



## **'Nigerian elections 2007: Towards the Future – or the Past?'**

**3 April 2007**

### **Introduction & Background**

The seminar, held on 3 April 2007 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, was the second in the series of three seminars on the 2007 elections and the future of democracy in Nigeria, hosted by The Centre for African Policy and Peace Strategy (CAPPS), The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), The Centre for African Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and The Royal African Society (RAS).

The objective of the seminar series is to assess Nigeria's position in light of the presidential elections in April and the impact of this on the recent reform process. Nigeria has undergone extensive change under President Olusegun Obasanjo's second term, with its debt to the Paris club written off and the country gaining huge new profits from the oil price rises. However, little of this new wealth presently reaches most Nigerians and frustration erupts frequently. Nearly all the 36 state governors are under investigation for corruption and some have been successfully impeached. The election in April comes at a crucial moment, and could strengthen the recent reform process or stop it dead. Nigeria's future is again precarious.

- Welcome Address: Dapo Oyewole (Think Africa)
- Chair: Dr Titilola Banjoko (Africa Recruit)
- Speakers: Dr Reuben Abati (The Guardian Nigeria)  
Dr Jadesola Akande
- Respondents: Patrick Smith (Africa Confidential)  
Dr Jibrin Ibrahim (CDD)

### **Dr Reuben Abati (The Guardian Nigeria)**

The presentation by Dr Abati provided a general overview of the economic and political change taken place under Obasanjo administration. Dr Abati began by stating that Obasanjo's election in 1999 was regarded as the moment of 'second liberation', as after the 1960 independence Nigeria slid into military dictatorship that tyrannised the country for nearly

four decades. In 1993, Chief Moshood Abiola appeared to win a majority in democratically held elections but was denied presidency when the election results were annulled by Babangida's military government. During the last years of dictatorship, the military regime waged ruthless war against the press, with the shut down of media houses and harassment, detention and killing of journalists. Reign of fear prevailed in society. With the support of the international community, 1999 saw a return to the civilian rule. According to Dr Abati, great optimism surrounded the 1999 elections as Nigerians expected the civilian rule to provide a solution to many of their problems.

Dr Abati moved on to discuss what the fledgling democracy in Nigeria has brought about. According to him, a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about the future dominates people's minds, a feeling which has evidently intensified during the election run-up. Nigeria remains one of the poorest countries in the world. It has a mono-cultural economy with 90 per cent of national revenue deriving from oil. Following the 1999 elections, Obasanjo's government embarked on an extensive reform agenda in order to re-establish confidence in the country and encourage investment and the return of exiled Nigerians. The economic reforms, comprising of privatisation of state assets and enterprises, have nonetheless failed to translate into economic development and prosperity. Likewise, the poverty reduction strategy NEEDS has thus far yielded few tangible benefits on the ground. Another large-scale, widely heralded initiative of the Obasanjo government has been combating corruption. Notably, the administration reduced the size of the military and increased the number of civil servants. The service sector has also undergone a reform process. According to Dr Abati, government's anti-corruption efforts began losing their credibility particularly after suspicions mounted that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) was being used as a political tool enabling the ruling party PDP to get rid of opposition members and their supporters. With regard to political reforms, human freedom has been greatly expanded, albeit freedom of information still remains one of the major concerns. Dr Abati noted that it is paradoxical that the human rights record of civilian government should be so poor – prompting critics to call the current regime a 'civilian dictatorship'. To illustrate the extent of the human right problem, Dr Abati cited the 1999 massacre at Odi, where military forces' reprisal attacks claimed the lives of nearly a hundred people. A similar incident occurred in Benue state two years later.

Dr Abati then outlined some of the issues which the Nigerian public expects the new government to prioritise. Firstly, the constitution is expected to be revised, as many of the ethno-regional tensions derive from constitutional flaws. Other areas where people are eagerly waiting to see improvement are security and infrastructure. Beyond federal and state levels, people are concerned about local councils, which are commonly regarded as even more corrupt than government officials.

Dr Abati concluded his presentation by remarking that the elections will most certainly feature issues of credibility and electoral violence. He stated that these will stand as reminder of the fact that elections will not in themselves translate into good governance.

### **Dr Jadesola Akande**

Dr Akande began her presentation by commending the fact that women have been appointed for high profile positions under the Obasanjo administration. Consequently, they have been

able for the first time to show their capability. Dr Akande lamented that economic reforms have not benefited women, with little or no improvement in women's livelihoods. However, women have become more aware of their rights under Obasanjo. Unfortunately, Dr Akande says, coming out does not necessarily mean being elected and traditional gender norms, among other things, continue to hinder women's participation in the politics.

