

## **Citizen Participation and Good Governance in Nigeria: Reviewing Past Elections and Looking Ahead to the 2023 General Elections**

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### **Abstract**

The researcher uses analytical method to review the journey so far and identify the impediments to political participation by citizens in Nigeria ahead of the 2023 general elections. This is necessary because despite the claim by the current administration to correct the ills of the past such as electoral fraud, corruption and insecurity in the country, these problems are still prevalent. Low level participation by the citizens has been the trend from 1999 to 2019 general elections due to flaws in the process that affect the legitimacy of the political class. Some of the identified impediments include insufficient education among citizens, wide spread poverty, elite manipulation of the political process, monetisation of the electioneering process, corrupt and inexperienced officials, marginalisation, political violence and insecurity. As the nation looks ahead to the 2023 general elections, the researcher recommends enhancing education and enlightenment, eradication of poverty, elimination of corruption training and re-training of officials.

**Keywords:** Elections, Political Participation, Good Governance, Citizens, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Democracy and good governance have been accepted today as necessary conditions for the development of the African continent. With sixty years of political independence and over twenty years of uninterrupted civilian rule, it is an irony that Nigeria's democracy is still regarded as "relatively young and still developing." This is so because the country has yet to attain higher stage in strengthening of democratic practice or good governance in its polity. One of the essential aspects of democracy is indeed political participation. Active citizens' participation has been accepted as the basis of democracy because sovereignty belongs to the people. Hence, citizens' participation in governance is a key element of the democratisation process. In its original meaning, democracy refers to the rule of people or in the words of Abraham Lincoln "government of the people, by the people and for the people." Democracy is also specially attached to some elements, which include freedom, civil liberty and rule of law. Citizens must be adequately accommodated to be able to make rational decisions based on their agreed interests. Some of the aspects of democracy that engage the citizens include periodic elections for citizens to choose their representatives and an independent judiciary to protect or safe guard their fundamental human rights.

A glance at the political history of the African continent reveals that most countries experienced long period of military interregnum in their political affairs. The incursion of the military into governance, has enthroned long autocratic rule at the expense of democracy. By 1990s when the wind of change started blowing across Africa, citizens' participation in governance was at its lower levels in many countries including Nigeria, Togo, Gabon, Gambia, DR Congo, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Sierra Leone, Mali, Libya, among others (Saleh, 2017). In these countries, repression as

opposed to freedom became the culture which diametrically turned down the ethos of democracy and citizens' participation in governance. The goal of this study is to conduct an analytical review of the impediments to political participation under the Nigerian democratisation process in the fourth republic (1999– 2019).

### **Conceptualisation of Good Governance**

Governance refers to the process of governing, whether undertaken by government, association, market or network (Abdullahi & Ghani, 2016). According to Gambari (2001), the process of governance implies establishment of policies and continuous monitoring of their proper implementation by the members of the governing body of an organisation or state. It includes the mechanism required to balance the powers of the members (with the associated responsibility) and their primary duty in the organisation. Saad (2017) describes good governance as broad-based or popular participation in governance or political process, including credible electoral process, transparency, accountability, integrity and respect for the rule of law.

Igbuzor (2005) sees good governance as the respect for the rule of law, ensuring effective delivery of public goods and services, participation of all people (men and women) in the decision-making process and institutional effectiveness and accountability. Moreover, good governance extols the virtues of democracy in the encouragement of popular participation in the decision-making process in society. The elected representatives must be responsive to the yearnings and aspirations of the electorate at all levels of government.

### **An Overview of Political Participation**

In political science, political participation refers to action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue or taking part in the political process by making his/her opinion and beliefs known. The term is politically inclined to the relationship between the people and government. Citizens of a state have a set of rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decision that affects their wellbeing. Citizens' participation in the process of governance may come in one of three forms– active participation; passive participation and standby participation. Active participation of citizens in governance promotes peaceful and healthy communities, increase quality of life and generate empowerment among citizens. Passive participation on the other hand, causes alienation, disempowerment, disappointment and general disillusion in society. In the case of standby, the attitude of negativity is encouraged thereby thwarting progress and sustainability of development.

