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'E dibo, Ke Se Obe': 'Vote for Cash' as an Emergent Paradigm of Electoral Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

The democratisation process in Nigeria has been seriously hampered by endemic corruption. The blatant buying and selling of votes at polling booths during elections in Nigeria further dims the hope of democratic consolidation. Known and referred to comically in the Yoruba language as 'E dibo, ke se obe', literally interpreted as 'vote and cook soup', that is 'vote for cash/cash for vote', in apparent reference to the money that voters get if they vote in a particular direction; the phenomenon is fast emerging as the new face of commercialization of Nigeria's electoral process. The decline of participatory democracy and fizzling of the euphoria that accompanied Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 informed this conversation. To explain the details of this discourse, this chapter relied on the understanding of the relationship of poverty and political participation as provided for by the political economy approach. Guided by the class analysis of poverty, this chapter interpreted vote buying and selling, a current emblem of Nigeria's democratization process, as a creation of the ruling class. Money has become a dominant factor in Nigeria's electoral process and the masses are increasingly made to exchange their votes for money just as they buy and sell goods and services. If unchecked, it poses a risk of further engendering electoral corruption and the inevitable collapse of the democratization process. Thus, this chapter utilized secondary sources of data to interrogate the corruptive effect of direct vote buying/selling on elections in Nigeria with specific reference(s) to the Edo State and Ondo State Gubernatorial elections conducted in 2016, as the phenomenon gives cause for concern given the fact of the threat it poses. The chapter concludes with some recommendations on the way forward.

Key words: Corruption, Vote Buying/Selling, Poverty, Elections, Democratisation

Introduction

In Nigeria, money has become the main ingredient that makes politics go around. Money buys votes, buys bags of rice as gifts for voters, buys the support of local leaders, and buys the house-to-house campaigns and wall-to-wall advertisements. The history of politics in Nigeria especially after the

First Republic is replete with money-bag politics. Although, there is hardly any country in the world where instances of bribery or political corruption are not present in their national politics but according to Olarinmoye (2008) “researches on Africa’s post-colonial history, have however shown that, in Africa, corruption is an institutionalized and a systemic practice affecting the majority of the citizenry”.

All over the world, democracy is adjudged to be the best form of government but it is being constantly assaulted in Nigeria due to the phenomenon of money politics and vote buying. Money and vote buying have vitiated the promises of democracy in the country thus hampering good governance. A survey of 2,520 randomly selected Nigerians in 2015 conducted for the Washington-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems, found that 48 per cent of those interviewed said they would “take the money” if offered for their vote; 45 per cent of those surveyed said they would not sell their vote under any circumstances. Others said they would collect money and still vote for who they want to vote (York, 2015).

The above to a large extent shows the links between the subversion of the electoral process, that is, electoral corruption and the absence of good governance as electoral corruption leads to the denial of voters control of a “valuable political resource; the giving or withholding of their votes” (Scott, 1973) which is at the core of indirect or representative democracy, where people “participate in taking and implementing decisions on the common affairs of the community indirectly, through their representatives, elected or selected for that purpose”(Agbaje, 2005).

While democracy has been acknowledged as the most widely accepted form of government, its institutionalization and legitimacy derives to a large extent on the successful conduct of credible, free and fair election. Unfortunately, the conduct of credible, free and fair election has been eluding Nigeria. Corruption is one of the major impediments to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections as well as the entrenchment of democratic values. The implication of the above is that the electorates are made to ‘choose’ wrong people for public offices hence the maladministration that has characterized Nigeria’s governance process since the birth of the Fourth Republic in 1999. This chapter argues that for any study of electoral corruption to be useful, it must take as its central variables: (a) the socio-economic milieu of politics in Nigeria and (b) the influence of money in the light of acute poverty crisis. This is because money has become the major determining factor in Nigeria’s political process as the masses have been conditioned to sell their votes for cash because their poor condition of living worsened by the free fall of the economy have made them to be susceptible to monetary inducements more than ever before.

