



Examining Electoral malpractice and challenges of Nigeria's democratic consolidation through a biblical perspective

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ABSTRACT

Election in any democratic society is meant for people to choose their representatives in the government. It is a complex process that involves the registration of voters, collection of voter's cards and the casting of votes at polling units on the day of election. A survey of Nigeria's elections from the first to the Fourth Republic reveals that they are marred by various forms of malpractices ranging from the use of thugs for intimidation of opponents, snatching of ballot boxes, underage voting, use of fake ballot papers, bribery, manipulation of results and so on. This paper examines the causes and effects of electoral malpractices on Nigeria's democracy in the Fourth Republic. It also aims to proffer solutions to these problems through Biblical injunctions. The research methods used are historical, analytical and hermeneutical methodologies. Primary and secondary sources are used to gather information. The findings reveal that election malpractice triumphed in Nigeria as a result of poverty, illiteracy, greed, over-ambition of politicians, etc. It is recommended that Nigerian politicians follow the precepts of the scriptures by removing all forms of envy and selfish ambitions (James 3:16) for Nigeria's democracy to strife.

Keywords Election, electoral system, electoral malpractice, democracy, politics and morality

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a form of government that allows people to choose their leaders and representatives in the government of the day through free and fair elections and other forms of participation. Democracy entails popular sovereignty, which is the idea that the people are the ultimate authority and the source of government authority. In this sense, the powers of government are based upon the consent of the governed. It is pertinent to say that elections are important components of modern democracy. They constitute the channel by which people elect their representatives in the government. According to Longley (2021, p. 20), elections in themselves do not fulfil the requirement of modern democracies; they must be free, fair and sufficiently frequent if the people's will is to have effect". Free elections mean all adult citizens can vote in elections and stand for political office. Also, candidates vying for political office should not in any way be blocked from addressing the electorate. Fair elections mean elections that are fundamentally honest, where voters must not be stopped from voting, and all votes must be accurately counted.

Electoral malpractice is one of the major impediments to democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. A critical assessment of the electoral system in Nigeria reveals that they are usually marred by a series of electoral malpractices ranging from snatching of ballot boxes, falsification of electoral results, use of fake ballot papers, bribery and so on. This paper is an attempt to address the issue of electoral malpractice from the biblical perspective. This shall be done by looking at the concept of democracy, elections and electoral system in Nigeria, electoral malpractices in the Fourth Republic, and the biblical approach to the

problem.

The Concept of Democracy

Semantically, the term democracy comes from two Greek words: *demos* (people) and *karatos* (rule). It literally connotes a government by the people and, for the people, a popular government that represents the interests of the masses. Most political scientists agree that democracies are based on six foundational elements, namely, popular sovereignty, electoral system, public participation, separation of powers, human rights and the rule of law (Robert Longley, 2021,p32). Some scholars also view democracy as a political competition through periodic elections. Others see it as citizens' participation in the government and still, others link democracy to civil and political liberties. Addi (1997, p. 107) perceives democracy as the process by which power changes hands without violence or force. The focus of this definition is the peaceful transfer of political power in a society. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is of the opinion that democracy is the equality of all individuals in society. This view is corroborated by Kapstein and Converse (2008) when they attribute the causes of the breakdown of democracy in a country to the prevalence of poverty and inequality that brings about segregation in society.

Throughout history, there have been different types of democracy practised by different democratic nations in the world. According to social and political philosopher Jean-Paul Gagnon, more than 2,234 adjectives have been used to describe democracy (Gagnon, 2018, p92). This shows that democracy has a wide range of descriptions depending on the angle from which one looks at it. Some scholars refer to

direct and representative as the most common type of democracy. For the purpose of this paper, we shall identify some basic types of democracy.

