

## **Growing Civic Awareness - Symptomatic Rehearsal of True Democratic Dividend: Lessons from Nigeria's General Elections of 2007**

Franklins A. Sanubi<sup>13</sup>

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### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of democratic dividend is a peculiar one among Nigerian politicians whereby political office holders believe that their call to service is occasioned by the need to garner as much of political goods to their electors as possible from the "national cake". Therefore, there is a popular conception (or perhaps misconception) among the local people that democratically elected public officers are only relevant in as much as they can secure and "graciously" give more of these public goods to them in the respective constituencies for their immediate and long term enjoyments. In this article, Dr. Sanubi, using events at the 2007 state and federal elections as data framework, believes that more than just securing political goods such as roads, health care facilities and education, the awakening of the local people to a civic awareness and responsibility in a growing democracy in which the people are in the driving seat of the determination of political progress in their own state is a more enduring dividend of democracy.

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<sup>13</sup> Franklins A. Sanubi, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Science at the Delta State University in Abraka, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Political apathy, which is the inverse of an active political participation in a democracy, may perhaps be one of the strongest retardations to the development of modern democratic culture in contemporary Nigeria. More than just dispatching election monitors (international observers) during national election periods, if there were any agenda of international concern on Nigeria in the furtherance of the development of a healthy democratic practice in this phenomenally sprawling and fledgling democracy in the entire African continent, the issue of stimulating political awareness (otherwise known as Civic Political Education) among the local people should take precedence. In a society historically shaped in monarchism, authoritarianism, and in fact, where the civil population had over the years lived in perpetual awe of state police and other instruments of political subjugation particularly as expressed in the long years of military domination in domestic governance, the introduction of popular rule (or democracy) is undoubtedly a long and arduous investment to undertake.

### **The Relevance of Civic Awareness in Democracy**

Democracy thrives in a politically conscious society where the people (whose popular decision is often expressed at public elections and other democratic forums) are not only aware of their civic rights including those relating to the determination of who takes the government seat of the state at a given time but also have the freedom to exercise those rights. In the

advanced democracies, dwindling civic awareness which can easily be implied by an observation of declining voters' participation at elections usually provide a course for concern to policy makers. For instance, the US Senate in September 2004 *resolved*, that the Senate--

(1) recognizes and supports all efforts to promote greater civic awareness among the people of the United States, including civic awareness programs such as candidate forums and voter registration drives; and

(2) encourages local communities and elected officials at all levels of government to promote greater awareness among the electorate of civic responsibility and the importance of participating in these elections.

Representative Ralph Hall (R-TX) at the House session on October 7, 2004 expressed similar view in a proposed resolution that "the percentage of Americans registered to vote unfortunately has declined in recent years...there is no better time to make citizens more aware of one of the greatest privileges we have as Americans – the right to vote." (108<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2d Session, S. Res. 434). An effective political awareness programme or the presence of numerous civic awareness organizations and advocacy groups at the federal, state and local level actively promote voter registration and voter participation. In fact, civic awareness helps to stimulate what Thomas Ehrlich (2000) calls a vibrant *civic engagement*. Civic engagement is crucial if the people in a democracy are to be seen as responsible for their own societal *political progress*.

The American Democracy Project (ADP), (an initiative of 219 AASCU campuses that seeks to create an intellectual and experiential understanding of civic engagement for undergraduates enrolled at institutions that are members of AASCU) defined the goal of the project as the production of “graduates who understand and are committed to engaging in meaningful actions as citizens in a democracy”. According to Ehrlich (2000), Civic engagement means:

working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes ... a morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.

Political awareness from the foregoing therefore, not only encourages civic engagement but also provides among others, the knowledge that no one person or group of persons can subdue the “popular will of the people”. This is what political scientists call the **sovereignty** of the state. In defending the sovereignty of the state, the civil population is availed a lot of instruments of check on the exercise of state power by those currently “managing” it. Such instruments include elections, the courts, public opinion, civil/mass actions (as in public

demonstrations, press condemnations) among others. Election as an instrument of check on political power can be seen from various perspectives namely; as an enthronement process as in *general elections*, a dethronement process as in *recall*, and even a confidence vote as in *plebiscites and referenda*. In such a traditionally authoritarian society where the people had lived in political apathy especially to elections and other modern procedures of democratic determination, a critical requirement for building a virile democracy is the promotion of a healthy civic education among the people.

