and other acts of coercion exerted on voters, falsification of results, fraudulent announcement of a losing candidate as winner (without altering the recorded results).

The objective of electoral rigging or fraud is to frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted, or would have voted into office someone other than the rigged in individual.

Electoral fraud has become one of the salient features of Nigerian elections. Bayo Adekanye (1990) has extensively reviewed electoral fraud in Nigeria's 1st Republic. This sad history of electoral fraud or rigging has serious implications for our democratic future because the phenomenon is growing rather than declining. As the elections go by, the principal forms of rigging and fraud have been increasing and being perfected in successive elections since 1964, 1965, 1979, 1983, 1999 and 2003. The result is that elections have become turning points in which the outcome has been the subversion of the democratic process rather than its consolidation. Not surprisingly, major political conflicts have emerged around rigged elections.

The 1983 elections occupy a special place in the history of electoral fraud in Nigeria. Competitive rigging reached its apogee:

All sorts of strategies and stratagems including manipulation of the ballot or "rigging" were employed in order to win elections. Each of the opposition parties used its local power of incumbency to retain power and/or to improve its position vis-à-vis other contenders. However, federal might was used to dislodge state governors in Anambra, Oyo, Kaduna, Gongola and Borno states, thus raising NPN's tally of governorships from seven to twelve states, reversing the power structure existing before the election when opposition parties had twelve against NPN's seven governors. (Kurfi, 2005:97)

One interesting case was the Ondo State gubernatorial election in 1983 where the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) candidate, Chief Akin Omoboriowo, was declared elected by the Electoral Commission with 1,228,891 votes as against 1,015,385 votes credited to the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) candidate, Chief Michael Ajasin, whereas the true scores, as found by the election count, the Federal Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court from the certificates of results signed by the assistant returning officers and by the party agents as well as from the oral testimony of the assistant returning officers and party agents, were 1,563,327 votes for Chief Ajasin and 703,592 for Chief Omoboriowo, Chief Omoboriowo’s score was thus inflated by 523,389 votes while that of Chief Ajasin was decreased by 547,942 votes. The evidence showed that the falsification was done at the level of the deputy returning officer. Chief Ajasin was accordingly declared by the court to have been duly elected (Ben Nwabueze, 2005:1).

Ahmadu Kurfi, the Executive Secretary of the Electoral Commission recounts that he was in a security meeting with the Secretary of the Government, Shehu Musa, the Inspector General of Police, Sunday Adewusi and other security chiefs when the flash came through that “we have delivered Ondo” (Kurfi, 2005, 97). Although Ondo state was successfully “delivered” to the NPN in 1983, the “elected” governor, Akin Omoboriowo had to go into hiding to protect himself from an irate electorate that would not accept that their verdict be stolen. Police stations and houses of prominent NPN supporters were burnt and many people killed. The judicial decision that ceded Ondo state back to the UPN came within the context of a massive level of popular mobilization of citizens determined to protect their votes.

Indeed, the diversity of the forms of competitive rigging employed during the 1983 elections has been carefully enumerated by the Babalakin Commission of Inquiry (FRN, 1986:289–290).

1. Compilation of fictitious names on voters’ registers.
2. Illegal compilation of separate voters’ list.
3. Abuse of the voter registration revision exercise.
4. Illegal printing of voters’ cards.
5. Illegal possession of ballot boxes.
6. Stuffing of ballot boxes with ballot papers.
7. Falsification of election results.
8. Illegal thumb-printing of ballot papers.
10. Printing of Form EC 8 and EC 8A used for collation and declaration of election results.
11. Deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas.
12. Announcing results in places where no elections were held.
13. Unauthorised announcement of election results.
15. Change of list of electoral officials.
16. Box-switching and inflation of figures.

The most significant issue in the 1983 elections was that emphasis shifted from traditional forms of electoral fraud based on manipulation of the ballot to total disregard of the figures collated on the basis of ballots and completed forms. Figures totally unrelated to any results – genuine or forged, are simply announced and illegally protected with state power.

In 2003, Nigeria conducted the second general election since her return to civil politics in May 1999. The 2003 elections were almost as contentious as the 1983 elections. The report from Nigerian observers affirmed numerous reported cases of alleged fraud in many states across the country (Transition Monitoring Group, 2003:120). The European Union observer report also reported widespread election-related malpractices in a number of states in the Middle Belt, the South-East and the South-South (European Commission, 2003:42). The plethora of electoral malpractices such as ballot box stuffing, snatching of electoral materials and smashing of ballot boxes, inflation of votes and other dimensions of electoral fraud and the high incidence of electoral violence once more rekindled the old fears that the basic institutional weaknesses associated with her electoral system could bring the democratic experiment to grief. There are three phases in election rigging: pre-election, election day and post-election rigging. We shall briefly outline some of the forms.

