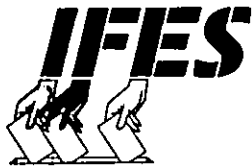


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**Status of Nigerian
Election Preparation**

December, 1988

by David F. Norcross

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Impressively, each polling district is intended to accommodate only five hundred voters, an eminently reasonable and manageable number. School teachers have been used as poll workers because they are authority figures, are literate and are able to organize people and command respect. Candidates are identified by pictures at the polling place; the absence of pictures at some polling places in recent elections created serious problems.

Initial vote tabulation is accomplished at the polling place; results are then transported simultaneously to the local election district by a National Election Commission representative and to the National Election Commission headquarters by police courier. Tabulations are made available to the press immediately after compilation providing immediate verification and subjecting any subsequent changes to public scrutiny. This is an excellent tabulation security device.

Election fraud and "disruption" are said to be endemic. "No Nigerian likes to lose" I was told by numerous people. In order to address this problem the government is proposing a program to prepare the unsuccessful for loss and to help them understand how to cope with loss. The concept of a loyal opposition will thus be introduced. Unsuccessful candidates, it is said, much prefer a disruption which would cancel or at least seriously question election results and the outcome. It is thought, by the unsuccessful, far better to have something on which to blame loss rather than simply to have lost a fair election. This is caused, at least in some measure, by the absence of any opposition involvement after elections are over. It is exacerbated by the losers' inability to realize any financial benefit from participation in government after the loss of an election. This, of course, identifies serious problems both for (and about) the government and the unsuccessful candidates.

The government is also hoping to institutionalize opposition by financing it, e.g. providing offices, vehicles, staff, office equipment and so forth. Salaries will be an indispensable part of any such program. Many fear that within a matter of months the losing party (or parties) and its members will have politically disappeared. There are also expressions of doubt that the military will ever truly relinquish power, chiefly because to do so would deprive younger officers of the opportunity for power, experience and personal enrichment. It is this same missed opportunity which condemns unsuccessful candidates to oblivion and makes losing such a permanent and serious matter. Our history is not without parallels.

The deeply and historically ingrained practice of selecting chiefs by "inheritance" or oligarchical selection and the holding of authoritative power for life militates against the process of elections from a philosophical and historical perspective. British rule further entrenched this practice by governing through local chiefs and tribal areas. A commitment to and understanding of elective government is not part of the tradition of Nigeria. British rule did nothing to change this since they chose to administer through existing power and geographical structures. Thus both history and practical hardships make the election process strange and difficult to understand and accept. Nonetheless the citizenry seems eager to try again.

What is fascinating, however, is that all of Nigeria's military governments seem to have legitimized themselves, in part at least, by professing a desire to return to civilian rule and by establishing firm plans for return to do so. There is at least a suggestion that a military government which failed to do so would not long survive without the use of significant force.

The present military government likewise seems determined to return to civilian rule and is spending money and unquestioned talent on the effort. National Election Commission leaders are intelligent and dedicated individuals whose talent might have been well used on other projects were the military not serious.

Ballot boxes are transported to the National Election Commission by police after the count is accomplished at the various polling places. Obviously the use of police and national security personnel presents an enormous opportunity for the government to subvert the system and, of course, for any dissatisfied, unsuccessful candidate (or "loser" with or without more votes) to cry foul and seriously discredit the election process with the general public. The reliance on police to control polling place behavior is viewed as "absolutely indispensable". Their use as impartial managers is, nonetheless, a glaring problem. I did not meet anyone who shared my alarm at this process nor did I see the question raised or even suggested in the remarkably free press. I believe that the National Election Commission does not truly comprehend the nature or potential of this problem. It is difficult to believe that unsuccessful candidates will not sooner or later raise the issue. If the trust of the Nigerian people is sufficiently strong the election may survive such charges. The officials are not, in my judgement, linked with the police in any

conspiratorial way but rather truly see the police as a trustworthy ally. The citizenry does not seem to disagree - yet. This will not long last if opposition is truly established nor will it need to. The institutionalization of opposition will in time, if successful, supplant the police as the enforcer of order and free elections; use of the police in the near term may well be a risk which, under prevailing circumstances, must be accepted. Officials at the National Election Commission are aware that the ultimate enforcer of election legitimacy is institutionalized opposition and they eagerly await its advent.

There seems to be, at least for now, a pervasive attitude of trust in the government's desire to democratize. Of course I was not in country long enough to find the dissidents nor was I ever outside of Lagos. The latter seriously flawed my ability to generalize as to national attitudes. That this opportunity was not afforded was the result of a decision taken by the Department of State and not by the Nigerians, however. I do not intend that observation in any way as a criticism of the Department's decision but merely to point out an important limitation on my ability to comment generally on attitudes and circumstances outside of the capitol. Experience suggests that there is good reason to believe that attitudes toward the process are markedly different outside of the capitol.

