RETHINKING ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA
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Introduction

The 2019 general elections amply demonstrated the perversities of elections in Nigeria, and showed once again that elections and their outcomes entail much more than the franchise and democratic choices made by citizens to decide who governs. By some accounts, elections in the country are stage-managed and outcomes are not determined by how people vote, but are rather manipulated, cooked up, even predetermined, suggesting that elections may be bogus and far from what they are supposed to be. This situation obviously led one scholar to conclude long ago in exasperation that electoral outcomes in Nigeria defy (rational) explanations; the results just have to be accepted as presented. The increased roles of election tribunals and law courts in the determination of electoral outcomes sometimes on technical grounds represents another variety of the evolving scenarios of electoral outcomes not determined by votes. The pertinent question would be how and why elections can be so dissociative of the franchise, but this is only one of the theoretical puzzles elicited by elections and electoral politics in Nigeria, and the conundrum of 'choiceless elections' in which people vote but do not choose. Another puzzle relates to how the conduct and outcomes of elections forcefully articulate the fragility of statehood and national cohesion.

Puzzles like these suggest that the core of elections does not consist only of the formal structures and procedures associated with free and fair elections, such as the impartiality of electoral bodies and technological efficiency in the accreditation of voters, card readers and collation of results. There are, in addition, the hard and arguably more serious and fundamental variables that relate elections to social structure and state politics. These belong to the less obvious and non-formal terrains of participation that go beyond elections, which encompass the desperate and surreptitious behind-the-scene activities that involve tradeoffs, manipulation of electoral institutions and processes, rigging, intimidation, in short, activities that mostly undermine formal structures and processes. As IDEA (2016:7) has rightly observed, Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) have largely been inserted into political contexts that have not really changed and often have to fulfil mandates in contentious democratic situations. There is reason, therefore, to consider the non-formal terrain more critical in explaining electoral

outcomes especially the bewildering and fiercely contested results that are nevertheless 'credible' because they comply substantially with certain unwritten rules of elections in the country, most notably the expectation that powerful politicians, godfathers and incumbents should win in their constituencies, whether they are popular, acceptable or not. The informal terrain, whose dynamics nevertheless have the force of a value system provides the lead for interrogating the intriguing nexus between elections and perverse politics.

The intricacies of the scenarios and tendencies described above suggest that although effective institutions and procedures or what I call free and fair election variables (independence of electoral commission and security agencies, orderly voting, compliance with voting procedures, etc.) are crucial to the credibility of elections, they are not sufficient to capture the essence of elections and their consequences in Nigeria. Nothing demonstrates this better than the reality that it is quite possible for elections to pass the free and fair tests and still end up with nation-threatening tensions and fiercely contested and unacceptable outcomes. Why are elections so peculiarly troublesome both in their conduct and consequences? The answer lies in the characteristic high stakes that place them in the extraordinary category that Key (1955) characterized long ago as *critical elections* – as opposed to normal or conventional elections which free and fair variables presume them to be. Although Key's main focus was on the changes elicited by landmark American presidential elections, the notion of critical elections aptly captures the essence of elections in Nigeria and several other parts of Africa (see Dudley, 1973).

Key's defining elements of high depth and intensity of electoral involvement and the occurrence of more or less profound realignments in relations of power are applicable to most national elections in Nigeria. Although Key's thesis has been critiqued and revised in the light of US experiences which suggest that realignments are products of cumulative presidential elections rather than one 'critical election' as well as of the rational choices made by party elites and activists to exploit particular issue cleavages (Shafer, 1991; Mayhew, 2002; Rosenof, 2003; Carmines and Schmidt, 2018), the notion that critical elections engender critical changes in political relations remains valid. The Nigerian variant is further characterized by pervasive tension, violence, uncertainty and fear of the unknown before, during and after the elections (Adekanye, 1990). The hallmarks of this perilous state include cross-country movements of citizens to the safety of their home areas, lockdown of the country on election days, stockpiling

of food and daily essentials, low voter turnout, excessive deployment of police, military and security agencies and personnel, and postponement or cancellation of elections or their declaration as inconclusive. By their very nature in Nigeria, critical elections define – or redefine – the strategic trajectory and futures of the country, in a manner that rocks the boat of national cohesion, unsettles political relations, threatens the very existence of the state, and often requires one form of compromise or the other to get things going again. As a report on governance in Africa aptly puts it, "elections…have become conflict triggers rather than instruments for resolving conflicts…Rather than unite, elections…divide people, undermining the very essence of elections, which is to peacefully aggregate preferences in the choice of political leadership" (UNECA, 2013:1). This is what gives critical elections the distinctive character of being state legitimacy tests.