Citizens' participation is also of different types, which include participation in voting during election, participation in peaceful protest, participation in public consultations (like town hall meetings), participation in juridical duty or participation in judicial process, giving financial donation or support (e.g. to non -privilege groups) and joining interest groups/civil society groups in the state. Uwechi (2019) observes that citizen participation gives every individual the opportunity to influence and change political, social, economic and public decisions and allows the people to be an important part of the democratic decision-making. Thus, through participation, citizens become part of the governance structure and can through the strength of their power, direct governance. Other forms of citizen participation as enumerated by Uwechi (2019) include

helping in the governance through actions, pushing for new laws that will improve peoples' lives and the society, recalling lawmakers who are inept, campaigning for policies and services that will make the future better, safer and more secure, using media and communication outlets like social media, WhatsApp, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and the internet to assist in citizen participation activities. Okwesili (2019) observes that the complexities in some African societies like, DR Congo, the Central African Republic, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Burundi, South Sudan, Sudan, Nigeria, etc. pose potential risks to citizen participation in governance. Unless such societies allow for the use of inclusive electoral process through which people take part in and influence public decisions, there will never be peace.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The study is anchored on participatory theory of democracy. The choice of the theory is necessary because of the role of citizens in democracy and governance. The participatory theory is based on the idea that the citizen's political participation is the basic principle of democracy. This denotes the active involvement of individuals and groups in the governmental processes affecting their lives. Thus, when citizens themselves play an active role in the process of formulation and implementation of public policies and decisions, their activity is called political participation. According to Robert Dahl (1956) and David Truman (1951), the proponents of this theory, voting pattern and political party campaigns are some of the variables for political participation (Abdullahi & Ghani, 2016).

The relevance of the participatory theory in democracy and governance is that the active involvement of people in politics, particularly in terms of voting pattern, may result to change. Abdullahi & Ghani (2016) note that the justification of the participatory theory can be seen in 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria where the candidate of the opposition party, Muhammadu Buhari defeated an incumbent president to emerge winner on the platform of All Progressives Congress (APC).

### **Methodology**

The approach used in this study is exploratory; using secondary sources of data through library research method. Various sources, including journal papers, books, newspapers, magazines and the internet were used to access information on the subject area.

### **Perspectives to Citizen Participation in Nigeria**

Like many African countries, Nigeria has been striving to achieve active participation of its citizens at all levels of governance since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Government and non-government groups like civil society have all keyed into the quest for improved participation of citizens in governance. This is evidently so in terms of formation of political parties, voter registration exercise, involvement in campaign issues and political debates, especially through the social media and voting in elections. However, the most important way citizens participate in the democratic process is voting. Citizens vote for leaders to represent their ideas and the leaders support the citizens'

interests. The performance of Nigeria's general elections from 1999–2019 shows a decimal mark in the rate of citizen participation.

### **The 1999 General Elections**

The 1999 general elections was the first under this dispensation and the one in which the nation was put under trial to ascertain the readiness of the citizens to 'wipe out' military rule in the country. However, the exercise was widely described as shallow because of the political apathy and disillusionment on the part of the electorate. Three political parties featured in the elections and only two fielded candidates for the post of president. Prior to the election, there were reported cases of banditry and lawlessness in many areas as political thugs took over campaign grounds and attacked opponents in bright day light. During the election, the exercise was characterised by fraud, ranging from the abuse of the secret ballot, deliberate refusal to supply election materials in some areas and scarcity of polling materials. Ballot papers were reported to be short in many places; thus, disenfranchising citizens. Furthermore, security agencies were accused of intimidating voters and opponents of preferred candidates and incidences of destruction of ballots and snatching of boxes. The election generally recorded very low turnout of voters as some states recorded as low as 30% -40% in parliamentary polls.

### **The 2003 General Elections**

In 2003, another general election was held across the country which was the first under a civilian government. There were widespread condemnation and criticism of the polls because it was marred by irregularities and violence and more fraudulent than the 1999 polls. Two Governorship candidates were said to have been assassinated prior to the conduct of the election. Political banditry was the order of the day. Because of fear and threats, the election could not hold in a number of units and places and in some other places, a low level of participation was recorded. In particular, the conduct of the presidential election was more violent and fraudulent because of the desire by the incumbent president to win the election at all cost (sit tight tendency). Commenting on the 2003 general elections, Awopeju (2014) observes that the Carter Centre, (US-based election monitoring group) regretted that it cannot make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the 2003 presidential election due to unprecedented irregularities. The election was also described by the Human Rights Watch as an "abject failure" and concluded that "the elections were more pervasively and openly rigged than the flawed 1999 elections." And that "it was doubtful whether the elections can be reflective of the will of the people."

