

Rigged Re-Elections in Africa and the Legitimacy of Democratic Regimes: A Nigerian Scenario

Khadijah Sanusi Gumbi
Department of Political Science
And International Studies
Ahmadu Bello University
Zaria, Nigeria.

Abstract

This article views rigged re-election as a threat posed to the legitimacy of democratic regimes in Africa by closely looking at the Nigerian scenario. It argues that most African governments perform poorly on public affairs, and yet continue to renew their mandates using power of incumbency and state machinery, including the election bodies. These governments are often declared winners even though the elections were not free and fair. This article takes a look at the issue of re-elections in Africa and the legitimacy of regimes that emerge therefrom, with a specific focus on Nigeria.

Keywords: rigging, democracy, legitimacy, re-election

Introduction

The democratic practice in Africa is characterised by people who are dissatisfied with their government, but, they continue to renew their mandates during election. This case becomes more perplexing where even the international election observers validate the elections as free and fair which clearly shows the elections have been rigged by the incumbent government. For instance, the Kenyan election of 1992 international observers admitted that the incumbent government had influenced the conduct of the election to its advantage. (Cowen, 2002) this is not different from the case of the 2007 general elections in Nigeria, the reason has been argued that during elections voters are more interested in what they receive from incumbent government rather than what they hope to get when voted for in power, they therefore vote for the party that lavishes them with money and goods during elections. According to Diamond 1988, competitions for political offices as avenues for accumulating private wealth is the reason why elections are contested, manipulated and rigged particularly by the government in power.

To Cowen and Kayinga (2002), they believe that these competitions are even peculiar in second elections, where the success of government in power to retain its position even when it's not performing well in office necessitate the use of manipulation like the case of Zambian election in 2001. The Nigerian scenario is the backbone of this article, reason is that Nigeria had a very long history of multi party democracy which has faced a number of problems in various election even when electoral processes have constantly been modified to tackle issues of election rigging in the country it has continued to persist. This brings us to the question; is the problem of election really not within the electoral system as Ikpe 2009 argues, or in the problem lies in the socio-political and economic system? Should the government continue to restructure the electoral process instead of restructuring the socio-political system which encourages election rigging and other abnormal voting behaviours in African democracies.

Conceptual Clarification on the Relationship between Democracy, Election and Legitimacy

Democracy is a system that allows citizens constitutionally to participate in governance through elected representatives. This notion derives its legitimacy from the peoples' acceptance. According to Schumpeter, 1952, democracy is that institutional arrangement in which individuals acquire political power by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples' votes. This definition has been accepted by theorists as the most empirically functional conceptualisation of democracy. Dahl in 1963, argues that mass control is built into the electoral process in which leaders compete for the people's votes. Democracy therefore, is distinguished from other political systems through its competitive elections.

Electoral competition make leaders responsive and accountable because voters are free to make choice and support any party or leader they wish to elect. African democracies are hardly faced with the issue of fear that they might lose voters support over their opponent. Since in the absence of free and fair elections most leaders do not depend on the votes of the electorate to win elections, this brings up the question of legitimacy. According to Nwosu ,1976 ,legitimacy is the prerogative of the people to grant or withdraw legitimacy from government, this depends on the citizens whether they are satisfied with the government performance or not. In Africa, most governments' begin their term with very high level of public acceptance and subsequently due to policy failure they lose peoples' acceptance which ultimately de-legitimise their regime.

Re-Election Process and the Nigerian Scenario

Re-election process in Africa is highly characterised by rigging and manipulation, this is not far from the reason that government officials when elected into office, perform poorly and in spite of this citizens are unable to vote them out of office. These officials still get re-elected into power, re-election in Nigeria in 1964 witnessed so much public misconduct, corruption and lawlessness even though these misconduct were overshadowed by ethnic and regional considerations. Ikpe argued that the three major political parties mobilised ethnic support and manipulated elections vigorously to retain control of their regions, while they attempted to make incursions unto other regions.(AJPSIR,Vol 3(7), 2009). The case of NNDP (Nigeria National Democratic Party) and a viable opposition, AG (Action group) reflect this instance. The NNDP was a faction of AG which used federal government's support to gain control of political power in the western region. After the 1962 crisis, while the leader of the party was jailed for treasonable felony. The NNDP led by Samuel Akintola formed an alliance with the Northern people's congress (NPC) the party contriving the federal government known as the NNA elections. The main AG also allied with NCNC (National Council of Nigerian Citizens) forming UPGA (United Progressive Grand Alliance) thus, the 1964/1965 elections were conducted under the alliances' barrier. Anifowose 1982, also added that the election was not free and fair Akintola and his party with the federal government support deployed a rigging control system to give NNDP an overwhelming victory. This violence was intercepted by the military who took over in 1966.

Beyond 13 years of military rule, one can still admit that the second republic election in 1979, that the performances in various areas of political economic and social aspects was poor, Falola and Ihonvbere, adds that there was gross administrative inefficiency, massive corruption and galloping rate of inflation while food and other essential commodities became very scarce. (Falola and Ihonvbere 1985) there was under spread of dissatisfaction yet the NPN resorted to rigging and violence in order to win that election. Nigeria witnessed another interval in her democracy when the military intercepted once again in 1983. The military era came to an end 1999 and the PDP became the ruling party. The 1999-2003 was not different from previous democratic regimes in Nigeria, there was failure of economic and energy policies, rampart corruption was evident. The PDP utilised all rigging strategies used in the past, the strategy adopted according to Ikpe, 1999 was the PDP hierarchy where all elected officers in 1999 returned in 2003 unchallenged in the primaries. This was to prevent defections or strong supporters due to dissatisfaction with the government, thus, the outcomes or the primaries to be utilised for election rigging was to ensure victories in the main elections.

The other strategy was the involvement of thugs trained to seize election materials, with these strategies PDP extended its control from 21 states in 1999 to 28 states in 2003 (tell magazine, may 5 2003). By 2007 Nigeria succeeded in transition without any military interruption even though it remained the ruling party. However, the unconstitutional third term agenda was swept under the carpet of history yet, the incumbent government influenced the electoral processes emerging a new president from the same party PDP. This president did not live long in office to execute some of his policies he died, eventually and his vice president took over affairs of the state. Nigeria continued to experience similar rigging and manipulation experienced in the past. Nigerian state by 2011 had a massive rigging and election violence occurred immediately after the elections in places like Kaduna, Kano, houses were burnt to show people's dissatisfaction of the outcome of the conducted election. The acting president eventually became the president despite citizens' cry of dissatisfaction with the outcome of the election.

Conclusion

This article concludes that the re-occurrence of the problem of re-election of poorly performing government might erupt citizens' anger as time goes on. Absence of legitimacy is a very crucial issue because re-election of such government will be very difficult with the emergence of a promising opponent.

There is tendency of continuous rigging and manipulation with the absence of legitimacy thus elections in Africa will not be free and fair until the government is capable of changing the bad and negative aspect of governance thereby regaining their legitimacy to rule. Hence, so long as incumbent government continues to show interest in staying in power manipulation, rigging will continue to prevail in Nigeria and Africa at large.

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