This conception of elections provokes a different set of questions from those associated with normal or conventional democratic elections. While the latter typically raise questions about rules, procedures, freeness and fairness, the former raises questions that are more contextual and sociological, having to do with history, values, norms, attitudes, culture and elite behaviour: Why do elections elicit so much desperation, fear and tension? Why are they approached in zero-sum, warlike terms and why do people believe that elections are won by means other than votes alone? Why are some electoral outcomes more acceptable and relatively peaceful even when the electoral processes that produce them are flawed and rigged? Why have elections been characterized by preferences for self-help actions that do not follow the rules of the game? Could it be that, as a reading of Merton (1968) would suggest, there are more fundamental social structural problems with legitimacy that manifest, among others, in the disjuncture between legitimate aspirations and procedures or strategies for attaining them? Why are elections state legitimacy tests that continually threaten national cohesion and state survival?

By the very nature of their focus on formal, legal-constitutional and procedural aspects of presumably normal elections, as well as on the short intervals within which elections take place, analytical frames that take their bearings from institutionalist perspectives are not adequately primed to account for the intricacies of critical elections. It is against this backdrop that I interrogate the trending frameworks for analyzing elections in Nigeria and Africa in general which are anchored in the new orthodoxies of governance that now dominate electoral discourses and tend to isolate elections from the larger political and social contexts which make them

critical. The hope is that addressing the more embedded issues will help to restore electoral analyses to the theoretically more profitable paths that relate elections and party politics to state politics, a perspective that dominated electoral studies in Nigeria for a long time (Sklar, 1963; Post, 1963; Post and Vickers, 1974; Dudley, 1973, 1981; Ollawa, 1981), rescue analyses of elections from the stranglehold of narrow-focused regime change approaches, and bring us closer to responding to Dudley's (1973:55) long-standing observation that the determinants of electoral outcomes and consequences in Nigeria have yet to be adequately investigated. I argue for a refocusing of analytical frames that relate elections to social structure, taking Merton's characterization of dysfunctional social structure as one of the points of departure.

First, the sources and flaws of trending frameworks

Elections are at the core of democracy and democratic governance. They not only offer opportunities for inclusive participation, but also make popular sovereignty meaningful by giving citizens the power to determine who governs them, and lay the basis for accountability and legitimacy. Following the democratization 'revolution' that led to the diffusion of neoliberal regimes to many countries around the world, elections became the mainstay of democracy, the key instrumentalities of democratic transition, installation and consolidation. The equation of elections with democracy was clearly an exaggeration as correctly argued by Karl (1995, 2000; also Diamond, 1996) who cautioned on the "fallacy of electoralism" or the tendency to privilege elections over other aspects of democracy and equate successful elections especially those in which incumbents lost with democratic growth (Przeworski et al, 1996). This did not however halt the emergence of perspectives that placed elections at the centre of democratization processes. Huntington's two consecutive successful elections was path-setting for this strand of analysis that was quickly embraced by the regime change-seeking international community which found in elections the appropriate mechanism for exporting, installing, and monitoring democratic growth in so-called new democracies. The election monitoring and observer missions that became an integral part of the validating process of elections by powerful harbingers of liberal democracy (the EU, Commonwealth, donor agencies and international civil society and local civil society partners) took their roots in this process. Simultaneously, the twinning of democracy with governance further extended the heuristic value of elections in the advocacy and promotion of citizen participation and engagement, transparency, responsiveness and legitimacy (Osaghae and Osaghae, 2013).

All this appeared appropriate and consonant with one major goal of democracy, which is citizen power. The reality, however, is that the reinvented location of elections is much narrower in focus and revolves around the 'procedural mechanics' of elections. Elections belong to what Clarke and Foweraker (2001) have described as a 'thin' conception of democracy – by contrast, the fat or maximalist conception, is more encompassing and contextual, and relates elections to the deeper political issues of statehood and legitimacy. It goes without saying that the fat conception of democracy offers a more useful framework for analyzing elections, which are only a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. This is more so in Nigeria and Africa where, as we have said, the high stakes of elections make them critical as referendums on the state. Many analysts are likely to agree with this line of thought, yet the thin conception which dwells on the soft variables of free and fair elections continues to dominate electoral discourses. This is even to the point where all that seems to matter is the effectiveness and efficiency of the formal side of institutions, procedures, technologies and actual conduct of elections, with scant regard for their bearings with, and consequences for, the state.