### **The 2007 General Elections**

Like the previous polls, the 2007 election was marked by monumental fraud and violence. These crimes were perpetrated by politicians, mostly agents of the official party before and after the elections. There were reported killings of political opponents, intimidation and harassment of opposition. It was described by some observers as a carryover of the 2003 election. Some even described it as a garrison democracy. The

introduction and use of electronic voting procedure only changed the method, but did not change the process. Because the attempt to use the card reader and electronic voting was vehemently rejected by the ruling elites. The outcome was marked by violence and protests in various places. The elected President, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'adua admitted that the polls were flawed and promised to make corrections. This election recorded the highest number of litigations at election tribunals. About three elected Governors were removed by the election tribunals because of the fraudulent nature of the process. The period marked the highest point of impunity by the civilian administration that was hell bent on installing puppets in various positions.

### **The 2011 General Elections**

The 2011 polls recorded the lowest turnout of voters in the parliamentary election due to the dis-enchantment with the ruling class by the masses. The ruling parties at states level violated the principle of internal democracy, allowing Chief Executives to decide who becomes a flag bearer for the various elected offices. At the national level, the ruling party denied aspirants the chance to purchase nomination forms and insisted in returning the incumbent unopposed. Consequently, the political atmosphere was highly charged as campaigns were flawed by the activities of thugs. There were reported cases of intimidation and harassment of opposition members and serious demonstration of lack of decorum on the part of the law enforcement agencies. There were threats and widespread violence before and during the election and the aftermath was disastrous and marked with unprecedented crisis. The level of voter-turnout was as low as 28.7% during the parliamentary polls. Despite the seeming failure of the administration, the incumbent President was returned elected with about 55% success at the polls. As expected, the outcome was rejected by the leading opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari and his party, the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). The opposition challenged the results at the elections tribunal and the case ended in the Supreme Court in favour of the incumbent President.

### **The 2015 General Elections**

The general elections of 2015 differs from the previous polls in the country because of the determination of the electoral body to implement the aspect of electoral reform that requires the use of electronic voting machine, popularly called card reader. The use of the card reader reduced the level of fraud in the process and ensured the practice of one man one vote. However, there were reported cases of violence and irregularities, especially where the card reader failed to work or broke down. There were complaints about delays in the delivery of election materials in some areas and the problem of buying and selling of voter cards increased during this time. Post-election violence was significantly reduced largely due to the fact that the incumbent President, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan conceded defeat and congratulated the winner early enough. The outcome of the 2015 presidential election raises hope that the vote of citizen counts in election. However, there were other problems associated with the 2015 elections which became a challenge to the application of card reader, including multiple and underage voting, intimidation of

voters, disenfranchisement as a result of missing names of some registered voters, snatching of card readers and destruction of ballot boxes. Others were changing the list of electoral officials, miscomputation and falsification of results. The electoral body promised to address these challenges before the next general elections.

### **The 2019 General Elections**

The performance of the Muhammadu Buhari administration was rated very low in the eyes of many citizens that expected high level of delivery and decency in governance. The hope of the common man turned into despair when the government failed to improve the quality of living as prices of commodities increased with the increase in the price of petroleum from N65 per litre to N90 per litre; later raised to N145 per litre and recently increased to N160 per litre. It is a well-known fact that any increase in the price of petrol would automatically reflect in hike in the prices of essential services in the country. Thus, the performance of the Buhari government was said to be decimal, despite some successes in the fight against insurgency and anti-corruption crusade. Even these areas are not fully addressed due to continuing insurgent attacks in the Northeast and a new wave of banditry in the Northwest and North-central zones. At the time of the 2019 general elections, the rank of the ruling party (APC) was divided and some prominent politicians, including three governors decided to cave out of the ruling alliance and returned to their former party, PDP. Apart from the governors, there were leading National Assembly members, including the Senate President and the Speaker of the House of Representatives that also returned to the PDP. However, the PDP was not able to stop the incumbent President who was the candidate of the APC largely due to wrong choice of candidate.

There was low level of participation as voter turnout was between 34%-35%, both during the parliamentary and the presidential polls. Similar complaints as recorded in previous elections, including underage voting, buying and selling of voter cards, as well as, intimidation of voters, disenfranchisement as a result of missing names of some registered voters, snatching of card readers and destruction of ballot boxes were reported. These irregularities were further accompanied by a new problem of declaring election inconclusive in many places. These again, affected the legitimacy of the political class and tarnished the image of the electoral body. There were large number of litigations at the election tribunals from state to national level. About six governorship elections and that of the President were challenged up to the Supreme Court. In addition, the large number of registered political parties further confused the already uneducated voters in rural areas who found it difficult to identify the candidates of the party of their choice.