Types of Democracy

- a. **Direct:** Direct democracy originated in ancient Greece during the 5th century B.C. It is sometimes called 'pure democracy'. It is considered the oldest non-authoritarian form of government. In a direct democracy, all laws and public policy decisions are made directly by a majority vote of the people rather than by the votes of their elected representatives.
- b. **Representative:** It is also called indirect democracy. It is a system of government in which all eligible citizens elect officials to pass laws and formulate public policy on their behalf. These elected officials are expected to represent the needs and viewpoints of the people in decision-making. It is the most common type of democracy in use today.
- c. **Participatory:** In a participatory democracy, the people vote directly on policy while their elected representatives are responsible for implementing those policies. It relies on the citizens to operate its political systems. Participatory democracy tends to encourage a higher and more direct form of citizen participation. There is no country specifically classified as a participatory democracy, yet most representative democracies employ citizen participation as a tool for social and political reform. In the U.S., for example, there is 'grassroots' citizen participation, such as the civil rights movements of the 1960s.
- d. **Liberal:** Liberal democracy is loosely defined as a form of representative

democracy that emphasises the principles of classical liberalism – an ideology advocating the protection of individual civil liberties and economic freedom by limiting the power of the government. Liberal democracy employs a constitution to define the powers of the government. Liberal democracy may take the form of a constitutional republic, like the United States or a constitutional monarchy, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

- e. **Parliamentary:** In a parliamentary democracy, the people directly elect representatives to a legislative parliament. The parliament directly represents the people in making necessary laws and policy decisions for the country. In parliamentary democracies such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Japan, the head of government is a prime minister who is first elected to parliament by the people and then elected prime minister by a vote of the parliament.
- f. **Constitutional:** it is generally defined as a system of government based on popular sovereignty and a rule of law in which the structures, powers and limits of government are established by a constitution. In a constitutional democracy, the constitution is considered to be the “supreme law of the land”. It is important to note that these types of democracy listed above are variants of representative democracy, and accordingly, they are generally descriptive of the particular values emphasised by the representative democracies that employ them.

Election, Electoral System: An Overview

Election is an important component of democracy. Through elections, citizens vote to elect their representatives in the government. Elections enable voters to select leaders and to hold them accountable for their performance in office. The question of who may vote is a central issue in elections. The electorate does not generally include the entire population. For example, many countries prohibit those who are under the age of majority from voting. In Nigeria, for example, citizens under the age of 18 are not required to vote. A representative democracy requires the nomination of a candidate to stand as the flag bearer for a political party. This is normally practised in partisan politics. However, before elections, political campaigns take place to influence the electorates to vote for the party concerned; there is always an electoral body set up to conduct elections on fixed dates.

The choice of electoral system is one of the most important institutional decisions for any democracy. The choice of a particular electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of a country. An electoral system or voting system is a set of rules that determine how elections and referendums are conducted and how their results are determined. A country's electoral system is the method used to calculate the number of elected positions in government that individuals and parties are awarded after elections. In other words, it is the way that votes are translated into seats in parliament or in other areas of government. Political electoral systems are organised by governments, while non-political elections may take place in business, non-profit organisations and informal organisations. Electoral systems are organised rules that

govern all aspects of the voting process: when elections occur, who is allowed to vote, who can stand as a candidate, how ballots are cast, how ballots are counted, how votes translate into the election outcome, limits on campaign spending and other factors that can affect the election result. Political electoral systems are defined by constitutions and electoral laws. There are different types of electoral systems. The major ones are the plurality electoral system, majority electoral system and proportional representation.

Elections in Nigeria are forms of choosing representatives to the federal government of Nigeria and the various states in the Fourth Republic. Nigeria operates a multi-party system with two strong political parties: the Peoples Democratic Party and the All Progressives Congress. The elected offices are the office of the President and the National Assembly, which has two chambers: the House of Representatives, which has 360 members and the Senate, which has 109 members. The 36 states also have their state assemblies.

Electoral Malpractices in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Electoral malpractice generally refers to an instance where acceptable norms and principles that confer credibility on elections are desecrated, and in their place, duplicity, falsehood, manipulation and cheating by any means are deployed to sway the outcome of elections (Aluagba, 2016, p14). Ezeani (2005, p. 10) defines electoral malpractices as illegalities committed by government officials responsible for the conduct of elections, political parties, groups or individuals with sinister intentions to influence an election in favour of a

candidate(s). Electoral malpractice in any form is anathema to democracy because of its retrogressive effect on the quality of democracy in a country. Aluagba (2016) opines that the abhorrence of electoral malpractices is necessary. He believes that if malpractices such as winning elections through rigging, massive use of money, use of violence against political adversaries and so on are unbridled, the tendency is for a negative culture of political larceny' to be inculcated by politicians (Aluagba, 2016, p. 5).

