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**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAILED ELECTION
IN 1993 FOR NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC
DEVELOPMENT**

Idowu Johnson, Ph.D
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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAILED ELECTION IN 1993 FOR NIGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

Idowu Johnson, Ph.D*

Abstract

Election plays a vital role in a system of representative democracy. In Nigeria, the history of elections has been a chequered one. From 1964, 1979 to 1983 elections in Nigeria, experience shows that the country failed to conduct credible elections which will move the country to a higher rung on the democratization ladder. Thus, successive elections in Nigeria lacked the essential ingredients of democratic electoral processes. However, the June 12 1993 Presidential election remains a watershed in the history of elections in the country. The election was adjudged the most peaceful, and the freest in Nigeria's post-independence political history. The results of the election were not released by the military government with no justifiable reason. All domestic pressures to make the military allow the winner, M.K.O. Abiola assumed presidential office proved abortive. The 1993 presidential election explains the important roles of individuals, civil society organizations, opposition parties, and foreign countries in terminating authoritarian regime in Nigeria. The paper posits that the June 12 1993 presidential election was very significant for three obvious reasons. First, it allowed Nigeria to slightly conform to the global norm of democracy. Secondly, Nigeria became an encouragement for other countries in Africa in returning to democratic rule. Thirdly, Nigerians were more enlightened to reject any government coming to power through military coup. Arising from the foregoing, the paper concludes with some recommendations on how to consolidate democracy in Nigeria.

Key words: June 12 election, Nigeria, military, democracy, democratic development

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1. Introduction

The importance of election in an ideal society cannot be underestimated. Central to the whole ideal of democracy is the issue of elections. In theory and practice, there cannot be any meaningful and durable democracy without a free, fair and credible election. In the same vein, elections provide an important arena for ensuring political equality between citizens, both in access to public office and in the value of their votes. Okoosi-Simbine (2008) seem to have buttressed this point when she argued that: "citizens' inputs into the process through which they are governed, via elections are important components of democracy being that they can provide direction for government in its policies and programme implementation, assess performance and ultimately ensure accountability and development".

Though election is not a sufficient condition for democracy, it is a necessary process. As such, a system of government cannot be regarded as democratic if it does not result from choices of parties, politicians and policies made by citizens through free and fair electoral rules, processes and administration. Therefore, democracy is built on the outcome of a credible election.

In the history of Nigerian politics, especially since independence, electoral conduct has been rather problematic. This is due to the fact that electoral conduct in the nation's political history has been marred by fraudulent practices, corruption and violence. In 1960, Nigeria experimented with parliamentary democracy fashioned after the British model. It was however truncated in 1966. It was only after 13 years in 1979 when the Second Republic began. The Second republican government likewise collapsed in December 1983. Having had to contend with various military governments since the collapse of the Second Republic in 1983, the country has progressively lost all the known vestiges of democratic values of accountability, rule of law and the flourishing of fundamental civil and

political liberties (Umar, 2009: 374). Though the military coup makers have their own agenda, however, it must be noted that the political elite and electoral commissions ease their task by the way they conducted elections and the contested nature of the outcomes of these elections.

However, the "globalization of democracy" and the universalization of popular demands for political freedom, participation, and accountability necessitated the West to tie the extension of aid to democratization from military and/or one party and/or personal rule to pluralistic and multi-party rule. This prompted General Ibrahim Babangida regime to initiate a transition programme in 1987. Although President Babangida saw it as a strategy for the perpetuation of his rule, it backfired with the events that followed the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election. This paper seeks to analyse the significance of June 12 elections and the consequences on democratization project in Nigeria. It shows that the attainment of democracy in 1999 stems from the internationalization of the cancelled June 12 presidential election.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part attempts an overview of elections in Nigeria. The second part highlights as well as criticizes the Babangida's transition programme and the cancellation of the June 12, 1993 presidential election. The third part examines the internationalization of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and consequences on democratization in Nigeria. The fourth part concludes the paper.