Why has the thin conception remained dominant in spite of its obvious shortcomings? The answer lies in the larger governance reforms project whose regime change agenda locates elections as instruments for installing neoliberal regimes. As Taylor (2002:35) reminds us, "Governance is not…a neutral description of an inevitable process but an ideological narrative justifying the neoliberal state". Like other aspects of the mostly one-size-fits-all neoliberal governance reforms in which the goal is to make targeted changes more manageable as it were, elections are approached in formalistic and institutionalist terms. This approach is further justified by the long-standing diagnosis that the governance problematic in most African states has more to do with weak and ineffective institutions than anything else. Reforms are packaged as technical exercises which aim to optimize efficiency by, amongst others, keeping out politics – whose nuisance is to distort and distract – as much as possible, and proceed on the basis of checklist templates in which core elements like elections and procurement are assigned empirical indicators for monitoring, assessing or evaluating institutions, processes and outcomes (see international codes and standards, such as the *Declaration Governing Democratic Elections in Africa* (2002) and the *African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*(2007)).

A typical checklist for elections which involves learning, emulation and installation of received global best practices would include technical issues of logistics, distribution and use of

electoral materials and technologies, voter education and registration procedures, effective use of voter cards and card reading machines, compliance with pre-election guidelines and campaign deadlines, timely and orderly voting, voter turnout, transparency and reliability of results collation, neutrality of security agencies, and prevention of thuggery and violence, participation of all competing political parties, and electoral administration and independence of the electoral commission, rule of law, constitutionalism, and inclusiveness, all of which can be directly observed and scored. So, if elections score highly on the assigned criteria, they are adjudged free, fair and credible. Where they do not, the elections do not pass the free and fair tests, and this simply becomes the basis for more reforms and external support. As the EU Election Observer Mission Report on the 2019 Elections in Nigeria puts it, "the systemic failings evident in the elections and the low levels of voter participation show the **need for fundamental reform** [read as more reform]" (emphasis original).

The final reports of the NDI-IRI and EU Observer Missions on the 2019 Elections followed this 'logic'. The reports fell short of saying that the elections failed, but concluded that they did not meet the expectations of many Nigerians, in comparison with those of 2015 which were adjudged free, fair and credible. The failings were attributed by NDI-IRI to template deviations including last-minute postponement of the presidential and National Assembly elections; delays in opening some polling units and other administrative challenges; serious irregularities including vote buying, intimidation of voters and election officials; election-related violence; flawed candidate nomination processes in political parties; paucity of women and youth candidates signifying low-level inclusivity; lack of commitment to peaceful and credible elections on the part of political parties and their leaders; failure to restrain and hold accountable members and supporters who committed electoral offenses; and weak election dispute resolution processes.

The report's recommended remedies align with the procedural and institutional diagnosis:

- Legal Framework and Election Dispute Resolution: pursue a comprehensive, inclusive and expeditious electoral reform process; establish time limits for the adjudication of pre-election petitions.
- Election Administration: complete constituency delimitation exercise and identify necessary polling units at least one year before the next elections; make the continuous

voter registration process more accessible to voters; develop and adopt a strong strategic communications plan; reconsider the order and timing of general elections; create a process that facilitates suffrage for those on official duty on election day; adopt more transparent procedures for the tabulation, transmission and announcement of results

- Political Party Conduct: urgently commit to and implement measures to strengthen mechanisms for political party internal democracy; develop and campaign on issue-based platforms that reflect citizen priorities; build the capacity of political parties to monitor elections.

- Civic Engagement: improve coordination among stakeholders to increase and deepen voter and civic education; continue efforts to enhance the participation of marginalized groups, including women, youth, people with disabilities and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

- Election Security: continue to improve coordination between security agencies and INEC on the provision of electoral security.

- Enforce electoral laws by investigating and prosecuting perpetrators of election-related criminal acts.

The EU report had similar recommendations. These included enhancement of INEC's organizational and operational capacities; further elaboration and strengthening of INEC procedures for the collation of results; legal backing for full results transparency; increased inclusivity and transparency of inter-agency body responsible for electoral security; legal backing for political parties to have a minimum number of female candidates; extension of electoral tribunals to pre-election cases; and reform of the licencing system of the broadcast media to ensure access, pluralism and diversity.