Vote buying in its literal sense is simply a form of economic exchange where candidates or their agents ‘buy’ and the electorates ‘sell’ votes as they buy and sell goods and services. While corruption is a global phenomenon, it would appear to have become endemic and problematic in Nigeria, prevalent among both the leaders and followers. Corruption has become a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of Nigeria’s development and a way of doing things (Obadan 2001; Omotola, 2007). The first, second and third Republics failed essentially due to corruption on the part of the political gladiators and to some extent, the military’s insatiable appetite for power. However, it is pertinent to pay particular attention to the issue of electoral corruption if Nigeria is to put its current democratisation process on the path of irreversibility. Vote buying in Nigeria takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle and has been observed eminently during voter registration, nomination period, campaign but the latest manifestation is the blatant purchase of votes on the election day.

The Theoretical and Conceptual Context

Corruption is the perversion of public affairs for private advantage. Corruption has broadly been defined as a perversion or a change from good to bad. As a matter of fact, corrupt behaviour involves

the violation of established rules for personal gain and profit (Sen1999). Corruption is efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means or private gain at public expense; or a misuse of public power for private benefit (Lipset & Lenz 2000:112-4). In addition, corruption is a behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role, because of private gains such as personal, close family, private clique, pecuniary or status gains. It is a behaviour which violates rules against the exercise of certain types of duties for private gains - regarding influence (Nye, 1967). This definition includes such behaviour as bribery (use of a reward to pervert the judgment of a person in a position of trust); nepotism; and misappropriation - illegal appropriation of public resources for private uses (Unruh, 2008).

Regardless of the forms corruption takes, the summary of the various definitions of corruption can be extracted from Article 4 section 1(a-i) of the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption:

- a. The solicitation or acceptance, directly or indirectly by a public official or any other person, of any goods of monetary, or other benefit, such as a gift, favour, promise or advantage for himself or herself or for another person or entity, in exchange for any act or omission in the performance, of his or her public functions;
- b. The offering or granting, directly or indirectly, to a public official or any other person of any goods of monetary value, or other benefit, such as a gift, favour, promise or advantage for himself or herself or for any person or entity, in exchange for any act or omission in the performance of his or her public functions;
- c. The offering or granting, directly or indirectly, to a public official or any other person for the purpose of illicitly obtaining benefits for himself or herself or for a third party;
- d. The diversion by a public official or any other person, for purposes unrelated to those for which they were intended, for his own or her own benefit or that of a third party, of any property belonging to the state or its agencies, to an independent agency, or to an individual, that such official has received by virtue of his or her position;
- e. The offering or giving, promising, solicitation or acceptance, directly or indirectly, of any undue advantage to or by any person, who directs or works for, in any capacity, a private sector entity, for himself or herself or for anyone else, for him or her to act or refrain from acting, in breach of his or her duties;
- f. The offering, giving, soliciting or accepting directly or indirectly, or promising of any undue advantage to or by any person who asserts or confirms that he or she is able to exert any improper influence over the decision making of any person performing functions in the public or private sector in consideration thereof, whether the undue advantage is for himself or herself or for anyone else, as well as the request, receipt or the acceptance of the offer or the promise of such an advantage, in consideration of that influence, whether or not the influence is exerted or whether or not the supposed influence leads to the intended result;
- g. Illicit enrichment
- h. The use or concealment of proceeds derived from any of the acts referred to in this Article; and
- i. Participation as a principal, co-principal, agent, instigator, accomplice or accessory after the fact or in any other manner in the commission or attempted commission of, in any collaboration or conspiracy to commit, any of the acts referred to in this article.

In order to allow for a better understanding of the various forms of corruption, Scholars have over time classified corruption in various groups. For instance, Otite (2000) classifies corruption into five groups: political corruption, economic corruption, bureaucratic corruption, judicial corruption and moral corruption. Dike (2005) also argues that there are three major ways to classify corruption: political corruption which is also known as grand, bureaucratic or petty corruption and electoral corruption. The most important thing is that whatever form corruption manifests, it perverts public interest and unlawfully elevates private gain which is glaringly daunting the hope of democracy in Nigeria.