2. An Overview of Elections in Nigeria

The first national election in Nigeria was conducted by the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) in 1959. It has been observed that no party emerged with a clear majority in the December 12, 1959 Federal Elections, thus creating a political stalemate. After a week of political bargaining during

which an NCNC/AG Federal Coalition was mooted, an NPC/NCNC Federal Coalition Government emerged, with Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (NPC Deputy leader) appointed as Prime Minister, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe (NCNC leader) appointed president of the newly created Upper Chamber of the Federal Parliament, the Senate, and subsequently, the Governor-General of the Federation in succession to Sir James Robertson (Akinsanya, 2005: 21). To be sure, most Nigerians agree that the political parties of the First Republic performed very poorly, especially when one focuses on the violent and rigged general elections of 1964 and 1965. In addition, the inter-party negotiations and bargaining that followed the 1959 federal elections revealed that the leading politicians were not totally committed to consensus politics and that they are therefore willing to experiment with competitive politics including the idea of an institutionalized opposition to the government (Adamolekun, 1985). These in turn led to the formal collapse of the First Republic on January 15, 1966.

The collapse of the First Republic ended the practice of British Westminster model, and put Nigeria under 13 years of military rule. The 1979 general election ushered in the Second Republic from October 1, 1979 with a Presidential system of government. The Second Republic collapsed on December 31st, 1983 when the military struck again by overthrowing Shagari administration. As observed by Forrest (1995: 86), two cardinal points stand out about the conduct of the 1983 elections. First, the independence of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was subverted by politicians and the ruling party. Second, there was rigging on a massive scale at all stages of the electoral process sufficient to throw results of the election into doubt. In fact, the reaction of Nigerians and most political parties to the merit of the 1983 presidential election was swift, strong, and generally hostile.

Following the demise of the Second Republic in 1983, the military government headed by Major-General Muhammed Buhari had his mind set on one major problem: clearing Nigeria of the endemic problem called

corruption. It must be added that in spite of its glaring excesses, repression, high-handedness and political insensitivity, the Buhari administration, through the introduction of War Against Indiscipline (WAI), succeeded to a large extent in curbing bad behaviour of Nigerians and gave the nation a more purposeful sense of direction. But the Buhari administration was terminated on August 27, 1985 in a palace coup which brought General Ibrahim Babangida into power. The coup came into effect because the Buhari administration failed to see that it was necessary to provide a political agenda within which to pursue its economic reform and its social and moral crusade. In fact, the Buhari administration neither initiated a political transition programme nor promised any future elections.

3. Babangida's Transition Programme and the June 12 1993 Presidential Election

The Babangida's transition programme began with the setting up of a Political Bureau in 1986. The Bureau made several recommendations to government some of which were accepted by the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC), while others were thrown out. For example, while the Bureau did not suggest a new political model for the country, it urged the Babangida administration to fall back on the presidential system as the best option, and the government accepted. The government also accepted the recommendation that a two-party was best for Nigeria, just as it turned down socialism which the Bureau prescribed, but preferred that both parties should accept the national philosophy (welfarism) of government as enunciated in paragraph 53 of the White paper (The Political Bureau Report, 1987).

The political transition was supposed to terminate with the presidential election on December 5, 1992. It must be noted however, that the Babangida administration has shifted the original handing over to civilians twice. In

fact, the final years of the Babangida administration were marked by gross manipulation of the transition process. There were series of unpredictable interventions, rule changes, and postponements, which stretched the life of the regime to eight years and tried the patience of Nigerians to breaking point. Constant interference in the political process gave rise to acute political uncertainty and raise fears about the future of the country (Forrest, 1995: 233). For instance, the cancellation of the presidential primaries of October 1992 was based on widespread cases of electoral mal-practices by the presidential aspirants of the two political parties and their executives (Forrest, 1995). There was little ideological difference between the parties, the National Republican Convention (NRC) leaning to the right and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) tending to the left. But as it unfortunately turned out the two attempts that were made by the NRC and SDP to choose their presidential flag bearers ended in a fiasco.

