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Civil Society Organisations and the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

From a global perspective, civil society organisations have been seen as agents of development. This role especially in the 21st century cannot be over emphasised. The role of Civil Society Organisations in the democratic projects in Africa have made them to be a force to be reckoned with, especially in the areas of engendering good governance and credible electoral process. It is on this note that this paper aims to examine the roles played by the civil society organisations in the 2019 general elections. Another objective is to identify ways by which civil society organisations has helped to achieve peaceful and credible elections in the 2019 general elections. This is in view of its role in previous elections especially the 2011 and 2015 general elections. The paper is anchored on structural functional theory and qualitative research method. The paper recommends that Civil Society Organisations should shun kickback from government in order for them to maintain their integrity.

Keywords: Society, Elections, Development, Democracy, Good Governance

Introduction

Election provides the avenue for democracy to thrive, when it is peaceful and devoid of rigging. "Rigged elections subvert the will of the electorates" (Nwosu, 2017:79).

Prior to the Fourth Republic that commenced in 1999, it was difficult for Nigeria to uphold the tenets of democracy based on incessant military rule. Previous elections in 2003 and 2007 had been perceived by John Campbell as election-like events (Nwosu, 2013). This is in the sense that they were not devoid of the normal rigging and declaration of the loser as the winner. While the 2011 general elections appeared to be peaceful, it was very costly because of the biometric voter's registration (Nwosu, 2013). The 2019 general elections, apart from attracting a lot of controversies, were also very costly and seemed the costliest in recent times. The elections were funded with a sum of ₦242bn, out of which ₦189bn was given to INEC, the remaining amount was to be shared by the security agencies, so as to enhance the provision of security during the election period (Ojo, 2019). In spite of these, a lot of the contestants that lost in the elections went to court and 640 court cases were been filed in the law courts (Ojo, 2019).

It is in view of these that civil societies have a role to play in enhancing credible elections in Nigeria. As Nwosu (2013) opined, strong civil societies are the bodies that can help to challenge illegalities perpetrated by elected leaders. This assertion has been reinforced by Alokpa (2015; Abdullahi and Gana, 2017), who observed that it was civil society organisations that championed the protest against the third term bid of Ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo's

administration under the auspices of the National Civil Society Coalition against Third Term (NACATT). The civil society organisations' efforts in the sphere of electoral reform is also worth mentioning, as they gave unflinching support to the Justice Uwais' Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) set up by the late President Yar'Adua's administration on 28 August, 2017. Their support was given through useful suggestions on how Nigeria could resolve its electoral challenges, while significant number of the civil society organisations were also made members of the ERC (Alokpa, 2015; Abdullahi and Gana, 2017). It is also on record that the support from the civil society organisations to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has strengthened the commission's non-partisan status and its resolve to have and maintain a level playing field for all those participating in elections (EU-SDGN, 2020). In addition, the civil society organisations have clamoured for expansion of the realm of citizens' participation in the electoral process and also media sensitization and policy of inclusiveness so as to ensure integrity in the electoral process (EU-SDGN, 2020).

The importance of the civil societies to the development of a country cannot be over emphasised. This is especially true of a democratic State. Over the years, civil society organisations have contributed to the socio-political and even economic development of developed countries. The developing countries like Nigeria in the past two decades or so have also felt their importance. They have served as vanguard for the protection of human rights and the promotion of rule of law. However, in spite of the prominent role of civil societies in election matters, and overall socio-political development of Nigeria some of them lack accountability with regards to funds donated to them leading to withdrawal of support from these organisations that have donated (Adelabu, 2018). This is an integrity issue that diminishes the status of the concerned civil society organisations as a well-structured body. Moreover, some of the civil society organisations have become a lucrative commercial sector by virtue of their engagement in consulting and direct provision of social services (Adelabu, 2018). It is therefore not surprising that some of the civil societies have become appendages of the government in power in Nigeria in their bid to secure contract. Also, a popular but disgusting trend has been the introduction of legislative and administrative policies by governments that stifle civil society organisations. In spite of these weaknesses, the role of civil societies in ensuring peaceful election and by extension, the consolidation of democracy cannot be overemphasised.