Electoral corruptions are also activities manifested and connected with election and successions. This is done by the politicians or political decision makers manipulating people and institutions to retain power and office (Otite, 2000). Electoral corruption includes purchase of votes with money, promises of office or special favours, coercion, intimidation, and interference with freedom of election. Nigeria is a good example where this practice is common. Votes are bought, people are killed or maimed in the name of election, 'losers' end up as the winners in elections, and votes turn up in areas where votes were not cast.

Many scholars such as (Davies, 2006, Olarinmoye 2008, Ojo 2006) have written on money politics and vote buying in Nigerian politics because of the devastating impact of the phenomenon on the body politics. Their views summarily captured electoral corruption as the illegal interference with the process of an election, whether by increasing the vote share of the favoured candidate, depressing the vote share of the rival candidates, or both. What constitutes electoral fraud varies from country to country. Many kinds of election fraud are outlawed in electoral legislation, but others are in violation of general laws, such as those banning assault, harassment or libel. *Myagkov, et.al, (2008) goes a step further to aver that "although technically the term 'electoral fraud' covers only those acts which are illegal, the term is sometimes used to describe acts which are legal, but considered morally unacceptable, outside the spirit of an election or in violation of the principles of democracy"*.

The political behaviour of the ruling class in Nigeria can be better understood within the context of the contest for power as access to primitive accumulation other than for service and; those of the masses, understood within the context of the effect that poor economic situation has made them to be susceptible to monetary inducements rather than rational choices in the expression of their political participation.

According to Gilbert and Barigbon (2015) "Poor people make poor democratic citizens. It is only when individual leap out of the vicious cycle of poverty that they begin to demand a role in and provide support for democracy by way of active participation as poverty, insecurity and ignorance do not produce descent democratic citizens". From the above, it is clear that the socio-economic status of the individual define their level of political participation just as they also weigh the decision for democratic participations on a cost- benefit scale (Ikelegbe 1995, p. 82). Thus, while democracy ordinarily carries with it the hope of poverty reduction, the Nigerian experience has shown that poverty is a potent tool to hinder democracy.

The class analysis could help explain the pervasiveness of vote buying and selling as a vestige of capitalism explained by its core value of maximization of profit which in turn results in exploitation of one class by another. The readiness and willingness to exchange one's vote for money easily signifies a crucial feature of a society whose economic structure is grounded in exploitation thus recreating conditions of poverty.

The blatant purchase of votes suggests the existence of a powerful and dominant class that has great interest in maintaining a mass of the downtrodden. Such a class deploys poverty as an essential condition for the realization of its interest. According to Anikpo (1995, p. 13),

Poverty is the historical process of individual or groups being forcefully eliminated from control of the decision making machinery that determines the production of resources in a society. It manifest in various forms as hunger or lack of food, lack of money, cloth, shelter, good health or poor education in national context, poverty becomes a euphemism for under-development or absence/ perversions of democracy (1995, p.13).

In a similar vein, Akeredolu-Ale (1975) uses the “Power theory of Poverty” to explain class and poverty. His power theory posits that “the structure of the political economy in any society determine the extent and distribution of power among the population. In this case, the ruling class constituted by the law, establish and legitimise an exploitative system, through which it determine the allocation of opportunity, income and wealth, relying on the use of state power, including the use of oppressive state agents”. The poverty of the majority of the people is caused by exploitative and oppressive relations. While oppression occurs when one group illegitimately excludes another from access to those resources, exploitation occurs when such exclusion from resources gives the controller of the resources the capacity to appropriate the fruit of labour of others (Gilbert and Barigbon, 2015).

Assessment of the Edo and Ondo Election

The phenomenon of money politics and vote-buying has become prominent in the politics of Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. Unlike the previous Republics where appeals to ethnic and religious sentiments were deployed by political leaders to ensure electoral victories, the Fourth Republic is replete with incidences of blatant vote buying as both candidates for elections and political parties have lost relevance with the people.

