

## **POWER OF INCUMBENCY AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT**

**Ndopnoikpong J. Afia**

Department of Political Science

College of Education, Afaha Nsit

Akwa Ibom State

08027683545 email: ndopafia@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*One of the discerning features of the Nigerian political system is the "sit-tight" or "second-term" syndrome". It express the degree to which public office holders often mop up the resources in their possession to win more terms in office. This study seeks to establish the influence of power of incumbency on the electoral process in Nigeria. The study found out that power of incumbency is used to perpetuate electoral malpractices and this increases political apathy in the country. The study recommends an amendment of the constitution to allow for only a single term in office for elected officers while the electoral commission should be given an independent source of funding to free it from an executive manipulation.*

### **Introduction**

The concept of electoral politics is new to Nigeria and associated with the advent of colonialism. Prior to this period, political offices as occupied by the Alafin in the Yoruba kingdom, the Emir in the Hausa aristocracy and the Obong among the Ibibios, for example were filled through divine right or any other culturally determined values. One of the influences of colonialism has been the change in this cultural political practice to the system of filling public offices through election. The essence of electoral politics is to ensure that office holders are selected through a constitutional device which receives the consent of the majority. In Nigeria, the electoral process could be traced to the 1922 constitution which allows for the election of four Nigerians, into the legislative council.

A government could be said to be legitimate to the extent that it has the right to govern and a corresponding recognition by the governed of that right (Alapiki 2004). Within a democracy, legitimacy is so important that power is being sought on the basis of periodic elections. Thus, even authoritarian governments, these days, seek to exercise power from the conduct of elections (Skills 1972).

It is on the basis that power could be acquired through an election that modern political system has developed an electoral system. An electoral system then refers to the rules and regulations that guide the conduct of an election. Thus, from independence in 1960, democratic regimes in Nigeria have been constituted through periodic elections. But while elections seem to be the legal framework for determining the allocation of power, it has the tendency of posing a greater problem in the country. The trend is that once power has been captured by individuals or groups, they found it delete difficult to concede it or compromise their dominion by allowing others to control it (Ayo in Adedeji and Ayo 2000). It is against this background that the influence of the power of incumbency on the electoral process in Nigeria is to be examined.

### **Statement of the problem**

Among the other reasons, election is used as a device to evaluate and choose new or veteran political leadership (Slann 1988). Thus, more than anything else, election epitomizes the existence of democracy; if election is abolished, it means that democracy has been abolished (Nnoli in Jinadu and Edoh 1990). It is simply the process of legitimizing power within a democratic system.

Given the relevance of an electoral process, it behooves the electoral process to ensure that both the campaign and election are conducted fairly; that voting is free of intimidation and that winners and losers accept the electoral outcome peacefully.

Unfortunately, from its inception, especially with the formation of regional political parties in the 1950s, the electoral process has been anything not been peaceful.

There is indeed no electoral process in Nigeria that could be said to be free and fair, and devoid of fraud, intimidation and massive violence (Ikpe 2004). Also, the electoral process is so arrogantly abused that a cursory look tends to reveal that it does not receive any protection from the government in power. On the contrary, accusing fingers seem to be pointed in the direction of those individuals and groups in power who perpetuate of abuse on the electoral process. The questions then remains: what influence does those in power exercise on the electoral process? To what extent can the power of incumbency assist in perpetuating oneself in power and/or dictating which way the ballot swings? These questions formed form the basic problems of this study and an attempt would be made to address them.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study adopts the political culture approach. Political culture describes the values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and orientations of the people towards the political system.

The proponents of this approach include Gabriel Almond, Talcott Parsons, Shils. Thus, Almond year in Alapiki 2004: 68) classifies political culture into the subject, parochial and the participant.

A subject political culture is one where there is high rate of individual orientation to the entire political system. The members in this culture are marginalized and remain passive or apathetic to the output processes but not to the existence of government which he may like or dislike.

In a particular political culture, citizens are positively oriented to the political system, the citizens have little or not awareness of, or orientation toward the political system as a whole, the input and output processes.

The approach is closely related to political development. it is relevant in this study because it provides an emotional attitudes that tend to determine the functioning of the electoral process in Nigeria.

### **Power of incumbency**

The study of politics brings to focus how power is being shared among groups or individuals within the political system. However, the concept of power is hard to define because of its varied usage. In order to avoid complexity, Rober Dahl in Oyediran (1998) uses a number of "influence-terms" to embrace every power situation. These include control, persuasion, might, force and coercion. Power could be seen in terms of command and

obedience. This means that somebody has power in so far as he can induce another to act in a specific manner because he has willed it (Alapiki 2004). Thus, Max Weber sees power as the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance.