In Nigeria, it is important to note that existing studies on civil societies have been mainly in relation to democracy and governance and as such, there has not been much studies on specific elections like the 2019 elections which exist as the focus of this study. With the antecedents of politicians in Nigeria and the 'do or die' posture of the politicians as per elections, the preparations towards the 2019 General elections became worrisome. This was especially the case with the spate of abduction and political assassinations emphasised in Nigeria. The two prominent political parties namely the All Progressive Congress and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) were engaged in unhealthy competition for political power in the country.

The main objective of the study is to examine the role of civil societies in the 2019 general elections. The specific objectives are to: clarify the concepts of civil society and election elucidate on the nature of election in Nigeria, examine civil society organisations and the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria, examine the challenges of civil society organisations, make appropriate recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification

The concepts that are worth clarifying in this paper are Civil Society and Elections.

Civil Society: Civil society has been conceptualized in different ways by different scholars, to the extent that there is no single accepted definition of the concept. Hall (in Kuka, 2003), defined it as the other side of despotism, a space that allows for the existence of social groups and serves as a symbol to ensure softer and more accommodating condition of existence. The World Bank in (Jezard, 2018) sees civil society as numerous and diverse organisations, community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), indigenous groups, faith-based organisations, and foundations set up by individuals. Going by this conceptualisation, civil society groups can be seen as organisations formed by individuals and groups to project some interests. Examples in Nigeria are Ohaneze Ndigbo, Oodua People's Congress, Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA Africa), Arewa People's Congress, Pan Niger Delta Forum (PANDEF), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF). Examples of international civil society organisations are Amnesty International and Centre for Economic and Social Rights. Civil society can also be seen as an association formed with the aim of promoting a course which can be political, legal or social in nature. A credible civil society will be registered, recognised by the government and work within the ambit of the law. A civil society can be state-based (that is domestic) or international in its form.

Election: Election, like civil society organisation has been conceptualized in varying ways. As opined by Ujo (2010:1), election is "a procedure that allows members of an organisation or community to choose representatives who will hold positions of authority within it". This implies that election is an organised avenue for people to choose their leaders. As Ujo (2010) further opined, elections serve as the avenue by which the voter is able to choose among alternative programmes as presented by contestants. Election had also been seen by Gibbins, Eulan and Webb (2020) as "the formal process of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting".

Election is "the act of voting in candidates who serve as representatives of the people in the different institutions of government namely; the legislature, executive and other spheres as stipulated in the constitution of the country concerned" (Tom and Desmond, 2008:95). This denotes representative democracy which comes into existence on the premise that every member of a community cannot come together to make decisions at the same time. Election is a peaceful means of choosing leaders in a state. Election can be seen as the means by which people of a community chose their representatives by ballot for different political offices. In other words, it is the avenue to vote in individuals considered suitable for various positions in government, especially in the legislature and the executive arms of government

Civil Society Organisations and the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria

Seventy-two civil society organisations participated in the 2019 general elections, out of this number sixteen were steering committee members (Situation Room, 2019). The Table II below shows the list of the civil society organisations in the situation room in Abuja during the 2019 general elections.