In reference to the First, Second and to a large extent, the Third Republics; Dudley correctly observed as follows:

Candidates in the elections were less important as the parties took the centre stage, appealed to ethnicity, played alliance politics and used highly emotive terms which in most cases invited people to violence. Most of the election expenses were borne by the parties from the funds they were able to raise (Dudley 1982, p. 68)

It should be noted, however, that although politicians were known to distribute gift items such as T-shirts, caps, badges with party emblems, food stuff and sundry items, to voters at political rallies, there was no blatant purchase of votes on election days as witnessed in the Fourth Republic.

The situation seemed to have ironically troubled the conscience of former President Obasanjo, who is a major player of the Fourth Republic to admit though, belatedly that:

With so much resources being deployed to capture elective offices, it is not difficult to see the correlation between politics and the potential for high level corruption. The greatest losers are the ordinary people, those voters whose faith and investment in the system are hijacked and subverted because money, not their will, is made the determining factor in elections. Can we not move from politics of money materialism to politics of ideas, issues and development (Obasanjo, 2005).

Following the outcome of the recent governorship elections in Edo and Ondo States, there are strong indications that many Nigerians and the international community are fast losing faith in the nation’s democracy.

The Edo State Governorship Election of Wednesday 28th September, 2016 will go down in history as a process marred with vote buying. The election was held against the background of a postponement that had cited security as a concern. The postponement fuelled perception in the public mind of a likelihood of bias. However, the atmosphere surrounding the election was largely peaceful and devoid of any major acts of violence, which was a concern for several citizens of Edo State and election observers.

The Transition Monitoring Group, (TMG) a coalition of human rights, non-governmental and civil society organizations observers and Nigeria's premier citizen observer group, reported complaints about allegations of inducement of voters by political parties on the basis of 'vote for cash/cash for vote' to influence who they voted for. According to the TMG (2016) "this will be a sore narrative of 2016 Edo State Election. We condemn the pathetic, sorrowful and ignoble act as it is our considered view that when people sell their votes, they become slaves to those who bought it, they surrender their power and strength as citizens and they are robbed of the moral right to hold the politicians accountable or question any wrongdoing by the politicians".

Also, a Coalition of Civic Groups dedicated to monitoring and improving the electoral process in Nigeria, The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2016) reported that "Voter turnout was generally low across polling units. With the wanton vote buying practice, more voters rushed to the polls. Vote buying fuelled turnout" The Report goes further to state that "collaboration between INEC personnel, party agents and facilitation by the police to encourage vote buying by setting polling stations in such a manner as to breach secrecy of the polls and encourage inducement".

In Edo state, it appeared that when All Progressives Congress (APC) was not so sure of her chances, the security agents came out with all sorts of security alarm to hoodwink Nigerians. That moment of postponement, would possibly have given APC enough time to reinforce itself, which culminated in its retaining power in the state. It is regrettable that what was sauce for the goose in Edo State was not deemed to be sauce for the gander in Ondo State.

In Ondo State, there was what could be referred to as "pre-election rigging" because when all parties are not given a level-playing ground, it means there is partiality. Both the electorate and the PDP candidates could not state with certainty the authentic Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governorship candidate barely three days to the election! After a long-drawn legal battle, Eyitayo Jegede was finally cleared by the court to be the authentic PDP flag bearer for the election barely 72 hours to the conduct of the election. Despite all calls for postponement by the PDP in Ondo State, INEC went ahead to conduct the election in the state.

The CLEEN Foundation (2016), a non-governmental organization in its Post-Election Statement on the Ondo Election stated that "... vote buying by party agents and/or chieftains who were seen distributing money in order to influence the direction of voting" is a major downside of the election of November 26, 2016.