Pre-Election Rigging: Rigging as System Manipulation

Most election rigging occurs before the elections themselves and involves elaborate forms of system manipulation. Many political forces in Nigeria do not get a chance to participate in elections because the conditions for party registration are such that groups could be denied the right to establish the party they desire to contest for power with. The Constitution also banned independent candidates from contesting elections. Nigeria also has a history of the illegal acquisition of voters’ cards by some parties. The purpose is to create conditions for the over-registration of certain persons and groups and simultaneous under-registration of other persons and groups. Favoured groups have their votes multiplied while others are basically disenfranchised. Many politicians have also developed the habit of buying over electoral officials and/or getting party supporters appointed as electoral officers so that they would tamper with the electoral process to produce a desired outcome. Many candidates are denied the right of contesting elections because they are prevented from contesting for their party’s nomination or else replaced after they have won the nomination (Ibrahim and Salihu, 2004). Finally, we have the practice of gerrymandering which involves manipulation while drawing the boundaries of electoral districts to favour some political parties and candidates while scheming out others.

Examples of Polling-Day Rigging
1. Collaboration between polling officials and agents to subvert the electoral rules.
2. Late or non-supply of election materials to opposition strongholds.
3. Delay in opening polling centres located in opposition strongholds.
4. Stuffing of ballot boxes.
5. Under-age voting.
6. Multiple voting.
7. Inducement of voters with food and money.
8. Threatening voters with the use of force.

Post-Election Rigging
1. Destruction of or refusal to count ballots from opposition strongholds.
2. Changing the results between voting centres and collation centres.
3. Declaration of false results.
4. Annullment of elections in situations where incumbents believe the results, the people’s choice, are unacceptable to them.
5. Long delays or manipulation of election tribunals to protect stolen verdicts.

Combating Electoral Fraud
Nigerians have devoted considerable energy to improving our electoral laws and institutional framework for elections with the aim of improving the conduct of elections in the country. As we moved
from the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO),
to the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and
now the Independent National Electoral Commis-
sion (INEC), we have gone through considerable
changes in electoral laws and political party regimes.
The reality of our elections notwithstanding this has
remained that of the development of what the late
Bola Ige described as “free style rigging that made
the occurrences of the Second Republic appear slug-
gish and amateurish” (Guardian, 12/10/1992).

One of the anti-rigging devices developed during
the Babangida transition was the open ballot sys-
tem. In the open ballot or queuing system, the secret
ballot was disallowed and voters queued up in public
behind the party symbol of their “choice”. The po-
itical parties and elections would henceforth oper-
ate on the principles of the military garrison parade.
Over and above the technical details of “secret bal-
lot rigging” the most serious problem with the open
ballot system was that it exposed voters to the wrath
of godfathers who could monitor how their “people”
voted. The direct effect of the system was that can-
didates paid people to vote for them and party aides
could directly observe and ensure that people who
had been “bought” joined the queue of the aspirant
who had paid for their vote.

Current studies in Nigeria’s electoral geography
(Ibrahim and Egwu, 2005) are attempting to cap-
ture the peculiarities of the various geo-political
zones in the country, for the purpose of not only
making intelligible the unique problems raised by
the conduct and management of elections, but also
for anticipating constitutional, administrative and
other practical measures for mitigating the impact
of these problems on the sanctity of the electoral
process.

Although it is correct to assume that a number of
problems associated with the Nigerian electoral
system are general in nature, a closer examination
of the details of problems associated with the 1999
and 2003 elections show that some geo-political
zones experienced peculiar electoral problems. For
example, the Niger Delta area, which falls within
the South-South geo-political zone experienced the
highest level of electoral violence in the period lead-
ing up to, and during the elections. Electoral mal-
practices such as ballot stuffing, snatching of ballot
boxes and the use of violence were perpetrated at the
highest level. In most cases, the spectre of violence
discouraged voter turn out, yet election results were
declared. Here, it may be important to bear in mind
the prevailing culture of violence and militarism re-
sulting from the military occupation, militancy of
ethnic organizations, youth violence and high level
of access to arms as a result of the battle over re-
source control. The riverine nature of the zone also
created obstacles to movement of electoral officers
and prevented easy access by election monitors and
observers. It could be assumed that given this state
of affairs, conducting a civil activity like elections
without addressing the deep-seated conflicts in the
zone might prove a difficult enterprise. Similarly in
the South East zone, the level of electoral malprac-
tices and incidences of violence were equally high
leading to a situation in which electoral outcomes
did not come close to reflecting the yearnings and
aspirations of the people. As was widely reported,
although actual voting did not take place in many
areas, results were announced. The Nigerian chal-
lenge is to devise modalities for citizens to resist this
culture of electoral fraud.