From the foregoing, the executives of the two political parties were accused of irregularities in the conduct of the primaries. It was alleged that the executive of each party had candidates which they favoured to win and manipulated the process so that their candidates could emerge winners. Due to public criticisms of the process and opposition to the results declared by the executive of the two political parties, National Electoral Commission (NEC) was directed by the federal government to investigate the conduct of the primaries and report its finding to the AFRC. General Babangida in announcing the cancellation of the presidential primaries and disbandment of the party executives, cited cases of the use of money to induce voters, falsification of results, over-voting etc. When civil society rose in strong protests, Babangida slated June 12, 1993 as the date for the Presidential election to produce a civilian president for the country.

The June 12, 1993 Presidential election represents a watershed in Nigeria's political history. By the beginning of the series of ward, local and state primaries that culminated in the revised national primaries and conventions

of the parties in March 1993, the electorate had become deeply dispirited, and the civilian political class humiliated and depleted by the violent gyrations and elongations of the transition programme. Notwithstanding the air of pervasive cynicism, however, the rescheduled primaries were conducted without any major incident or controversies (Suberu, 1997: 308). In the party primaries in Port Harcourt and Jos respectively by the NRC and SDP, Alhaji Bashir Tofa emerged his party (NRC) flag-bearer while Chief M.K.O. Abiola got the SDP ticket, through the option A4 method. As a southerner, Abiola symbolized the fervent desire of several elements in the south to break the virtual northern monopoly on national political leadership. Yet, as a prominent Muslim, Abiola did not excite the traditional northern Muslim antipathy for "southern infidels", and could count on the support of several moderate and progressive politicians in the North who were willing to concede power to the South in the interests of equity and national unity (Suberu, 1994: 309).

However, an attempt was made to stop the holding of the elections through a state-sponsored, *albeit* illegal organization, called "Association for Better Nigeria" (ABN) led by Senator Arthur Nzeribe. The Association on June 10 got a 9.30 p.m injunction of an Abuja High Court stopping the elections slated for June 12, 1993. The National Electoral Commission acting on the directive of President Ibrahim Babangida and the power vested in the Commission by the Transition to Civil Rule Decree, Decree No 13 of 1993 declared that no court can stop the elections as planned on June 12, 1993. Thus, on June 12 voters turned out to vote for the candidate of their choice under a calm and peaceful atmosphere. The elections monitored by observers from more than sixty countries endorsed it as free and fair, and to the Nigerian population, the best held elections in Nigeria (Omoruyi, 1999).

Indeed, observers agreed that the election was very well conducted. Results of the presidential election as compiled by NEC showed that the flag-bearer under the ticket of the SDP Chief M.K.O. Abiola was leading his NRC

counterpart, Bashir Tofa. The SDP won nineteen out of thirty states, including Kaduna and Kano with the support of former governors Balarabe Musa and Abubakar Rimi and three states in the south-east. The NRC suffered high abstention rates in the northern states where well-known candidates like Adamu Ciroma, Umaru Shinkafi, Shehu Yar'Adua and Bamanga Tukur had earlier been barred from contesting (Forest, 1995: 236). The SDP captured 56% of the overall vote with substantial support in all regions.