The EU report also believed that provisions of the 2018 electoral reform amendment bill which, among others, gave legal backing to the use of smart card readers and for the electronic transmission of results from the polling units, the serialization of ballot papers for each polling unit, and the announcements of results in the presence of the agents of the parties could have made all the necessary difference in the elections. The president refused to assent to the bill for reasons that were believed to be tied to his efforts and those of the ruling APC at winning the 2019 election. The checklists, diagnoses and remediations are basically the same for all elections

(in Africa). Kanyinga's (2018) analysis of the flaws of elections in Kenya and Zimbabwe and how to solve them show the one-size-fits-all character of the templates: the major problems are lack of constitutionalism; a weak culture of rule of law; and poor electoral governance, while solutions include building "inclusive politics", strengthening the rule of law, and altering the electoral system to provide for inclusive political power and address the challenges embedded in "winner-take-all" politics.

Yet, elections adjudged to be relatively, reasonably or substantially credible, free and fair, for the most part by foreign observer missions and monitors that have become gatekeepers and validators of elections, sometimes end up with contested and delegitimizing outcomes that linger long after the elections. So, it is quite possible for elections to comply with the key template measures and yet be flawed and problematic, which suggests that the legal-constitutional and technical aspects of elections may be important but that they are not the key determinants of their flaws, outcomes and consequences. For these, we have to consider the historical and social contexts of elections which inhere in the 'fat' conception of the election-democracy nexus. Thus, for example, ethnic, religious and regional interests represented by political parties and candidates are key variables that shape electoral calculations, but these tend to be underplayed by the focus on card readers and other technicalities. Analyses of the 2015 and 2019 elections that employed template frameworks of free and fair elections concluded that ethnicity was no longer a major factor in elections in Nigeria.

This was more so in the 2019 presidential election in which the candidates of the two major political parties – incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP – were Northerners, Fulani and Moslem. Yet, the elections not only clearly showed bloc ethnic voting patterns, the campaigns, voter mobilizations and candidate selection processes reflected strong ethnic preferences and calculations that, as in previous elections, polarized the country. For the Igbo of the Southeast who had the Vice Presidential slot in the main opposition party, the PDP, for instance, the elections provided the best opportunity so far for redressing their self-perceived marginalization. They voted in large numbers for the PDP, but this drew the ire of the Yoruba in Lagos who saw support for the opposition as a threat to their control of Lagos state via the APC. Polling centres and neighbourhoods that had large Igbo voters were attacked, ballot boxes were snatched, and lives threatened. In other words, the conduct and outcomes of the elections were not less tension-soaked or less violent simply

because they were reasonably free and fair. Ballot box snatching, thuggery, dubious cancellations of results and use of police, military and security agents to intimidate opponents, and suspected manipulation and falsification of results were reported all over the country.

The failure to relate elections to the larger issues and contexts of state politics and legitimacy, by treating elections as isolated, stand-alone events, which amounts to literally taking the wind out of the sail of elections, must count as a major flaw of the institutionalist bent of the reforms approach. But it is not the only one. The narrow focus on the actual periods or days of elections and voting, which derives partly from the interval specificity of democratic transition perspectives (Osaghae, 1995), and partly from the nature of electoral tourism of foreign observer missions, is another. However, the evidence from the Nigerian field at least suggests that, contrariwise, the factors that determine electoral outcomes, including the positioning of parties, the long-drawn campaigns, selection of candidates based on zoning and power rotation arrangements for example, and the power sharing compromises and strategies involved in them, bestride election dates and periods, notwithstanding that party primaries to select candidates are held shortly before the elections. Under the circumstances, strict focus on the period of elections runs the risk of missing out on the factors that make elections in general critical, and some, more critical than would otherwise be expected.