The common questions to be addressed in the
context of the electoral geography, among others, in-
clude the following. Why has a credible electoral sys-
tem continued to elude Nigeria despite the existence
of a fairly well crafted electoral law? Why do differ-
ent parts of the country exhibit different problems
and tendencies in the context of electoral behaviour
and the conduct of elections? Why are some zones
more capable of others in protecting their vote? In
responding to these questions, significant lessons
can be learned from the South West.

Lessons from the South West

The Yoruba of South West Nigeria have set very high
standards of civic culture and a determination to
protect their vote that is worthy of emulation. Their
commitment to the development of education from
the 1950s to date is an important factor in political
culture. The Yoruba speaking area of the southwest
is the most urbanized of all the zones in the coun-
try. Similarly, it has a strong tradition of civil society
and civil engagement, pre-dating the independence
period. Incidents such as the Agbekoya (peasant
farmers) movements and the resistance to electoral
malpractices in the first and second republics as well
as the resistance to the annulment of the June 12
presidential elections are examples. The South West
also has fairly developed infrastructure which is im-
portant in the successful conduct of free and fair
elections. They also have the most developed mass
media in the country.
All these factors translate into a greater political awareness. There is also the complex interaction between ethnicity, religion and politics dictated by the two-faith structure of the South West. Interestingly, the existence of this faith structure is founded on a deep culture of religious tolerance which makes it almost impossible to manipulate religion. Consequently, religion is not a key issue in the politics of the geo-political zone.

The high level of civic consciousness in this zone translates into a community capacity to define the correct political line and to impose sanctions for political misbehaviour. The zone is noted for imposing sanctions on politicians adjudged to have broken rank with tradition or to have acted in a politically embarrassing manner in relation to what is perceived as the collective interest of the Yoruba. There are several examples. Following excessive rigging of the December 1964 elections in the Western Region, communities organised violent resistance to the theft of their mandate following the split between the Action Group (AG) and the Nigeria National Democratic Party (NNDP). In the 1983 general elections, Akin Omoboriowo, who was purportedly declared winner as the governor of Ondo State, having defected from the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) to the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), became a victim of violent attacks and was prevented from stealing the electoral mandate the state had given to Governor Ajasin.

A critical issue in elections in this geo-political zone (the South-West) is the role of collective memory, especially the role of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Two issues are immediately important here. In one respect, having adopted Awolowo as a symbol in their election campaigns and political mobilization, Alliance for Democracy (AD) governors in the 2003 elections wrongly saw themselves as untouchable and natural leaders of the zone. They forgot that their people would evaluate them on the basis of Awolowo’s performance standards rather than their choice and support by Afenifere (a Yoruba socio-cultural association). Having performed very poorly by the standards of the zone, most incumbents in the zone were punished by their people who voted them out. The fact that there were no massive protests about rigging in the zone, although some rigging did occur, meant that the level of rigging did not significantly change the mandate given by the people. It was in this context that the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) took over the “Awolowo mantle” in the zone. However, the PDP can keep it only for as long as they are seen to serve the interest of the people of South-Western Nigeria.

This lesson that it is possible for communities to define, articulate and protect their political interests, including their electoral mandate is an extremely important one for the rest of the country. The South East for example seems to be characterised by pervasive monetization of politics as it would appear that people tend to care for money only rather than the integrity of their votes. There is clearly a cultural problem which can be explained in terms of the collapse in the values of the Igbo people following the profound disorientation visited on the people by the civil war experience. Whereas the Igbo historically valued hard work, integrity and promoted education as exemplified by the life experiences of people like the late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the late Mbonu Ojike and the late Akanu Ibiam, the situation today has radically changed.

The relative neglect and marginalization of the Igbo in what appears to be a punishment for daring secession left the people on their own to take charge of their destiny. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which the people feel that they were treated like a conquered people after the civil war. In response, a mad race for wealth and all kinds of opportunism, including resorting to criminal activities to make money became the order of the day. What has been noticed as the decline in male education in the core eastern states can partly be explained in terms of this development.

The consequence is the emergence of an incoherent and opportunist leadership that has no commitment to the aspirations of the people in the zone occupying political space. Things have been changing since the 2003 elections. A culture of resistance to the political marginalisation of the Igbo has been growing and there is an emerging determination to protect the Igbo mandate in the 2007 elections.

The development of a strong civic culture imbued with the determination to protect the electoral mandate of the people is a strong deterrent to the rising culture of competitive rigging we have reviewed in this section. When people know that excessive rigging will be combated, they tend to be more careful in the level of recklessness they exercise. Protecting the vote is also a solid point of entry in compelling governments to provide the dividends of democracy.
The Way Forward

In searching for the way forward in converting elections into opportunities for political choice, a number of milestones need to be passed:

1. All countries in the region should strive to carry out constitutional and legal changes that will secure operational and financial autonomy for electoral commissions.

2. The capacity of political parties to campaign for and monitor a level playing field for elections should be enhanced. Parties should see that it is in their interest to protect the basic tenets of multi-party democracy.