Eminue (2001) highlights three connotations of power to include:

- (a) **Power as ability to affect/influence people:** This implies that power involves the capacity to make one's will prevail over those of others or the capacity to compel others to do what they would otherwise not wish to do. It therefore refers to the ability (through sanctions, coercion and the use of physical force) to get one's wish carried out despite opposition.
- (b) **Power as Decision-Making:** Power in this respect is seen as a process of affecting the policies of others with the help of actual or threatened severe loss, deprivation or punishment for non-compliance with the intended policy.
- (c) **Power as Ability to Crush Resistance:** This involves the capacity to crush resistance or opposition and to veto the decisions of others.

Accordingly, Eminue looks at power as a means as well as an end, a resource, a relationship, a process and as quality. Power in a given society could be associated with several sources such as wealth, money, physical strength, social status, education, moral character, and personal magnetism, military, legal, or managerial skill (Beer and Ulam in Oyediran 1998). They are referred to as power bases, Dahl (1957) sees the base of an actor's power as made up of all the resources, opportunities, acts, objects, etc. that can be exploited to affect the behaviour of another individual.

Shively (year) in Eminue 2005 extends the base of power to include money, affection, physical strength, legal status, information, a smile, strong allies, determination and desperation. Other sources of power include beauty, loyalty, credit, knowledge and expertise, ethnic solidarity, franchise, time and control over jobs.

Power of incumbency refers to power, which arises by virtue of occupying an office. It is referred to as a legitimate power because it flows from the constitutional acceptance in the political system. This implies the power of incumbency because it is legitimate and recognized by the laws of the land.

## **ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA**

An electoral process refers to a system of rules and regulations that determine the conduct of an election. Thus, we talk of an electoral process only in terms of an election.

It gives the electorate the opportunity to choose their representatives and to maintain contact with them. For an electoral system to be seen as democratic, there must be equality among the votes (equally weighted) as well as equal freedom for prospective candidates to present themselves to the electorate (Eminue 2001). He outlines the features of a free and fair electoral process to include:

- (a) The inclusion of both the majority and minority views in the legislature;
- (b) An indication of seriousness of purpose, shown by the willingness of candidates to pay election deposits and to be nominated.
- (c) The existence of a secret ballot system
- (d) Rough equality of basic electoral facilities within constituencies

- (e) Equality of campaigning conditions
- (f) Declaration of winners through a majority of the votes cast and
- (g) An opportunity to challenge election results and for settling electoral disputes and petitions in law courts.

As a procedure for election, electoral process in Nigeria started with the introduction of the elective principle in the Clifford Constitution of 1922. Although based on a limited franchise, the principle allows for the direct election of four Nigerians – three representing Lagos and one for Calabar into the Legislative Council.

Accordingly, this marked the beginning of election in Nigeria with the first being held in 1923. From then, elections in the country were after every five years as in 1928, 1938, 1942 etc.

On independence, Nigeria adopted a parliamentary (1960-1963) and later a presidential system in 1979 to the present. Consequently, elections of the President, Governors and members into the senate, House of Representatives and Houses of Assemblies were constitutionally held every four years. This implies that the electoral system provided for a four-year term of incumbency in the country.

The election of public officers has been based on a number of principles, such as the universal adult suffrage (which allows for every individual citizen from 18 years to vote or be voted for), nomination by a political party, secret ballot as well as the open ballot, referred to as option A4.

## POWER OF INCUMBENCY AND ELECTORAL PROCESS

An electoral process is designed as a means of evolving a legitimate power structure within the political system. But once power has been acquired, it becomes a variable in the hands of the incumbent in realizing his or her objectives. In analyzing the influence of power of incumbency on the electoral process, it is necessary to determine why people or groups seek for power in the first instance. The reason is that people seek power as a means to control and determine the allocation of the scarce values of the society.

Such values include wealth, status, power, respect, deference, income, safety, affection, rectitude, well-being, skill and enlightenment.

Power is therefore being sought because it improves one's actual or potential possession of other values (Alapiki 2004). The above justification explains the frenzy with which individuals or groups pursue power in Nigeria. Power is seen merely as a means to control state resources which can then be used in determining its distribution. As a result, power play in Nigeria is characterized by a do-or-die contest among competing groups and then the unwillingness on the part of the incumbent to relinquish it once it has been captured. This phenomenon is referred to as the "sit-tight syndrome" which manifests in the popular second-term addiction.

As noted by Kukah (1999), once power has been handed over to Nigerians, it becomes difficult for them to surrender it to other individuals and groups. The incumbent exercises a number of influence on the electoral process in Nigeria. Such power can be used to weaken party influence as a means of favouring the incumbent. For instance, Tafewa Balewa used his position as the prime Minister to weaken the Action Group (AG) in the Western region by backing Akintola to form the new Nigerian National Democratic Party

(NNDP) in 1963. Supported by the federal might, the NNDP won an overwhelming majority during the election. Again, incumbents are known to have risen above party discipline such that political parties in Nigeria are seen as mere rallies (**Insider Weekly**, February 2, 2004:17).