Another problem is that institutionalist frames are largely descriptive and offer explanations that literally beg the question. Reports of election observer bodies catalogue infractions of the electoral process, sometimes with the aid of the police, military and other security agencies, that lead to violence, rigging, vote buying, and manipulations of results, which are attributed to institutional weaknesses, and lax enforcement of rules. But the weakness of institutions and enforcement of rules which manifest in violence, rigging and manipulations needs to be explained. A member of the Commonwealth Election Observer Mission to the 2003 elections who covered the Niger-Delta reveals that the election outcomes were most definitely fixed. This had to be so because while voter turnout for the elections was very low in many polling stations, with some polling booths not opening till 2.00 p.m. and closing before 5.00p.m., the election results declared for most constituencies indicated a 90-100 percent voter turn-out (Mole, 2003:427). This was by no means an isolated case, so the question is why? There are several other pertinent questions. Why is the process of candidate selection so contentious? Why has there been an increase in the desperation to capture state power as evidenced by the increased

spate of inconclusive elections and the devious postponements and cancellations of elections at the last minute, which are deliberate obstructions of the electoral process? Why are some results accepted even when they are obviously rigged, and those that were not so obviously rigged rejected? Why do political parties and candidates for elections believe that elections are not won by votes, but by huge bribes, violence, and manipulation of the process? To be able to answer questions like these, "It is imperative to explore terrains of participation that go beyond elections and that serve to change mind-sets away from winner takes all approach to politics" (IDEA, 2016:7).

Elections and Politics: From 'Thin' to 'Fat' Narratives

The reality of institutions, rules and procedures, as well as objects of reforms that constitute the core of trending governance perspectives on elections is at variance with that of the politics of elections. While the former lays down the institutional frames and rules of the game and expects actors (political parties, electoral commissions, political leaders, candidates, voters, electoral officials, security agencies) to play by them in pursuit of integrity, freeness and fairness, the latter is built around interest-begotten self-help rules that bypass and undermine institutional frames and rules, and make elections more critical and state-threatening than normal or regular elections would. In the order of things, the interest-begotten rules define the larger contexts within which institutional frames and rules are meant to work, which is partially what IDEA (2016:7) means by the assertion that electoral management bodies often have to fulfil mandates in contentious democratic situations.

The situations have been elaborated as "the prevalent cultural-normative, economic, political, and human security environment, constituting the political economy, or the typical "developmental circumstances" of competitive party and electoral politics in the African state, [which] severely constrains the feasibility of democracy in Africa." The 2019 general elections in Nigeria clearly demonstrated that "the material and normative-cultural structure of Nigeria's political economy constitutes shackles, from which the country must free itself, if it is to achieve and sustain electoral integrity and strengthen the process of democratic consolidation and nation-building" (Jinadu, 2019:9). It goes without saying that the 'contentious situations' underbrush has to be interrogated and cleared, as it were, in order for the institutional frames and rules to be meaningful and legitimate.

At the core of this interrogation is the question of why elections in the country belong to the category of critical elections which, unlike normal or regular elections, are state legitimacy tests that threaten the continued existence of the state. I suggest two explanatory clusters. The first, and probably the most popular in the literature, relates to the nature of the state itself. The key factors here are (i) the highly contested and incomplete process of state – and nation – building, whose hallmarks are the unresolved crisis of ownership and susceptibility of the state to exclusionary capture; (2) the domination, if not monopoly of development spaces by the state, which encourages a culture of governmentality, entitlement and privileging that ties the material progress of groups and their leaders to their shares of state power and access to state resources; and (3) the desperation of the political elite to capture state power for which electoral politics presents the only legal-constitutional platform (military coups and interventions presented alternatives in the past). The essence of these tendencies has been captured by the notion of the rentier state, which, according to Jinadu (2019:2) is "the site for violent political competition among ethnic fractions of the political elite to acquire political power for primitive accumulation and economic power", the rentier state itself being "a fledgling proxy for external capital which does not provide the conducive environment for the nurture of democracy, including competitive party and electoral politics, and development".

The character of the state and its attendant political terrain predispose a form of politics that makes every form of competition – material, non-material, symbolic – significant. However, elections are the most critical since they most directly have to do with state capture. Although political parties are the most important actors in normal democratic elections, they are not the only frontline – or even the most critical – participants in Nigeria. Communal, ethnic, cultural, regional and religious political organizations, militia groups and movements, and even traditional rulers take the driving seat in political mobilizations, compromises, agenda-setting, campaigns, selection of candidates, funding, and so on, and political parties often find themselves acting the scripts of these more embedded centrifugal actors, especially in the selection of candidates, zoning/rotation of party tickets, appointments to top government offices, character of political opposition, and major campaign issues. Notable groups include the Arewa Consultative Forum, Arewa Elders Forum, Afenifere, Yoruba Council of Elders, Odua Peoples' Congress, Ohaneze Ndigbo, Middle Belt Forum, PANDEF, Ijaw National Congress, South South Peoples'

Assembly, Urhobo Progress Union, Christian Association of Nigeria, Northern Christian Forum, and Miyetti Allah.