3. The electoral process, including the registration of voters, provision of voter identity cards with embossed photographs and transparent ballot boxes as well as the representation of party agents in registration, voting and collation centres should be made credible.

4. Citizens must develop the capacity of incumbent presidents to change the constitution to increase their term limits.

5. Civic education should be accorded a high priority. The task of enlightening the citizenry on their rights and duties, and how to defend the sanctity of their votes is crucial. Considering the fact that politicians use religion and ethnicity as tools of political manipulation, the content of civil education should take into consideration how to provide effective responses to such manipulative tendencies. Similarly people should be educated on how to demand accountability from their leaders through town hall meetings as well as effective use of recall provisions in the constitution.

6. The need to encourage the culture of opposition politics is of crucial importance to the future of democracy in West Africa. It serves the cause of democracy better if opposition parties remain steadfast, build strength and capacity around their programmes and manifestos and provide the electorates with credible alternatives in future elections.

7. The mass media also need to play a more significant role in promoting and strengthening the credibility of the electoral system. Three main points are important in this regard. First, the need to encourage proliferation of privately controlled media as opposed to those controlled by the governments. Privately owned media houses are more likely to give better coverage to opposition political parties. Second, some countries in West Africa such as Nigeria do not allow the establishment of community radios that are far less expensive to operate. Community radios can play a major role in community mobilisation and should be encouraged. Third, we have not made adequate use of the information super highway offered by the Internet and electronic e-mail as a means of reaching out and putting information in the public domain concerning elections. The possibilities of using the Internet for displaying the voters’ list and for national and international advocacy in securing free and fair elections should be developed.

8. People’s Forums should be established to promote the culture of citizens bringing their representatives to town hall meetings to engage in face-to-face interaction and demand accountability. There is need to build linkages, alliances and coordination among groups such as churches, market women, motor cycle taxi operators and the media to checkmate the excesses of those in power.

9. Finally, ethnic and community associations should become more active in identifying credible individuals who should be persuaded to enter the arena of electoral contests. Communities should start developing the culture of sponsoring the elections of such candidates so that the field of electoral contest is not dominated by the rich and powerful.

Conclusion

For a democratic future for the African people, the crafting of democracy must be given a significant place on the continent’s agenda. West Africa has suffered excessively from state arbitrariness and violence. Civil society has been infected by the same phenomena. The first phase of democratic transition consists of building peace and tolerance. Education in general and civic education in particular must be given a major role in reconstituting West African society. A central aspect of civic education must be oriented towards the rehabilitation of the concept of politics and liberal democracy. Popular conceptions about the politics of liberal democracy tend to perceive it as a process of thuggery, violence, and
electoral fraud. Political “godfathers” are emerging in many countries to promote this negative culture. It is the image that Chinua Achebe has drawn attention to in his novel, *A Man of the People*. It is the image of dirty politics that Siaka Stevens first established in Sierra Leone or that Samuel Doe established with the 1985 elections. That conception of politics must be combated. We are reminded by Bernard Crick (1964:15), that there is an alternative conception of politics as a great and civilising activity. Politics could be practised as:

The activity by which different interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community. (Crick, 1964:21)

It could therefore be a way of ruling without violence, of emphasising tolerance and conciliation. That is the message that must be passed on to the people. Democracy is not about Western values as some authors claim today. It is about tolerance, it is about co-existence in diversity. It is an urgent solution for current problems. It is a universal objective for humanity. What is clear is that there are numerous social actors who have been fighting for democracy in Africa.

Our study of struggles for expanding democratic space in Nigeria (Ibrahim, 1997) reveals that a wide spectrum of actors – labour unions, university students, professional associations, women’s organisations, intellectuals and journalists – have been very active in the democratic struggle. As Björn Beckman has argued, in very arbitrary and authoritarian systems, many groups suffer from relations of domination in their social and professional fields and feel obliged to contest such relations of domination, thereby contributing to the struggle for the expansion of democratic space:

The Nigerian experience of the past decade suggests that interest group agendas can be closely linked to broader popular concerns, relating both to democratisation and welfare. Even special and elitist organisations such as university lecturers and students may be seen as giving voice to popular aspirations. (Beckman, 1997:34)

In addition to specific interest groups, a large number of organisations, movements and alliances specifically devoted to struggles for enhancing democracy and human rights have been formed. The social actors for the construction of democracy therefore exist in West African civil society. Some issues have been more or less resolved. Authoritarianism has failed in its promise to build the nation-state and develop the economy. The military has failed in its promise of imposing order and fighting corruption. The military has also lost its manipulative capacity of pretending it is working for the good of the people. The concentration of power in one party or one absolute president has failed to produce hegemony. In the long run, the struggles of the people for democratic transition cannot but bear fruit of success.
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