It should be noted that since the re-emergence of democracy in Nigeria in the 4th republic, the country has conducted five nationwide elections in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015, respectively. Though the elections were all periodically conducted as expected and closely monitored by domestic and international observers, they were all marred by varying degrees and calibres of malpractice. The inference from the conduct and outcome of these elections is that Nigeria is yet to demonstrate the attributes of a growing democracy (Yagboyaju, 2011, p. 93). After a long period of over three decades of military rule, elections that ushered in Nigeria's Fourth Republic were organised in a staggered manner. The 1999 election was won by the People's Democratic Party (PDP), where Olusegun Obasanjo emerged as the winner and subsequently became the first President of the Fourth Republic. As noted by Okolie (2005, p. 14), transition elections are usually relatively peaceful because a country is transitioning from an authoritarian to a civilian regime. This was true of the 1999 elections. This is not to say that the 1999 general elections were devoid of electoral corruption or malpractices.

The most noticeable cases were voter bribery and the sale of voter cards. The

subsequent elections were bedevilled by electoral ills, which included massive use of money for vote buying, stuffing of ballot boxes, ballot box snatching, falsifying election results to favour or disfavour particular candidates, fraudulent announcement that candidates who had, in fact, lost, had won and so on (Ojo, 2008, p. 116). The 2003 polls were acknowledged by both domestic and foreign observers as highly fraudulent. The elections were disastrous – they were demonstrable evidence of democratic deficit. There were lots of petitions and appeals from opposition parties but with little or no effect. The 2007 general election turned out to be the most disparaged and discredited in terms of fraudulent practices (Jega, 2009, p. 20). This has led scholars to describe it as a fitful path to democracy, 'muddled' elections, failed elections, etc. Money was used to influence everyone involved in the election process, from INEC officials to party agents, security agents and the electorate (Bryan & Baer, 2005, p. 101). In 2011 and 2015, there were reported cases of rigging, ballot snatching and falsification of results. This behoves one to conclude that electoral malpractice has become a tradition in Nigeria.

Causes of Electoral Malpractice in Nigeria

There are numerous factors that influence electoral malpractice in Nigeria. Some of them are discussed below;

a. Economic Problems

Economic issues and instability make people anxious about their future. Some are eager to join politics in order to get rich quickly. They are anxious to get their own share of the national cake. This

situation is common amongst underdeveloped countries with bad economies. Everybody wants to use politics as a means of survival. The economic recessions experienced in Nigeria and the high rate of inflation, coupled with the high exchange rate, have undermined the economic status of the country. This position is corroborated by Onwe and Eze (2019, p. 32) when they assert that;

The economic recession has serious negative impact on government revenue, employment, income vulnerability, inflation, human health, infrastructural supply, natural resource management in Nigeria.

Electoral malpractice strife in a country with a bad economy.

- b. **High Rate of Poverty:** The high rate of poverty makes people vulnerable to the manoeuvring of politicians. Gordon (2003, p. 9) believes someone is poor when they have both a low standard of living and a low income. Fredman (1999) sees poverty as a form of disempowerment that can be viewed from socioeconomic, political and psychological dimensions. Socioeconomic disempowerment refers to a relative lack of access to the resources for the self-production of livelihood; political disempowerment refers to the lack of a clear political agenda and voice, while psychological disempowerment refers to an internalised sense of worthlessness and passive submission to authority. Politicians in Nigeria take advantage

of the high rate of poverty to hire political thugs to destabilise elections through the snatching of ballot boxes. Sometimes, they make use of money to buy voter's cards from vulnerable people.

- c. **Illiteracy:** The high rate of illiteracy makes people to be gullible and easily become victims of greedy politicians. Education plays a vital role in the social and political life of a people. In a situation where people are not well informed, there is a tendency for them to be easily manipulated. This is one of the major factors that fuel electoral malpractices in Nigeria.
- d. **Weak Judiciary:** Electoral malpractice strife in a country where the judicial system is weak. In the case of Nigeria, the judiciary is being manipulated by wealthy politicians when cases of electoral malpractice are brought before it. In addition, reported cases take a long period of judicial processes before judgments are pronounced.
- e. **Bribery and Corruption:** It is a common occurrence in Nigeria for electoral officials to be offered bribes by political parties in order to falsify election results in their favour. Sometimes, security agents are offered bribes to aid electoral malpractice.