Table II – Partner Organisations (Civil Society Organisations)

S/N	Organisation
1	Action Aid Nigeria, FCT
2	Achievers Initiative, Kogi
3	Advocates for Human Rights and Sustainable Development, Abuja
4	Agents of Communication and Development (A-CODE), Enugu
5	Alliance for Credible Election, FCT
6	African Centre for Entrepreneurship and Information Development, FCT
7	Aspilos Foundation, FCT
8	Centre for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD), Lagos
9	Centre for Citizens Rights
10	Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), FCT
11	Centre for Environmental Education and Development, Taraba
12	Centre for Development Support Initiative, Rivers
13	Centre for Health and Development in Africa (CHEDA), Adamawa
14	Centre for Human Rights and Conflict Resolution, Kogi
15	Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), Kano
16	Centre LSD (African Centre for Leadership, Strategy and Development), FCT
17	Centre for Women and Adolescent Empowerment, Adamawa
18	Citizen's Advocacy for Good Governance
19	Citizens Centre for Integrated Development and Social Rights (CCISEDOR), Imo
20	Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), FCT
21	Challenged Parenthood Network Initiative (CPN), Kogi
22	CLEEN Foundation, FCT
23	Community Health and Development Advisory Trust (COHDAT), Imo
24	Community Life Project/Reclaim Naija, Lagos
25	Community Rights Project (CRP), FCT
26	Conference of NGOs (CONGOs), Edo
27	Democratic Action Group (DAG), Kano
28	Development Dynamics, Imo
29	Development and Integrity Intervention Goal Foundation (DIG), Ebonyi
30	Edo State Civil Society Organisation (EDOSCO), Edo
31	Election Monitor, Akure
32	Enough is Enough Nigeria, Lagos
33	Equity Advocates, FCT
34	Foundation for Environmental Rights, Advocacy and Development (FENRAD), Abia
35	Good Governance for Grassroots
36	Habitat Care Initiative, Imo
37	Human Rights Advancement, Development and Advocacy Centre (HURIDAC), Lagos
38	Human Rights Monitor, Kaduna
39	Initiative for Capacity Development and Empowerment Foundation (ICADEF), Benue
40	Inspire Nigerian Youth, FCT
41	International Peace and Civic Responsibility, Anambra
42	Initiative for Grassroots Advancement (INGRA), Kogi
43	Justice and Peace (JDPC)/Caritas Nigeria, FCT
44	Justice and Peace (JDPC)/Caritas Nnewi, Anambra

45	Justice and Peace (JDPC)/Caritas Sokoto, Sokoto
46	Joint National Association of People Living With Disabilities (JONAPWD), FCT
47	Kimpact Development Initiative, Osun
48	Koyenum Immalah Foundation, Edo
49	Mac-Jim Foundation, Bayelsa
50	Majesty Community Rural Development Foundation, FCT
51	Nigeria for Change International, FCT
52	Nigerian Initiative for Social Development (NISD), Ekiti
53	Nigerian Women Trust Fund, FCT
54	Partners for Electoral Reform, FCT
55	Partners West Africa Nigeria, FCT
56	Partnership for Justice, Lagos
57	Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), FCT
58	Proactive Gender Initiative (PGI), FCT
59	REED Centre, Delta
60	Responsible Citizens and Human Development Initiative (RECHDI), Gombe
61	Rural Youth Initiative (RYI), Kebbi
62	Savannah Centre for Diplomacy, Democracy and Development, FCT
63	South-Saharan Social Development Organisation, Enugu
64	Spaces for Change, Lagos
65	Stakeholders Democracy Network, Rivers
66	WANGONET, Lagos
67	Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARD-C), Lagos
68	Women and Youth Empowerment for Advancement and Health Initiative, Adamawa
69	Women's Rights to Education Programme (WREP), FCT
70	Youth For Peace and Development
71	Young Innovators and Vocational Training Initiative, Kaduna
72	Youth Initiative for Advocacy Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), FCT

Source: Report of Nigeria's 2019 General Elections (Nigerian Civil Societies Situation Room, 2019).