On June 15 1993, an Abuja High Court presided over by Justice Dahiru Saleh restrained NEC from announcing the results, which nevertheless had already been made available to the public and media locally and internationally. This court injunction was swiftly countered by High Court rulings in Benin, Ibadan, Lagos and Awka and challenged by NEC itself at the Kaduna High Court of Appeal. On 21 June, however, the Abuja High Court invalidated the presidential election on the grounds that it had been conducted in defiance of a court order. On 23 June, when a hearing was scheduled to commence on NEC's action at the Kaduna Court, the Federal Government intervened abruptly and decisively to suspend the Electoral Commission, annulled all actions and judicial proceedings on the presidential election, and revoke all relevant legislation relating to the transition programme. (Suberu, 1997: 309). The way was then open for the elections to be cancelled on the totally unconvincing grounds that the reputation of the judiciary needed to be protected. Subsequently, in his broadcast to the nation on June 27, 1993, Babangida gave the reason why the June 12 presidential election had to be cancelled. He alleged breaches of the rules and regulations of democratic election, sighting the use of money to the tune of billions of naira by the two presidential candidates in the June 12 election.

Quite obviously, opposition to the cancellation of the elections came not from the parties but from extra-parliamentary opposition groups that originated in Lagos, though they had wider support. They included the

Campaign for Democracy (CD), a coalition of forty-two human rights organizations, the June 12 movement, the Association for Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria (ADGN), Civil Liberty Organizations (CLO), Universal Defenders of Democracy (UDD), Constitutional Right Project (CRP), and Movement for National Reformation (MNR). Through conferences, seminars and symposia, these organizations were able to educate the people on their rights. Also through the use of handbills, pamphlets and posters, the pro-democracy groups were able to mobilize the people to undermine the authority of the military government. Despite a strong clampdown on the press and the detention of poor democracy supporters by security services, these organizations were able to maintain a vocal position to the government and played a key role in terminating Babangida's administration. It is also worthy to note that the activities of this group not only pushed Babangida out of power but made the illegal Interim National Government (ING) set up by Babangida impotent.

4. The Internationalization of the June 12 Crisis

While the internal factors created the enabling environment to discredit the military government over the cancellation, the external influence was also important in putting pressure on the government to return the country to democratic rule. Apparently, international reaction to the cancellation was very negative. Barely 24 hours after the June 12 presidential election result was cancelled by the Federal Military Government, a statement from the state department in the US said:

The United States government note with deep concern, the Nigerian military regime continuing refusal to release the results of the June 12

presidential election and its suspension of the country's transition framework (The Guardian, 1993: 1).

The US reacted by suspending non-humanitarian assistance to Nigeria, reducing the level of military personnel exchange between the two countries, reviewing all new applications for exports of defence articles and services to Nigeria, imposing restrictions on the issuance of American diplomatic visas to Nigerian officials, and advising prospective American visitors to avoid Nigeria (Suberu, 1997: 311). Later, the US suspended direct air links with Nigeria because of the security situation at the Lagos airport and declared Nigeria a major drug trafficking country (Forrest, 1995: 238).

Britain also reacted to the cancellation of the June 12 presidential election. A statement from the British foreign and Commonwealth office said: the cancellation of the result of the election "is bound to harm our friendship". This statement was followed by announcement of sanctions on the military class which include suspension of military training courses provided for members of the Armed Forces, suspension of assistance to the National War College (now National Defence College), review of new aid to Nigeria, all preferential treatment to officials of the federal and state government and parastatals with regard to visa applications, would stop (The Guardian, 1993: 13). Canada also suspended Nigeria's eligibility for Canadian sponsored military and police training, cancelled an upcoming visit to the country by a delegation from the Nigerian Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies and advised Canadians to defer all travels to Nigeria (Suberu, 1997: 311).

In addition, Japan, Germany and the 12 member European Community (EC) expressed serious concern with the decision of the military to cancel an election adjudged free and fair worldwide.

It is imperative to state here that the Nigerian government considered this imposition of sanction as external interference in its internal affairs. However, in Akinterinwa's view, such foreign intervention in the course of

democracy in the country was timely. Akinterinwa succinctly puts it as follows:

In the New World Order, the Europeans are saying that democratization is and will be a non-negotiable issue so that is the signal by those sanctions. The implication for Nigeria is that military dictatorship will not be accepted in international relations (The African Guardian, 1993, pp. 25-26).