Similarly, once elected, the office holder often hijacks the party and turns it into personal machinery. The end is that elected officers assume dictatorial characters because the party lost its supremacy in favour of the incumbent (**Sunday Punch**, September 19, 2004:15).

Another influence wielded by incumbents on the political system is in determining the choice of their successors and those to fill the existing offices. This explains why for instance party conventions become mere gatherings to announce rather than choose candidates for election.

For instance, Dr. Okwesilieze Nwodo and Gemedo are said to have lost their re-election bid because the President, Olusegun Obasanjo wanted to install Audu Ogbeh as the National Chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 2001 (**The Punch**, May 27, 2002:59).

Apart from party offices, power of incumbency could be used to install individuals in elective offices. Thus, Balewa was instrumental in Akintola's election as the Premier of the Western region in 1963 while Obasanjo is known to have used his influence to bring in Adolphus Wabara into the senate even after losing the election in 2003 (**New Age**, March 23, 2004:8).

Also, the impeached Deputy Governor of Osun State, Omissore had to be shielded by the presidency to win the Osun East Senatorial District even while being in prison detention and standing trial for the murder of Bola Ige (**Tell**, March 24, 2003:28).

In the same vein, State Governors were known to have adopted their transitional committee chairman as their consensus candidates for the 2004, 2015 and 2019 Local Government Polls. In sum total, every incumbent is interested in determining and having a say in whom will be his successor from the federal down to the state levels (**Sunday Punch**, July 25, 2004). The result is that winners in Nigerian elections are often known in advance. Power of incumbency could also be used in influencing the electoral behaviour of the voters. Due to the support – reward system which characterizes electoral politics in Nigeria, people are bent in support of an incumbent.

This for instance explains why the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) abandoned its zoning principle and endorse Shehu Shagari for a second-term in 1983. It also accounts for the reckless cross-carpeting by members of other political parties to the PDP especially during and after the 2003 elections (**Daily Sun**, February 10, 2004:12).

In affirmation, President Obasanjo is known to have used his office to remove a number of public office holders. This explains the case of Audu Ogbeh, and his effort at removing Chris Ngige (Anambra State) and Dariye (Plateau State) as Governors. Thus, any individual within the system who disagrees with the President stands to be guillotined (**Vanguard**, January 11, 2005:16). All these issues were reported under Goodluck Jonathan and even the present Buhari's administration.

Power of incumbency is also used to will the choice of voters in favour of the incumbent party or individual. For instance, Umaru Dikko simply told Nigerians during the

1983 campaign that they had only two parties to choose from the NPN, which was then in power or the Military. Presently it is APC or no other.

The electorates are thus influenced because a man who supports the incumbent will be rewarded with contracts of official projects enabling him to pass on largesse to further down the line of those who look to him for generosity. The above phenomenon encourages what is commonly referred to as the second-term syndrome in Nigeria. Incumbent Chief Executives must often win their re-election bid in Nigeria.

Thus, Balewa had to win the prime ministership in 1958 and 1963; Shagari won both in 1979 and 1983 while Obasanjo won in 1999 and 2003. Goodluck won in 2011, Buhari 2019. Often such victories are overwhelming or by a landslide. In line with this, the same trend holds in the states incumbent, Governors are given blanket clearance by the Electoral Commission and the parties to re-contest for the office. For instance, despite the cases of fraudulent declaration and corruption against them, Akpabio (Akwa Ibom) El Rufai (Kaduna), Amechi (Rivers) Bola Tinubu (Lagos) were given the nod to contest the 2011 elections (Tell, March 24, 2016: 26-27).

This explains also why the APC, being the incumbent at the federal level had to sweep victory during the 2019 elections. It is also reasonable to argue that Edo State Governor Obasefi had to be re-elected though from the APC to PDP simply because he was incumbent.

The capacity by the incumbents to influence the electoral system in Nigeria could be explained mainly by the facts that they have access to the purse of the state. Hence, in their position as the sharer of state resources, the incumbent wielded a lot of economic power over the system. They have access to money which is used in buying off the electoral commission and personnel.

With state wealth, incumbents use state resources and influence to compel state security agents to aid them in manipulating the electoral process in their favour. Also, the influence of the incumbent plays a vital role in the functioning of judicial system in the country. The courts as well as election petition tribunals are compelled to give judgments in favour of the incumbent.