Forms of Electoral Malpractice in Nigeria

The under-listed are the common forms of electoral malpractice in Nigeria.

- Fake ballot papers and manipulation of votes
- Falsification of figures and results
- Artificial scarcity of electoral materials

- Under-age voting
- Thuggery and intimidation of political opponents
- Financial inducement and other corrupt practices
- Fake manifestoes
- Mix up in voter register
- Partisanship of the electoral body

The consequences of the above forms of electoral malpractice include having the wrong people in power, political violence, loss of confidence and trust in the political structure, destruction of political participation and military intervention.

Biblical Approach to Electoral Malpractice in Nigeria

The focus of this paper is to apply biblical principles to the problem of electoral malpractice in Nigeria. However, there are no direct biblical injunctions relating to electoral malpractice, and there are some allusions in the Bible relating to this issue. Psalm 22:28 asserts that 'kingship belongs to the Lord, and He rules over the nations...' The message to Nigeria's politicians is that they should not be unnecessarily desperate about political power because power belongs to God. Humans are mere representatives of God; they are, therefore, required to surrender all power to Him. Proverbs 14:34 affirms that 'righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people'. Electoral malpractice can be viewed as an act of unrighteousness. It is ungodly and an aberration of the set moral order established by God. Political leaders should understand that the predicament of Nigeria today is borne out of 'unrighteousness'. The act of falsifying election results and snatching of ballot boxes are ungodly attitudes. This position is corroborated in Proverbs 29:2 'when the righteous thrive, the people rejoice, when the

wicked rule, the people groan. The wicked, according to the researchers, are those who use illegitimate means to acquire political power. The result is that they become insensitive to the plight of the people. Daniel 2:20-21 declares, 'Praise be to the name of God forever and ever; wisdom and power are His. He changes times and seasons, he disposes kings and raises up others. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.' This passage points to the fact that God is sovereign; He has the capacity to enthrone and dethrone leaders. Nigeria Politicians should keep in mind that political power is not forever. It is a matter of time and season.

1 Thessalonians 4:6 emphasises the act of manipulation 'and that, in this matter, no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins.' Electoral malpractice is an act of manipulation since politicians who are involved in this take advantage of the vulnerability of the people. This passage affirms that God will punish such people. It is pertinent to point out that morality cannot be rationalised in politics. This view is shared by Daniel (2016, p32) when he opines that in Nigeria, politics has been rationalised by some people with the notion that politics is inherently dirty. This has led to the appearance of vices in Nigerian politics. In support of this position, St. Augustine avers, "Remove justice what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals of a large scale". This suggests that the idea of justice is an essential element of government, and its absence will result in having no government (Okorie, 2006). Electoral malpractice is against the fundamental principles

underlying the creation of the world in Genesis. At each phase of creation is the phrase "and God saw that it was good". God has created the world good for man's habitation. Manipulating elections and all the vices attached to them is a distortion of the perfect order of creation.

Conclusion

This paper examines the notion of electoral malpractice in Nigeria. It establishes the fact that it has negative effects on the democratic consolidation of Nigeria. It describes elections and electoral system in Nigeria in the fourth republic and posits that they were marred with various forms of electoral vices. The causes of electoral malpractice were also considered. The paper applied some biblical injunctions as suggested solutions to this national problem.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proffered;

- i. Nigerian politicians should not see political position as a 'do or die' affair.
- ii. Politicians should have it in their minds that power belongs to God and only he can raise and dispose of a 'king' (ruler).
- iii. Politicians and political leaders in Nigeria should understand that 'righteousness exalts a nation and sin is a reproach to it.
- iv. Politicians should not separate morality from politics.
- v. The government should work towards alleviating poverty since it is one of the

- vi. major causes of electoral malpractice. There should be an effective channel for educating and sensitising the people and not allowing greedy politicians to manipulate them.
- vii. The government should establish a strong and independent electoral body to oversee elections.

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