The internationalization of the June 12 presidential election was not limited to the Western countries. Also, Nigerians resident in the United States and Britain protested the cancellation and called for pressures to be put on the country's ruler by the international community to force the government of Nigeria to rescind its decision to cancel the June 12 election. In the same vein, the activities of National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) in abroad were also significant in the struggle for the actualization of Abiola's mandate. NADECO-abroad was mainly coordinated and effective in three major countries – United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada.

With the exist of Babangida, the demise of ING and the coming into power of General Sani Abacha, NADECO abroad were very vibrant in ensuring that Nigeria conform to global norms of democracy. To be sure, a preponderant number of the NADECO-Abroad executive were based in the United Kingdom where they also learnt about and networked with several other groups particularly the New Nigerian Forum, Nigerian Liberal Democrats, Nigerian Organization for Democracy with Integrity, Association for Democratic Movement of Nigeria, African Democratic League, Justice Nigeria, Nigerian Patriotic Front, African Liberation Support Company, National Strategic Committee, International Movement for Democracy in Nigeria, Now Group, United Democratic Front for Nigeria (UDFN) and National Liberation Committee of Nigeria (NALICON) (Momoh, 2012: 45).

NADECO in abroad organized programmes, rallies, conferences, and briefings to Nigerians, foreign audiences and sympathizers with the Nigerian struggle to actualize the June 12 mandate. Radio Kudirat and Radio Freedom, though not established by NADECO – Abroad, had many NADECO activists and supporters serving as regular commentators in projecting and propagandizing on the Nigerian cause (Momoh, 2012: 47).

Although Chief M. K. O. Abiola was not installed as the president, the internationalization of the June 12 struggle was very significant for three obvious reasons. First, it allowed Nigeria to slightly conform to global norms of democracy. This was clearly seen in the transition programme of General Sani Abacha within the context of his “home – grown democracy” idea. The drama came to an anti-climax when all the five political parties which were set up, funded and run as government parastatals, adopted General Sani Abacha as the sole presidential candidate (Kukah, 2003). But the crisis reached a climax with the death of General Sanni Abacha on June 8, 1998. He was succeeded by General Abdulsalaam Abubakar, whose first task, according to his Maiden Broadcast to the nation, was the holding of a new election for the return to civil rule as against popular demand by the civil society for the installation of Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola who was still in detention. General Olusegun Obasanjo who was imprisoned for his alleged roles in abortive *coup d'etat* against General Sanni Abacha Administration was immediately released while Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola was still detained because he refused to renounce his claim to the presidency although he later died on July 17, 1998 in mysterious circumstances. Meanwhile, General elections were slated for April 1999 and indeed, did take place as scheduled, and on May 29, 1999, retired General Olusegun Obasanjo who was the military Head of State from 1976 - 1979 was sworn in as the country's Second Executive President.

The second symbolic reason for the internationalization of June 12 Presidential election was that Nigeria became an encouragement for other

countries in Africa in returning to democratic rule. Nigeria has been a strong promoter and an advocate of democratic rule at least in West Africa sub-region. Nigeria's influence in West Africa was enhanced by Abacha regime's bold decisions of May 1997, to reverse a coup d'état in Sierra Leone. Nigerian military forces intervened to restore an elected government that had been overthrown by rebellious soldiers. The paradox of a military dictatorship opting to play the role of guardian against military usurpation abroad baffled many observers. However, the rationale for this action was evident in the chorus of approval from top ranking officials of the Commonwealth as well as the OAU (now AU). When the OAU (now AU) Summit of May 1997 convened in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, which had been a divisive factor in African councils, suddenly occupied a central place in the continental consensus of support for political legitimacy. The organization formally approved the use of military force by its West African members to restore the legitimate government of Sierra Leone (Sklar, 2001: 274). Also, the Abacha regime installed democratic rule in Liberia at a time Nigeria had not even attained democracy. In addition, the Obasanjo led civilian administration resisted regime changes through coup d'état in Sao Tome and Principe when the country's President Frederique de Menezes was in Nigeria to attend the Leon Sullivan Summit. The Nigerian government ensured the return of de Menezes to power and president Obasanjo even accompanied him back to his country (Idachaba, 2009: 313). Another instance was in Guinea – Bissau where the government of Kumba Yala was ousted. Although Yala was not seen as a symbol of good leadership for democracy and he himself saw the futility of returning to power, Nigeria and other countries ensured commitment to an immediate commencement of a transition programme to civil rule in Guinea – Bissau. Consequently, a transition government not headed by the army chief was immediately installed. In this sense, the internationalization of the June 12 struggle and the subsequent Nigeria's return to civil rule was the most consequential event on the African continent since the overthrow of apartheid