**Table 1: Voter Turnout in Presidential and Parliamentary Elections from 1999–2019**

Year	Presidential	Parliamentary
1999	52. 26%	40. 7%
2003	69. 08%	49. 32%
2007	57. 5%	57. 49%

2011	53.7%	28.7%
2015	43.7%	43.65%
2019	34.75%	34.8%

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2020)

The table above indicates that only in 2003 has the voter turnout exceeded 60% in presidential election in the country. This figure was faulted by many observers due to the level of irregularities that characterised the polls. Voter turnout continues to decrease in presidential elections from about 53% in 2011 to 43.7% in 2015 and down to 34.75% in 2019. This is a negative impression about the performances of civilian administration in the country and the level of despair on the part of the citizens of Nigeria. The situation is even worse in the case of parliamentary elections, where in 2011, voter turnout was at its lowest level of 28.7%. It rose to 43.65% in 2015 and went down again to 34.8% in 2019. This shows that Nigerian democracy is still at infancy stage after about two decades of uninterrupted rule. It is also an indication of the low level of citizen participation in governance in the country.

### **Towards Improved Citizen Participation in Nigeria**

The analysis of elections in Nigeria from 1999–2019 has shown that citizens' participation was at its low level due to a number of reasons, ranging from illiteracy, poverty, elite manipulation, poor service delivery, corrupt practices, to insecurity. These factors have been acknowledged by Fourie (2001) as being responsible for the leadership failure in Africa. The current situation in the country reveals an alarming and terrible condition of citizens due to poor performance of civilian administration from 1999–2019, a period of twenty years of uninterrupted democracy. The citizens are left to dine with low level education, high rate of poverty, unemployment, deep-rooted corruption of the political class, general insecurity, marginalisation and insensitivity of officials at all levels. The measures so far introduced by the Muhammadu Buhari administration have not yield good results. Today, life has become unbearable for the average citizens who find it difficult to get food on their tables.

The era of COVID 19 pandemic has further devastated families across the country, particularly the low income class. Going by the rate of bandit attacks and continuing insurgency in parts of the country, many citizens might be disenfranchised. Political leaders at the national and state levels, civil societies, security agencies, electoral body and the entire citizens of Nigeria must join hands to stop the nation from a brink of collapse.

### **Conclusion**

Citizen participation in governance promotes responsible, shared decision-making on issues that affect individual and collective life. The researcher concludes that the level of citizen participation in public policy and governance in Nigeria is low and identifies the factors that hamper democratic practice and impedes citizen participation in Nigeria to include low literacy level, wide spread poverty, lack of security and corrupt practices, among others.

### **Managerial Implications**

In order to change the situation and support the agitation for a better nation, the researcher considers the following as necessary before the next general election:

1. Improving the level of literacy through enhancing education. In a country where the adult literacy rate stands at 62% as at 2018, then there is a long way to go to improve the level of education. Improving citizen education will go long way in promoting participation in governance.
2. The desire for the empowerment of citizens would be achieved through reduction or eradication of poverty across the nation. Provision of adequate and qualitative infrastructure will go a long way in fighting against poverty. Specific groups, like women and youths must be targeted in the fight against poverty. Social interventions are needed, especially in rural areas. This would help to check the excessive use of money to entice voters during elections. The measures introduced by the current administration to fight poverty like *N-Power*, *YESSO*, *Trader Money*, *Conditional Cash Transfer* and *Agricultural Revitalisation Programmes*, have fallen short in the face of the increasing rate of unemployment among youths coupled with the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic. So, the government needs to do more.
3. The government must be up and doing in the on-going fight against corruption in the country. A situation whereby only a few people are subjected to investigation (mostly those who are said to have fallen out with the government) must be changed. There should be all-out war against all forms of corrupt practices in the country.
4. Training and re-training of public officials for effective service delivery. This includes improvement of administrative capabilities of elected representatives and their staff for better performance and responsible governance and accountability. This is necessary because many of the elected officials lack the capacity and exposure to carry out the assigned responsibility. A situation where some of the political office holders use money to get to the position of authority has further destroyed the spirit of leadership delivery in the country.
5. Supporting the merit system among contestants will go a long way in enhancing internal democracy among political parties in the country. The society will be more secure when political parties allow for internal democracy to take its course in the selection or nomination of candidates or contestants into various political offices.

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