Out of Nigeria's forty-seven years of independence, only seventeen comes under what may be regarded as "attempts" to practice some form of modern democracy. And with three of such attempts namely 1960-1966, 1979-1983, 1993-1995 failing to entrench a sustainable democratic culture, and a fourth attempt being currently under test of survival, there are undoubtedly great imperatives to identify those factors, which impede the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. Civic Education is a panacea to political apathy if the citizens need to understand that their political destiny is in their hands. With lessons drawn from the conduct of the 2007 general elections by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), we presently explicate herein how the current practice of democracy in Nigeria has yielded (perhaps unexpected) benefits in form of the creation of a strong civic awareness among the Nigerian electors.

### **Defining the Dividend of Democracy in Nigeria**

Except for the international reader who may erroneously see it from the traditionally-business point of view of corporate investment in stocks, the phrase “dividend of democracy” is a peculiar terminology in Nigeria which means something that is quite a departure from stock trading. In recent time, politicians in Nigeria have expropriated the term “dividend” to imply “payment of one’s own share of the national cake” as a result of participating in the democratic governance in the country at whatever level. It depicts, quite unfortunately however, some far-reaching negative philosophy of political participation in the country - an avenue for wealth creation and not necessarily as a call to serve. In fact, for most political office holders, “service” is only a medium of self-aggrandizement and the building of personal economic base for one’s life expectancy. If anything, “good service” is accidental. In other words, if in the process of a public service, a political office holder (such as a council/county chairman, a governor, a senator, a minister or even a president) finds himself providing some political goods such as good governance, roads, health, education etc, the local people can most often perceive it as window-dressing for personal enrichment. In fact, some political office holders have indicated, by their personal attitudes, that the provision of such social goods to the people is a privilege and not a right. In this reasoning therefore, whenever political office holders use the word “dividends of democracy” they are seemingly telling their audience about the amount of social goods they are able to garner and “*graciously*” provide for their electors

such as the amount of schools built with public funds, hospitals or infirmaries equipped or staffed, kilometers of roads constructed and or amount of student bursary payments made while in office. Because of this perception, it is often very easy to picture an average politician in Nigeria as being overtly corrupt. This also makes it difficult to identify who among these political officers is actually called out for service to their motherland. But has the seventeen years of democratic “experiment” in Nigeria yielded any sustainable dividends to the Nigerian elector than mere provision of rudimentary basic social goods as roads, water and education, if any?

Beyond these, we believe that one fundamental “latent” dividend which we may classify as an “unexpected benefit” of the country’s transition to democratic governance, is the growing spate of civic awareness among the Nigerian electors as “manifested” in the recent (2007) state and federal elections in Nigeria. The creation of a strong political education is regarded here as “unexpected benefit” because those whose political activities indirectly yielded this benefit may not have envisaged it. Some so-called political “stalwarts” had wished that the local people in their community would perpetually remained uneducated and subservient to their (stalwarts’) domineering political magnanimity and the people’s continuing economic and social dependence.

### **The Political “Dividends” of the 2007 Elections?**

The 2007 state and federal elections in Nigeria has become a topical issue, albeit in the international political platform, for policy makers to chew upon. The election represented in many

respects, a grievous backslide in Nigeria's political image and national integrity. It was an election that would already have aroused a popular pessimism by neighbouring and foreign "erstwhile hopeful" friends of the nation, beside its enemies, on the ability of the nation to function, even if less actively, in the contemporary millennial global political and economic settings. It was an election that cast serious innuendoes on the nation's aspiration to a regional power, let alone an international player in world politics. For a nation that once sought a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (Osagie,2005) the 2007 state and federal elections exposed the nations' faltering electoral process, which has provided a new alibi to call for the total restructuring of the whole electoral system. Right from the time of its appointment by the executive arm of the government, up to its commencement of preparations for this election, the electoral authority, INEC demonstrated ineptitude and incapability to deliver its assignment thereby portending failure. The process began with the registration of about sixty million eligible voters representing 40.09percent of an estimated 140million national population (as per the figures of the 2006 national population census released by the National Population Commission in early February 2007). Earlier in 2006, there had been discussion and some acceptance of a possible electronic voting during the final elections in 2007. This inspired the electoral body to register "eligible" voters through a photographic procedure whereby voter's personal and forensic data are embossed in the voter's registration card apparently to act as check against multiple voting during the