According to Dr Akande, many women have lost faith in the electoral process and surrendered to apathy. Dr Akande cites illiteracy and electoral violence as some of the major issues affecting adversely on women's ability to exercise their right to vote. She believes that a lot of women voters will not be at the polls either due to fear of violence and intimidation or because they cannot read.

Concurring with Dr Abanti, Dr Akande believed that the elections will be a faulty process. In her view, Nigerians will accept elections despite all the faultiness, because it will be a motion forward. The preparations for the elections have been fraught with problems. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has been criticised for mismanagement; the process of compiling the voters register has been delayed and electoral staff have not been trained.

Dr Akande argued that it is the determined efforts of media and civil society which are to be thanked for the failure of Obasanjo to push through the third term agenda. For her, the stepping down of Obasanjo is first and foremost a matter of rule of law. The proposal for constitutional amendment, which would have allowed Obasanjo to carry out a third term, also included sections on free education, poverty eradication and a quota for women in the government. As the amendment has now been scrapped and no legal framework for the proposed reforms is in place, the new administration needs revisit these issues.

### **SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION SESSION**

Following the presentations by the guest speakers, the floor opened for discussion. Questions from the audience included whether media had played a strong enough role in pressing for free and fair elections, what is the future of the EFCC, the likely extent of rigging at the polls, gravity of electoral violence, and the state of the youth.

#### **Dr Abati's comments:**

- In relation to the role of the media, Nigeria can be thankful for the confidence and courage of its media institutions. They have helped to highlight the dangers of individual heroism and the importance of building and strengthening government institutions.
- Regarding rigging, elections will inevitably have a strong element of this. Rigging, however, starts before the elections. Many political parties are inherently undemocratic, operated by political godfathers. Democracy has become a kind of blackmail; as people do not want to return to dictatorship, they are supposed to tolerate any levels of political corruption.
- In relation to the state of the youth, they have alas been reduced to a level of militancy, causing destruction and violence in the Niger Delta. Thugs and able-bodied men are commonly employed by politicians to harass their opponents. The militancy of the youth is closely linked to the lack of educational and employment opportunities, hence it is critical that the new administration addresses the issue of youth unemployment.

#### **Dr Akande's comments:**

- With regard to the EFCC, the institution should be independent. Apart from being under the National Assembly, EFCC should have more transparency. In order to know who the office-bearers are, their CVs should be circulated.
- Nigerian media has done truly well, acting with a one voice and uniting in the efforts to prevent Obasanjo's proposed third term.
- In relation to electoral violence, democratic and human rights principles have suffered considerably during the campaigning, with incidents ranging from violent kidnapping to killing. There is a need to address these issues and ensure that perpetrators will not enjoy impunity.

## **CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE RESPONDENTS**

Following questions from the floor, respondents Patrick Smith and Dr Jibrin Ibrahim deepened the debate by bringing in their views.

### **Patrick Smith (Africa Confidential)**

Smith stated that with reference to the reform programme, Nigeria could be said to be the ultimate privatised society. Examples include the lack public provision of electricity and water. According to Mr Smith, even political parties have become private enterprises, which are first invested in and subsequently taken over entirely. Godfather politics flourish.

Smith concurred with the general opinion that there will be all the falls and fails in the elections. He believed it difficult, however, to get the interest of the business people, international community or even the local community over rigging.

### **Dr Jibrin Ibrahim (CDD)**

Dr Ibrahim argued that Nigerians may not be willing to accept the results whatever they are. He asserted that a new consciousness is rising among Nigerians and people are prepared to organise and demand for accountability, should the elections fail. In many federal constituencies, the elections will be a major referendum where people vote vis-à-vis state action. Dr Ibrahim reminded that in 2003 elections, different regions showed different levels of rigging, and that similar situation is likely occur again. Electoral geography can be mapped, he said, revealing a pattern of regional differences in rigging and political preference. Regarding Niger Delta, all stakeholders in the region should contribute to a peaceful electoral process. Currently, short-term fixes are reinforcing violence. Politicians recruit gang leaders to bash opposition candidates.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dapo Oyewole from Think Africa gave the concluding comments. He said that there appeared to be strong agreement among the participants that democracy dividends have thus far failed to translate into tangible outcomes. People on the ground however view that anything is better than the return to the military rule, and hence they are likely to tolerate a degree of fraudulence and irregularities in the elections. The Nigerian civil society and media were unequivocally praised for their vigilance and robustness in challenging authorities for their actions and pushing for free and fair elections.