From Table II above, it would be seen that the civil society organisations are located in different parts of the country (Nigeria). A lot of the civil society organisations participated actively in elections and made many valuable contributions to the success of the elections. These can be seen in the following ways:

Safeguarding the Right of Voters like those in other countries

In the first place, the civil society organisations helped to safeguard the rights of voters to vote in the 2019 elections. Though INEC opines that individuals that have registered can take part in voting and attend campaigns of political parties as provided for in the 1999 constitution (inecnigeria.org, 2019), this right can be violated by some other individuals. The ability of a civil society to defend/promote the rights of citizens depends on the type of government in power, be it military or civilian. This influences to a large extent the civil societies' ability to protect citizens' rights, especially the right to vote and be voted for and freedom of movement and association.

Henrick (2016) opined that civil societies assist in clamouring for the rights and wishes of the citizenry in different spheres of human life be it economic, health or environment. This implies that civil societies are out to protect the political, social and economic rights of the people. In its quest for the protection of human rights, the Media Rights Agenda, a CSO condemned the invasion of Daily Trust Head office in Abuja and its branch office in Borno by soldiers which was done on the basis that the paper published what was regarded as classified documents which according to them tended to jeopardise national interest. The action of the military was seen as gross violation of human rights (Adetayo, Amaefuly & Akasike, 2019).

Monitoring of Elections

Civil society organisations in Nigeria help to monitor elections in order to prevent rigging and hijacking of election materials. It was in view of this that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) accredited 144 observer groups to monitor the 2019 General Elections (Premium Times, 2019). Some of the observer groups can be seen in the table below (Table III).

Table III – Some INEC Accredited Observer Groups for the 2019 General Elections (Foreign and Domestic)

S/N	Foreign Observer Groups
1	African Bar Association
2	African Parliament of The Civil Society
3	African Union
4	British High Commission
5	Democratic Union of Africa
6	ECOWAS
7	Elections Cameroon
8	Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa
9	Embassy of France
10	Embassy of Japan
11	Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt
12	Embassy of the Republic of Korea
13	European Centre for Electoral Support
14	European Union
15	German International Agency
16	High Commission of Canada
17	International Foundation for Electoral System
18	The International Human Rights Commission
19	International Republican Institute
20	The National Democratic Institute
21	The Network for Solidarity
22	The Empowerment and Transformation for All
23	Nigeria in Diaspora Organisation
24	Pan-African Women Project
25	Pan-African Youth Training and Enlightenment Centre
26	Queen Zara Foundation for Human Resources Development
27	Commonwealth and the United States Embassy
Domestic Observer Groups	

-
- 1 Action Aid Nigeria
 - 2 Advocacy for Quality Leadership and Health Awareness Foundation
 - 3 African Centre for Leadership, Strategy and Development
 - 4 African Christian Care Trust Organisation
 - 5 Transition Monitoring Group
 - 6 YIAGA Africa Initiative
 - 7 Africa Initiative for Sustainable and Positive Development
 - 8 African Youth Leadership Roundtable Initiative
 - 9 Al-Habibiyyah Islamic Society
 - 10 Alliance for Credible Election
 - 11 Asabe Shehu Yar'Adua Foundation
 - 12 Centre for Citizens with Disabilities
 - 13 Centre for Strategic Conflict Management
 - 14 Centre for Transparency Advocacy
 - 15 Children and Youth Awareness Development Foundation
 - 16 Christian Association of Nigeria
 - 17 Christian Council of Nigeria
 - 18 Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion
 - 19 Citizens Rights for Peace and Good Leadership Initiative
 - 20 The Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre
 - 21 CLEEN Foundation
 - 22 Conscience Women of Africa Initiative
 - 23 Jama'atu Izalatua Badi'ah Wa Ikamatu Sunnatu
 - 24 Justice Development and Peace
 - 25 Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria
 - 26 National Orientation Agency
 - 27 Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre)
 - 28 Nigerian Bar Association
 - 29 Northern Patriotic Front
 - 30 Northern Youth and Elders Awareness Forum
 - 31 Police Service Commission
 - 32 Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation
-

Source: Punch, January 28, 2019 punchng.com

From the Table III above, it would be seen that domestic observer groups for the 2019 general elections were drawn from different segment of the Nigeria society, cutting across religious, social and ethnic groups in order to have credible elections. The foreign observers were also men and women of honour. It follows that the Electoral body aids the civil societies in their attempt to monitor election and prevent rigging. This is based on the realization that election rigging is a major drawback for democracy in Nigeria.