election. The photographic process of registration was undoubtedly a more expensive venture compared to the manual registration hitherto used in previous elections. To a great extent, there seemed to be a popular acceptance of this process at least as some measure of advancement of the electoral system. Suddenly however, the final voting was no longer to be the electronic type as the electoral authority had argued that there was insufficient time available to it to test run and perfect the electronic system which, it was already working towards. Thus with the hope of electronic voting jettisoned, INEC was constrained to relapse into the usual manual voting in a peculiar Nigerian system called Open-Secret ballot (a system whereby a voter secretly thumb-prints against the candidate of his/her choice and comes to cast it into a transparent ballot box kept on an open place where everyone around the polling station can see). The elections into seats in Nigeria's thirty-six state assemblies and as governors were conducted on Saturday April 14 2007 throughout the country while that into the presidency and the bicameral national assembly (Senate and House of Representatives) were conducted a week later on Saturday, 21 April 2007. There were a total of 120,000 polling stations nationwide each containing a segment of the 60 million registered voters' names. The final conduct of election and the aftermath was quintessentially deplorable as demonstrated by various observers. Two views from credible international monitors amongst a flood of other observers are incisively summative of the 2007 elections.

Firstly, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) faulted the conduct of the general elections saying:

the election fell far short of basic international and regional standards for democratic election.

The Election, according to the mission, was “marred by poor organization, lack of essential transparency, widespread procedural irregularities and significant evidence of fraud, particularly during the result collation process”. EU-EOM also listed “voter disfranchisement at different stages of the process, lack of equal condition for contestants and numerous incidents of violence as other major features of the elections” concluding;

as a result the elections have not lived up to the hopes and expectations of the Nigeria people and the process cannot be considered to have been credible.

The observation that polling started late throughout the country due to the late arrival of materials and INEC officials while voting was not conducted at all in many areas, was characteristic. The EU-EOM observers also reported that at least 200 people, including candidates and policemen were killed in election-related incidents, adding that thugs were widely used to create a significant degree of fear and intimidation. It regretted that, “INEC, which was financially dependent on the executive, did not prepare well for the election and does experience widespread lack of confidence

among election stakeholders in relation to its capacity and impartiality”, noting that “the quality of final voter register was poor and included under aged voters, double entries, missing and blurred pictures of voters”. The EU-EOM fearing probable mass reprisals quickly urged aggrieved candidates and political parties to demonstrate calm and explore the legal mechanism to seek redress and called on the relevant authorities to investigate allegations of irregularities. It equally called for an immediate action to establish what it called “a truly independent and capable election administration”. For the confidence of voters to be restored, the mission called for the demonstration of political will by the federal and state governments to end the practice of hiring thugs to perpetuate electoral violence (Vanguard:2007)

The second credible international observer at the election that we shall consider here is the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which described the election as a “failed process”. Ms Madeleine Albright, the leader of the international election observer team, described the election as a failure stating, “in many places and in a number of ways, the electoral process failed the Nigerian people. The cumulative effect of the serious problems the delegation witnessed substantially compromised the integrity of the electoral process...the polls were flawed by several shortcomings, including unprecedented delays, early close or failed opening of the polls, which served as a “fundamental barrier to popular political participation and most likely, disenfranchised many prospective voters”. Other flaws observed included ballot snatching and stuffing, supply of

inadequate polling materials, underage voting, lack of secrecy, unverifiable electoral documents and involvement of security agents in manipulating the electoral process among other flaws which, Albright believes has further “eroded citizens’ confidence in the electoral system” while the 2007 polls represents a “step backward in the conduct of elections in Nigeria”, But the striking part of the NDI’s report is the one relating to the judiciary, legislature, civil society and vibrant media which it believes *gave rise to hope*.(NDI: 2007). The report commended the “disciplined posture” of the electorate before and during the elections, adding that aggrieved parties should seek redress through “peaceful and constitutional means” before May 29. The group proffered a five-point solution to the pitfalls recorded, including early preparations, effective and credible judiciary, expeditious prosecution of poll cases and respect for the rule of law. It stressed that the INEC must ensure speedy correction of the identified “technical failings” before future elections are held.