in South Africa. It led to the African Union, for the first time adopting a rule refusing to admit to membership any government which came to power through a military coup (The Nation, 2013: 4).

The third significant reason arising from the internationalization of the June 12 presidential election is that Nigerians were more enlightened to reject any government coming to power through military coup. Since May 29, 1999, Nigeria has had a peaceful transition programme from one civilian government to another (1999 – 2007, 2007 – 2011 and 2011 – 2015). Despite current strains and stresses in the political environment, the future prospects for the survival of democracy in Nigeria as opined by Fafowora (2013: 64) are quite good and definitely better than ever before. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the military will seek to return to power again. But this is not simply because military rule in Nigeria stands discredited. The fact is that the conditions that made military rule possible have ceased to exist. The most important of these was a consensus among the political class in support of civilian democratic rule. Today, the politicians have built up a consensus in support of civilian democratic rule in Nigeria that the military will have considerable difficulty in breaking (Fafawora, 2013: 64). Even more pertinent is the fact that Nigerians are more aware of global rejection of military rule backed by the African union and the international community.

In the final analysis, the internationalization of the June 12 1993 presidential election has a positive influence in pushing the military off the political scene. The various sanctions imposed on Nigeria are aimed at forcing the military rulers to return the country successfully to democratic rule. The march to democratic rule after the cancellation of the June 12 1993 presidential election by the military government drew international attention because of the important position Nigeria occupies in Africa. These sanctions were used as an instrument of pressure on the Nigerian government until the international community is convinced that the government in Nigeria reached an irreversible stage in the march to democracy.

5. Concluding Remarks

The June 12, 1993 presidential election represents a watershed in the annals of Nigeria's political history. The election was globally adjudged the most peaceful, fair and free in Nigeria's post-independence political history. The voting pattern on June 12 suggests that the election was not based on religious and ethnic bigotry. It was the first time in the world legal history, when a citizen of a country was given mandate through the ballot boxes by his people and would not only be denied the access to the office by a military junta but also charged for treason and eventually died in detention in a mysterious circumstance. Civil society and pressures from the international community lend their voices to the call for the return of democracy in the country. Specifically, international reaction to the cancellation of the election brought about a fundamental change for Nigeria to embrace global norms of democracy.

The story of the June 12, 1993 debacle has become Nigeria's narrative for over two decades. Nigeria's democracy founded on a fault line, has remained askew since then. Elections are still Nigeria's problematic issue as witnessed in the crisis that engulfed Nigeria's Governors Forum (NGF) in 2014. It is remarkable that ethno-religious crises in Nigeria which the Abiola mandate would have curtailed are even more alive and well today, ravaging the country now more than ever. Democratic space has continued to constrict over these decades with successive governments ignoring the basic tenets and conveniently neglecting to build institutions that would enhance civil rule and orderly conduct of governance (The Nation, 2013: 19). However, as Nigeria is preparing for another general election in 2019, it is imperative for Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to open the political space in order to ensure transparency in the elections. Thus, genuine electoral arrangements as witnessed in the June 12, 1993 elections will foster good governance and at the same time consolidate democracy in Nigeria.

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