The involvement of these groups before, during and after elections, especially the uncompromising claims and hardline positions they uphold on issues of alleged sectional domination, marginalization, resource sharing, restructuring of the federal system, conduct and outcomes of elections, and the like, demonstrably heat up the polity and are a major factor in fiercely contested outcomes and the reinvention of elections as legitimacy tests. They underlie the pathologies of elections in places like Nigeria which have been aptly captured by UNECA (2013:1) as follows: "Sectarian mobilization, intimidation, and violence are major features of some African countries' elections, which have become conflict triggers rather than instruments for resolving conflicts...Rather than unite, elections divide people, undermining the very essence of elections, which is to peacefully aggregate preferences in the choice of political leadership". Within the context of state-sanctioned constructions and definitions of identity in Nigeria, the embedded actions of these frontline political organizations not only give rise to and wake up ethnic, religious and regional divisions, but also continuously reproduce and sustain them. To the extent that the activities and tendencies of these groups are not illegal or illegitimate, their roles in making supposedly regular elections critical have to be taken a bit more seriously. Those roles, which the political parties and their legislated nationalizations are too circumscribed to play, are best analyzed within the context of the ownership crisis that has crippled the state since its colonial imposition.

The second explanatory cluster is embedded in the social structure, that is, the social, political, economic and cultural milieu within which the individual lives and interacts with other members of society (also Rossi, 1974). Such elements as beliefs, values, norms and mores order the structure and condition individual and group tendencies in rather fundamental ways. According to Merton (1968:186-7), it is within the social order that what he calls "cultural goals" related to "a frame of aspirational reference in things worth dying for" emerge. The goals come with a structure (which is more norm and value-based than legal-constitutional) that "defines, regulates and controls the acceptable modes of reaching…these goals". In relatively consolidated – or orderly – societies, this is quite often the case, and it is relatively easier to observe and apply the rules, regulations and procedures govern free and fair elections. The situation is however different when we have state-society disjunctures of the 'old societies, new states' variety

(Geertz, 1963). The disjunctures have their origins in the colonial impositions of state creation (Osaghae, 2015). In such societies, as explained by Ekeh's (1975) theory of two publics, although there is consensus on cultural goals or aspirational references in things "worth dying for" (of which elections and state capture are arguably some of the most crucial), structural rules are fractured and not capable of bringing about desired goals. This is not simply a matter of institutional weakness of ineffectiveness, but of a more underlying belief that things worth dying for cannot be gotten by following the rules alone. Consequently, people rely more on self-help strategies for winning the game rather than winning under the rules of the game. This attitudinal frame applies not only to elections but competition for social goods and resources considered valuable and strategic. For Merton (1968:188) such aberrant behaviour or anomie "may be regarded sociologically as a system of dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and social structural avenues for realizing those aspirations".

Interest-begotten self-help strategies are pervasive and extend to virtually every arena of electoral politics. Ibrahim (2017) provides a comprehensive list of various forms of electoral fraud and rigging:

> 1. Illegal printing of voters' cards; 2. Illegal possession of ballot boxes; 3. Stuffing of ballot boxes; 4. Falsification of election results; 5. Illegal thumb-printing of ballot papers; 6. Infant voting 7. Compilation of fictitious names on voters' lists; 8. Illegal compilation of separate voters' lists; 9. Illegal printing of forms used for collection and declaration of election results; 10. Deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas; 11. Announcing results in places where no elections were held; 12. Unauthorized announcement of election results; 13. Harassment of candidates, agents, and voters; 14. Change of list of electoral officials; 15. Box-switching and inflation of figures.