No discussion of Nigerian election processes is complete without mention of the banned politician. The "banned politician" is an interesting but disquieting proposition. The government's position is literally to start over, without the participation of former participants who are widely blamed for prior governmental failures. Allegedly they had previously engaged in corrupt practices and self-aggrandizement so serious that "political activity" by parties was banned until some 24 months before election. Present officeholders ponder how they are to choose a party when the time comes. Of course, there is a strong suspicion that politicians have chosen sides and are already holding clandestine meetings. One presumes that the ban is known for what it is by the government: a means to keep parties and politicians somewhat in check prior to "sounding the bell". How it will turn out is a matter of great curiosity. It is logical enough in theory and if successful could be replicated elsewhere to great advantage. I have serious doubts as to the ultimate success of this maneuver although thus far it seems reasonably successful due to substantial public support.

The nation as a whole seems to have accepted the ban as a good thing and the fresh start seems entirely welcome. There is surely a second side to that proposition though I simply did not have the opportunity to hear or observe it. It was assuredly not part of my charter to stimulate banned politicians by soliciting their views no matter how interesting that might have been.

The notion of limiting the political universe to two political parties while convenient, orderly, and much to be desired, is without any discoverable, meaningful basis whatsoever. There apparently is no Nigerian historical basis; there are presently no identifiable parties nor any plans for how they might take shape. It is clear, for sound reasons, that the government will not permit religiously nor geographically based parties. These are the most likely rallying points but would be fatally disruptive. Therefore, given the nation's history, such a ban appears to be a sensible decision. It is widely assumed that parties ought to be based on ideological grounds but no one cared to say on what ideology. How two meaningful, sound parties could emerge from the present circumstances I cannot possibly imagine or predict. The parties will have more than Nigerian abhorrence for loss with which to contend. The best that can be hoped is that some reason for party foundation will present itself during or after the first elections. It would make some sense to permit the election to take place with several parties competing and then attempting to meld the "major" losers into an opposition by providing funds to those who could successfully put the opposition together as an entity. All of this is very tenuous and quite contrary to rational expectation. Democracy is difficult to "impose": so are parties and party philosophies.

The National Election Commission is, however, quite prepared and eager to deal with the role of parties in the election process. They properly view such participation as easing the Commission's burden of establishing legitimacy and orderliness in the election process. They view monitoring by the parties as positive in terms of general reliability of results and public faith. The Commission already plans to have parties trained to keep candidates and party members from disruptive activities although there is no suggestion that anyone has carefully considered the ultimate behavior patterns of these parties. It is probably the weakest link in the plan. It is as though a state, since it can impose a one party state, can therefore impose a two party state.

It is no mystery why there is no "opposition" history in Nigeria. No one knows what an "opposition" really is; that is to say a group of loyal citizens and politicians truly opposed to the government but not opposed to the republic. This realization remains on the Nigerian horizon. The military government is therefore left to conduct an election based solely on the public's ability to determine who are the best candidates while communication of ideas will be enormously difficult because of the problems inherent in mass communication in Nigeria. A vigorous free press will provide a substantial hope at least among literate Nigerians.

The government's decision to separate the census from the election/registration process is a sound one. While it would seem that counting heads and registering voters should go hand in hand Nigerian history suggests that the problems created by combining the two far outweigh the benefits to be realized. Regional rivalries and attempts to maximize population counts for political gain may ruin the census project anyway. It would be senseless to tie the electoral process to it as well. To combine the census project directly with the election process could result in the failure of both.

The Commission has decided against the use of computers and voting machines allegedly because of general public distrust. I suspect that this evaluation is accurate and strongly believe the decision to be correct. The Commission seems "embarrassed" by this lack of technology. This embarrassment is misplaced. A less sophisticated system is more easily understood and therefore trusted and therefore successfully implemented. Less sophisticated systems are more easily operated by less sophisticated poll workers. Therefore fewer complicated mistakes will develop. Such mistakes as will undeniably occur will be more easily corrected by local workers. Machinery would not make the count necessarily more accurate nor would it make the count faster if the machinery was not properly operated. To introduce machinery while the entire concept of elections is being reintroduced is courting unnecessary complication.

The plans are thus well laid and well devised to reintroduce the concept and the process of elections to Nigeria. The faith of the local populace, in Lagos, at least, seems substantial. The press seems free and willing to criticize and seems for now not disposed to doubt that further elections will take place as planned. If these circumstances continue to co-exist success will likely be achieved.

February 9, 1989