Consequently, an Abuja High Court presided over by justice Bab-Yusuf refused to disqualify James Ibori despite the case of 'guilty' entered against the Governor by the Bwari Upper Area court (Inside weekly, February 9, 2004:21). In attempting to influence the electoral system in their favour, incumbents adopt a number of strategies which include bribery, intimidation of opponents and electoral personnel, use of thugs, and imposition of candidates, flouting of party directives and the manipulation of electoral laws. For instance, President Obasanjo attempted to introduce reforms into the Electoral Act in 2002, through the back door as a means of preventing the registration of more political parties for the 2003 elections (*The punch*, May 27, 2002:59). It is also believed that Obasanjo inaugurated the Political Reform Conference in 2005 to enable him tamper with the constitution to allow him to run for a five-year tenure from 2007 (*The News*, February 28, 2005:12).

He simply does what he wants at any time (*The Guardian*, March 22, 2005:6). In line with this, the country has been hijacked by a clique that found itself in power through foul means and will do everything to hang on to power. Accordingly, they use the instrumentality of power to intimidate others (Daily Sun, August 15, 2005:4).

A body was put in place despite the refusal of the National Assembly to approve the N931. 7 Million sought for by the president. According to Adamu Farouk Aliyu, this goes to show how conquering the president in this country could be. Another device is the barefaced rigging of elections by the incumbent. Thus, Abubaker Danjiwa Umar, a Campaigner for democracy in a letter to the president Obasanjo stated that the process that brought him to office was not the mandate of the people (*The News*, February 2, 2004:27).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The essence of election is to determine the constitutional succession into any given office in the political system. It is the device which enables the electorate to express the acceptance or rejection of a policy, party of candidates.

- (i) To make electoral process free and fair, it is necessary that the constitutional provision which allows individuals to run for a second term should be amended. It is important that people should be allowed only a single term in office to prevent them from using their offices to influence the electoral process in their favour.
- (ii) It is also necessary that the electoral commission should be given a free and truly independent status. Consequently, the commission should be given a free hand in the recruitment of both the adhoc and permanent staff, devoid of government influence. The commission should have an independent source of finding its programme instead of waiting for funds from the government. As long as it relies solely on government for its finances, the electoral commission will continue to be dictated to and manipulated by the incumbents.

## CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, the study came to the conclusion that power of incumbency increases political apathy in Nigeria. Thus, most of the analysis indicated that most people may not contest any election in Nigeria when an incumbent is also a candidate for a particular office.

Also, the study shows that people are reluctant to vote because of their conviction that the incumbents will not allow for a free and fair election.

According to the findings, candidates are often imposed on the electorate by the government officials and parties thereby making the selection process purely an elitist affair instead of putting it in the hands of the voters.

It also revealed that most causative agent of electoral malpractice in Nigeria are those individuals who contest the election while still occupying public offices. From their position, such candidates easily exert influence on the electoral commissions in the administration of election. Such influence is then translated to favour the incumbents who for instance impose party loyalists on the electoral commission to serve as electoral personnel.

Thus, the study agreed that power of incumbency enhances electoral malpractice, hence political apathy in Nigeria.

## REFERENCES

- Adedeji, A. and Ayo, B. (eds) (2000) *People-Centered Democracy in Nigeria? The Search for Alternative Systems of Governance at the Grassroots*. Ibadan: Heinemann Ltd.
- Alapiki, H. E. (2004) *politics and government in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt : Amethyst and Colleagues publishers.
- Cartwright, D. (ed) (1959) *Studies in Social Power*. Ann Arbor : Michigan Institute for Social Research.
- Dudley, B. (1982) *An Introduction to Nigerian Government and politics*. London: The Macmillan press.
- Eminue, O. (2001) *Introduction to Political Science Calabar* : CATS Publication.
- Jinadu, A. and Edoh, T. (eds) (1990) *elections in Nigeria*, Vol. 1 Case studies, Lagos: National Electoral Commission.
- Joseph, R. (1991) *Prebendal Politics in Nigeria: The Rise and Fall of the Second Republic*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Kukah, M. H. (1999) *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Oyediran, O. (1998) *Introduction to Political Science*. Ibadan: Oyediran consults International
- Slann, M. (1998) *Introduction to politics: Governments and Nations in the post Cold War Era*. USA: McGraw- Hill

## NON – TEXTURE MATERIALS

- Dahl, R. (1957) "The Concept of power  
**Behavioral science 2**".  
Daily Sun, August 15, 2005
- Ikpe, U.B. (2004) "Attitude of Politicians to Electoral Process in Nigeria" A Paper presented at a seminar on **Sustenance of Democracy in Nigeria**. June 17 – 18, Uyo: INEC.
- Insider Weekly, February 2, 2004.
- Tell, March 24, 2016: 26-27