These are in addition to manipulations of ethnic and religious differences especially between 'indigenes' and 'non-indigenes', and the more recent strategies of rescheduling, postponing or cancelling elections to favour incumbents in particular, and manipulations of election tribunals and courts of law. Self-help strategies have also been strengthened by the wide-ranging discretionary powers exercised at various levels of the electoral process by the executive arm of government and INEC. A corollary of this is the so-called incumbency factor that makes it possible for ruling parties and political office holders to deploy all the 'resources' at their disposal – public funds and control of security agencies, government-owned media and electoral bodies – to rig elections. The ease – or impunity - with which elections were declared

inconclusive by returning officers and INEC based on the margin of lead principle in manners that reeked of devious efforts to manipulate the process because favoured candidates were heading for a loss, illustrates the point very well. This was believed to be the case in the 2019 gubernatorial elections in Kano, Plateau, Bauchi, and Adamawa states, and earlier, in 2018, that of Osun state. Indeed, in the case of Osun, which was finally determined by a split majority (five to two) judgement of the Supreme Court, one of the dissenting judges, Justice Akaahs accused INEC of partisanship, saying it failed to act as an unbiased umpire. Justice Akaahs said he observed that INEC, through an officer without legal powers to act, ordered the supplementary election to ensure that Oyetola cancelled over 300 votes that Adeleke led with after the initial election that held on September 22 (https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/07/breaking-s-court-upholds-oyetolas-election-dismisses-adelekes-appeal/)

At the core of self-help electoral behaviour is the belief that the strength of political parties and candidates and the probability that they can win elections depends on the amount of support given to them by powerful men and women because to all intents and purposes, these are the people who secure and 'win' elections. It is rare to find an electoral victory that is not literally delivered by the strong men or godfathers (so-called because candidates especially those that win elections are proxy) who control the constituencies. As it were, the outcomes of elections are pretty much pre-determined by the patterns of support by the 'kingmakers' and 'godfathers', and quite often elections end up working from the answer. Thus, even where elections are clearly rigged as affirmed by election observers and monitors as well as electoral tribunals that have cancelled elections and upturned declared results in several instances, the results are accepted, even justified, because they are secured by the powers-that-be and it is inconceivable that strongmen can lose their constituencies. It is only when the strongman loses to rival strongmen that elections 'hot up' and become more violent. So, it is the big men, the super patrons that count, and politicians and political parties invest almost exclusively on buying and retaining their support. Of course, the big men whose influence also derives from the fact that they are also ethnic entrepreneurs, do work very hard to validate their patron roles. They actually 'buy' the votes and retain the services of the terror machines constituted by thugs, criminals and groups like motor park gangs and drivers unions whose internal operations thrive on violence. In some cases, they also have security agents on their payroll – many of them actually have police and other security operatives as personal bodyguards.

The triangulation that makes it possible for strongman to intermediate relations between politicians running for office and the electorate has obvious implications for reciprocity and accountability. Politicians hold themselves primarily accountable to the strongmen rather than the electorate whose votes would have been bought and who are left to demand accountability in the courts of patrons rather than elected politicians with whom they do not have any direct dealings. One other reason for this is that the critical sponsorship of strongmen also extends to party primaries where candidates for elections are supposedly elected but actually selected. Indeed, the selection is generally 'zoned' to the strongmen, which makes it impossible for a politician to get party nomination entirely on his or her own merit. In cases of Governors and local government Chairmen who control budgets, aspirant politicians have to swear to oaths of allegiance and go through secret rituals committing themselves to continued payoffs in the form of agreed percentages of state resources, contracts, and appointments of the strongman's cronies to juicy positions.

Conclusions

The push for credible elections which reproduces so-called global best practices a la regime change has led to a paradigm shift in the study and essence of elections from what I call the hard variables of elections which relate them to larger political issues of statehood and legitimacy, to soft variables of free and fair elections. In practical terms, this has meant an equal template approach to elections that gives too little attention to the nature of the state or the challenges that beset or are provoked by elections. This paradigm shift unfortunately is unable to account for why elections in many African countries but especially Nigeria which has been the focus of this paper belong to the extraordinary category of critical elections, operationalized as elections that are akin to state legitimacy tests that characteristically complicate the process of national cohesion and threaten the very existence of the state. For this reason, elections mean more than the routine or regular periodic exercises liberal democracies presume them to be. This paper makes a case for rethinking the essence of elections along these lines and proposes interrogations that relate elections to the state and its social foundations. If elections are to serve the purposes expected of them, which relate to…The need to reform the institutional, technological and procedural frameworks for free and fair elections cannot be overemphasized, but these can neither be meaningful nor effective for as long as the underbrush of unresolved state ownership and legitimacy that make elections warlike remains uncleared. As was pointed out, the fact that

elections comply substantially with the template for free and free elections does not make them credible or guarantee that their outcomes will not be contested. The challenge is to account for why this is the case.

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