Constructive Criticism

Civil societies criticized constructively the handling of the elections by actors. This was done by YIAGA Africa, a coalition of election observers with respect to the 2019 General Elections. The body opined that INEC did not seize the opportunity to improve on the quality of elections but nevertheless the credibility of the 2019 election was not undermined. Election observers also

criticized the election on the ground that it was being affected by logistical shortcomings (Kazeem, 2019).

The Buhari's civilian administration had also been criticized on the basis of promising to conduct a credible poll in 2019. Both the Government and INEC had reneged on this promise because of credibility issues. For instance, an INEC commissioner Amina Zakari, appointed as chairman of the ad-hoc committee on National Coalition Centre was believed to relate to President Buhari through inter-marriage of extended family members. Though, this was refuted vehemently by INEC and the Government. In a related development, Transparency International raised fear concerning the militarization of the 2019 General Elections by the Buhari's led Federal Government. There was the fear of the Security Agencies being compromised (Olorok, 2019).

Mobilisation to Vote and Contest for Elective Positions

Civil societies also have the responsibility to mobilise people to vote. This is in line with the tenet of the structural-functional theory, since civil societies are structures or institutions that are set up to perform some functions like mass mobilization to vote during election in a society characterized by low voters turnout. Though the people were mobilized by the civil societies prior to the 2019 elections, women participation in the elections was still at low ebb. As observed, women constituted 49.4 per cent of Nigeria's population based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics, but political representation was negligible in the sense that, there were only 2,970 women on the electoral ballot which amounted to 11.36 per cent of nominated candidates (Onyeji, 2019). The issue of low representation was further compounded by the fact that the six female presidential candidates stepped down as the election period approached (Onyeji, 2019). This definitely is not in line with the idea of mass mobilization that such bodies like civil societies and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) seek to achieve. It is an indication that women civil societies will have to do more in order to enhance women participation in election.

Enhancement of Democratic Values

The civil society bodies have enhanced democratic values. Among the democratic values are tolerance, orderly conduct during elections. As 2019 election process unfolded the civil society organizations joined together to mobilize citizens to go to the polls, advocate for adherence to democratic concepts and ideas, and candidly report on the process through real-time observation shared on social media and other platforms (USAID, 2019). These however did not prevent rigging and violent acts in some states and local government areas.

Political Education

There is also the issue of political education as a responsibility of civil society organisations. In other words civil societies also enlighten the electorates about how to vote and register as voters. For instance, a civil society organisation, Action Aid, that promotes good governance urged women and youth to shun violence as the 2019 General Elections drew closer (Egba, 2019). Political education can help to reduce the incidence of vote buying, vote selling and thuggery thus, enhancing democratic consolidation.

Hate Speeches

Civil societies helped to reduce the impact of hate speeches in the 2019 General Elections. This was done through outright condemnation of hate speeches and the clamour for issue-based campaigns instead of mudslinging, bigotry and insults (Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, 2015). There is the need to realize however that in spite of this stance of civil societies they were not in support of hate speech bill that sought to prescribe death penalty for any person found guilty of any form of hate speech that results in the death of another person (Adibe, 2018). The Buhari civilian administration with the aid of civil societies has been able to reduce it to the barest minimal level. Hate speeches can promote violence, hatred and can result into crisis across ethnic lines. Nigeria witnessed a lot of hate speeches prior to the elections of 2015.