A Social Commentator, Adejumo (2016) also reported on the Ondo Election as follows:

The rampant and open buying and selling of votes by agents of the parties, with the main offenders being the PDPand the APC that is in power at the federal level. Rumour abound that even the winning candidate's party (APC) was "spreading" so much money around to buy votes, it was mind-boggling.the blatant and open buying of votes. Again, I will not subscribe to the general trance that the election was not flawed. It was! The suspicion that money was used to buy votes (allegedly, but we all know this was true) has besmirched the result of

the elections in my mind and eyes. I cannot accept that the election was not flawed with vote-buying accusations and rumours flying about.

Similarly, Dada (2016) reporting on his coverage of the election averred that:

Members of the major political parties in the Ondo State governorship election have accused one another of inducing voters with money. It was observed that members of the All Progressives Congress, the Peoples Democratic Party and the Alliance for Democracy were giving money to voters at most polling centres visited across the state. Some polling units in Odigbo, Okitipupa and Ilaje local governments areas were given N450,000 while each voter got between N3,000 and N5,000.

ThisDay (2016) also reported that:

two groups of independent observers that monitored the process and conduct of the governorship election in Ondo State said their findings on the field revealed monetary inducement of voters. The groups, *Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA)* and *Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room* in their separate reports on their activities during the poll, said the exercise was characterised by many irregularities in some areas. They said the practice, whereby voters were given money before they voted for candidate, poses threat to the Nigeria's democracy.

Apart from the above reports, the Alliance for Credible Elections, (ACE-Nigeria) which deployed 92 observers and 8 supervisors that carried out the direct observation of the election confirmed that there were incidences of votes buying by agents of politicians in many polling units across the state (Vanguard, 2016). The group therefore concluded that "from the foregoing we can confidently state that 2016 Ondo State governorship election was peaceful, orderly but not credible" (ibid).

Matenga (2016) described the 'strategy' employed for blatant vote buying thus: "political 'party agents' are hired and placed at strategic locations very close to the ballot boxes to see which party a voter has voted before payment. The 'agent' will give a signal to another party agent to pay at the back, and if the voter fails to vote for the party, there is also a signal. At the end of the exercise, the highest bidder usually emerges as winner with grave implications for democracy and good governance.



The Way Forward/Recommendations

Vote buying is an electoral fraud; it is an electoral malpractice, electoral corruption and election manipulation, or vote rigging and is illegal interference with the process of an election. There is no doubt that money politics and vote buying have serious threats to democratic governance in Nigeria. To combat this ugly phenomenon, electoral and stringent institutional reforms are imperatives.

According to the Nigeria Electoral Act, 2010, Article 130: “A person who— (a) corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election; or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a) of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N100,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both.” While vote buying is subject to punishment, the attainment of compliance to this legal provision remains a challenge.

It is also essential that Nigerians change and imbibe a culture of democratic citizenship that begins with an electorate ready to insist on credible and transparent elections, although, this may be a herculean task if poverty is not alleviated.

Nigeria has made significant gains in enhancing the legal framework to guide against vote buying through the Electoral Act 2002, 2006 and 2010. However, there is need to address some of the notable inconsistencies and potential loopholes in the Electoral Act. For instance, while section 91(9) of the Electoral Act states that “no individual or other entity shall donate more than one million naira to any candidate, section 93(2) (b) in contraction gives political parties leverage to receive unlimited amounts above the threshold. There is therefore the urgent need to enhance the compliance to laws regulating the conduct of elections.

The establishment of an Electoral Offences Commission, a body that will have authority to investigate and prosecute breaches of laws governing elections including vote buying is critical to combating electoral corruption.

Conclusion

This paper concluded on the note that financial inducement to voters has become standard practice in Nigeria. But if indeed money answers all things, there is one thing it will always fail to buy, and that is credibility. The credibility of Nigeria’s electoral process has been absolutely mired by the role money plays because the use of money with the objective of purchasing votes is counterproductive to democracy and good governance. To overcome electoral corruption therefore, joint efforts of the State and citizens are needed. Nigeria equally needs re-orientation and new value systems that will enhance people’s commitment and confidence in government.

Nevertheless, electoral and other institutional reforms are alone insufficient; also essential is a culture of democratic citizenship that begins with a citizenry ready to insist on clean elections.

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