Beside these observations, there were a flood of domestic protests (with attendant demonstrations by various segments of the society including women) coming from aggrieved parties, among which were the nation’s foremost labour unions, the Nigerian Labour Congress and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria which even stressed that the “new president will lack legitimacy” (NLC,2007) and a greater part of the electorate majority of who expressed complete disenfranchisement during the elections.

### **Civic Awareness in the 2007 Elections – A Truer Democratic Dividend**

Civic response to the 2007 state and federal elections in Nigeria showed that, by and large, the citizenry is growing tremendously in civic awareness. There has not been any election in Nigeria with such a massive civic engagement as reflected in the year's voter's turnout in its history of elections depicting a burning desire and hope by the electorate that its mandate is reflected in the enthronement process of new state and national leaders. Whether or not, this desire was fulfilled in the 2007 state and federal election remains a crucial matter of concern for democratic watchers of Nigeria. Yet, for once in its history of elections in Nigeria, the electorate was able to discern between credible and incredible candidates. It was an election in which money factor (especially as a bait on voters) was very minimal, if not completely absent. If anything, money politics was practiced at the middle and upper levels of the political class. Massive domestic media coverage of elections, especially by privately owned organizations) was unprecedented. Perhaps the many years of social and political anguish and countryside economic poverty have whipped up the political consciousness of the people to determine its destiny by the ballot. Another striking element of the civic awareness in the 2007 elections was the emergence of informal political organizations popularly known (especially in the Niger Delta regions) as *Political forums*. During the three years preceding the conduct of the 2007 state and federal elections, some of the key players in the domestic politics of the local communities, especially those who participated in

securing some *dividends of democracy* for their local people, with an intention to use them as platforms for prosecuting further political ambitions, have mobilized their community members into forming strong political associations where the political stakes and other objectives of the respective communities are articulated and projected. By the eve of the 2007 elections, there were countless numbers of political forums. In fact, each local community has a political forum named after the community under which the political aspirants from the community launch their political campaigns. The Urhobo Political Forum in the Niger Delta for instance became the forerunner of the establishment of a plethora of political forums among the Urhobo ethnic communities including Uvwie Political forum, Udu Political Forum, Oghara Political Forum amongst others. This development is also characteristic of other regions in the country not just the Niger Delta alone.

### **Conclusion**

The enormous political awareness demonstrated in the 2007 state and federal elections show that despite its present inability to enforce its will on the current awful election process, in no distant future, election fraudsters would be completely overwhelmed by an overriding will of the people to enforce its choice of candidates at public elections in Nigeria. A highly civically aware society would constraint election manipulators to apply the rules of the political game at public elections. Public elections in such a state would be meaningful and truly representative of the people's choice at elections and

prevent the glaring practice of political disenfranchisement and denial prevalent in the current dispensation in Nigeria. By that time, there will be no need for external assistance in determining credibility in elections in the country because the people can then enforce their popular will on the state whenever any anomalies were observed, even in the face of threats and intimidation from statutory authorities. Civic awareness therefore is the major instrument required in attaining a sustainable democracy in Nigeria. This to us is a symptomatic rehearsal of a better democratic dividend, which the 2007 state and federal elections have bequeathed to the teeming population of helpless Nigerians in their quest for a better democratic culture.

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Franklins A. Sanubi, Ph. D  
Department of Political Science, Delta State University,  
P.M.B.1, Abraka, Nigeria  
E-Mail: [Sanubi@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:Sanubi@yahoo.co.uk)  
Telephone: 234-80-34089467