The Challenges of Civil Society Organisations in the Elections of Nigeria

The civil society organisations in spite of contributing to the success of 2019 elections are beset with challenges. The challenges include the following:

Corruption:

Corruption exists within the rank and file of civil societies and this cannot be overemphasised. As observed by Swardt (2015), corruption is not limited to political office holders or public servants, it is also noticeable among civil society organisations. As Swardt (2015) further asserted, Transparency International (TI) in its survey noted that 28 per cent of people globally opined that civil society organisations (CSOs) are somehow corrupt or extremely corrupt. This belief is also noticeable in Nigeria and this has in no small measure eroded public confidence in the civil society organisations as vanguards for the protection of human rights.

Funding as a Challenge

Civil societies are usually funded by their members or in the alternative, secure funds from foreign bodies. For instance, the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) collects dues from its members, though substantial parts of its finance which were derived from foreign donors (Kew, 2004). As Kew (2004) further posited, most of CLO's ₦30million funds in its 1996 budget came from US based National Endowment for Democracy, Carnegies Corporation and several churches in Germany. In the quest for the safeguard of human rights all over the world, Amnesty International is being funded by its supporters. It does not receive money from the Government of any country. This is to enable it maintain its impartiality (UNESCO, 2010). While buttressing this position, Amnesty International claims, it is politically and financially independent based on the fact that it does not solicit for or accept funds from any government or political party in trying to document information and campaign against the abuse of human rights (Amnesty International U.K., 2017). This claim of Amnesty International has however been debunked on the ground that Amnesty International does receive funds from the government of some states. For instance, it has been alleged that in 2011, Amnesty International collected the sum of £42,000 from the U.K. Department for International Development purpose and exist as part of award for four years that commenced in 2008 with the amount totaling £3,149,000 (ngo.monitor.org. 2012). It was further alleged that in 2009, Amnesty International was given a sum of £2.5million which was approximately 1% of the donations and were received from governments (ngo.monitor.org. 2012). This allegation if found to be true calls for concern as the Amnesty International's independent position can easily be compromised with the collection of funds from governments or their agencies.

Incivility in Conduct

Another challenge of civil societies is that some are not civil in their conduct. Afolabi (2011) posited that some civil societies are agents or apologies of government in power as they try to promote the interest of the government and this is noticeable in Nigeria. Afolabi (2011) opined further that this inevitably leads to a civil society that can be seen as structurally deficient. It is therefore the responsibility of civil societies to strive to maintain their credibility by not being partisan.

Lack of Press Freedom:

It is pertinent to note that, the mass media has a lot of role to play in democracy. However, in Nigeria painfully, freedom of expression and human rights are in a state of siege with journalists and their family members routinely arrested, tortured and detained (Akinwale, 2010). Lack of press freedom and intolerance to opposition in Nigeria has been demonstrated by the detention over a long period of time of a human right activist, convener of revolution protest and publisher of Sahara Reporters, Omoyele Sowore. Sowore was detained by the Department of State Services (DSS) for about five months on charges that have to do with treason, consequently about 50 civil society organisations implored the United Nations and the African Union to appeal to the Federal Government of Nigeria to release him (Sahara Reporters, 2019). Omoyele Sowore was released on Tuesday, 23rd December, 2019 by the DSS as a result of the intervention of the Attorney-General of the Federation, Mr. Abubakar Malami (SAN).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it would be seen that elections in Nigeria have involved various electoral malpractices like rigging and ballot snatching. It would have also been realized that though civil society organisations participated actively in the 2019 general elections, they are still confronted with enormous challenges. Civil society organisations should shun kickback. If this is done, they would be able to maintain their integrity and promote the course of action that they want to promote. Their relevance in the scheme of things will also be guaranteed.

It is also recommended that, civil society organisations should avoid receiving funds in form of financial aids from the Governments of some of the states where they operate. By so doing, they would be able to maintain their independence and neutrality. Civil societies should avoid bias in dealing with different groups or individuals. Bias can stem from data gathering, processing and dissemination. They should inculcate the tenets of objectivity in their activities. Civil societies should be committed to their ideals. This can be achieved through hard work, resilience and wide coverage.

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