

Opposition Challenges Nigerian Elections

by Uwe Friesecke

The Nigerian national legislative elections of April 12, and the Presidential and gubernatorial elections of April 19, were marked by massive vote fraud and intimidation, according to reports by election observers and opposition politicians of various camps. According to the Nigerian Electoral Commission, incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo received 24.5 million votes (62%), and his leading rival, Muhammadu Buhari, 12.7 million (32%); while the former leader of the Biafra secession, Odumegwu Ojukwu, received 1.3 million (3.3%). The legislative elections had a similar result, should the Electoral Commission be believed. In the race for the House of Representatives, the President's People's Democratic Party (PDP) garnered 181 seats, Buhari's All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) 82, the Alliance for Democracy (AD) 30, and other parties 6 seats. In the Senate, the outcome was 60 seats for the PDP, 26 for the ANPP, and 5 for the AD.

Buhari told a press conference it was the worst fraud in Nigeria's history, and demanded new elections. He announced that he would not recognize the results and would exhaust all legal means to overturn them. His party declared: "Any government that is formed on the basis of this so-called election shall be illegitimate and we shall not recognize it. A fraudulent democracy is worse than a dictatorship." Above all, Buhari made clear that he and his adherents would pursue peaceful means for rectifying the election results. The vote manipulation was especially pronounced in the southern and southeastern states. Ballot boxes were stuffed with ballots prepared in advance, under the very eyes of Electoral Commission officials, while PDP members often voted more than once. In other cases, once vote totals from individual wards were combined, their count was higher than the sum. This was possible because ward officials were not obliged to make their totals public. The police harassed ANPP activists massively, and hundreds were arrested as a means of intimidation.

Critics of the Nigerian elections can also invoke the reports from international observer delegations, including from the European Union and several from the United States. The EU report, on April 22, identifies serious irregularities and fraud in at least 11 of the 36 states. At least a quarter of the EU observers personally observed fraud being committed, an EU press release stated. Especially outrageous was the fraud in Rivers State in the South, where the victorious Obasanjo was given 96% from all registered voters, despite the fact that there was no voting at all in parts of the state.

Is Nigeria Doomed?

President Obasanjo has so far appeared unmoved by the extensive criticism. On the contrary, he cynically remarked that good politicians should be good sportsmen and accept defeat in a spirit of generosity. Given the poverty and misery of the Nigerian people, scarcely anyone could have thought of the election as a sports event.

There is reason to fear that political tensions could now build up dangerously. Buhari—of the Fulani-Hausa ethnic group from the northern city of Kaduna, and, like Obasanjo, a retired general—headed the military government during 1983-85. In this election, he was the hope of the Muslim North. Such blatant fraud, organized by the ruling PDP—whose candidate, Obasanjo, is a Christian from Yorubaland in the Southwest—will inevitably intensify religious tensions between ethnic groups.

Nigerians' distrust of the results is not limited by religious or ethnic bias. It was clear that a section of the political class had built a war chest of several hundred million dollars, and the millions it took just to assure Obasanjo's PDP nomination, went into double digits, according to reliable allegations. What many Nigerians see as the real fraud of this election was the endeavor to preserve a regime that guarantees the continued shameless enrichment of the elite and the further impoverishment of the great mass of citizens. It is not surprising, therefore, that condemnation of the official results comes not only from Buhari. It also comes from the camp of those who, for decades, have demanded democratic constitutions and economic improvement and never stood a chance in elections against Obasanjo or runner-up Buhari.

The well-known lawyer from Lagos, Chief Gani Fawehinmi, who ran for President from the National Conscience Party, declared: "Undoubtedly, our brand of democracy defies plain logic. It does not accommodate honesty and integrity. Everything about the 2003 elections is unnatural. If the results of the elections are a reflection of the votes of the electorate, then they voted, or were induced to vote, for continuation of poverty, hunger, starvation, depressed economy, looting, corruption, low quality of life, weak currency, mass unemployment, insecurity of life and property, poverty, lack of water, epileptic electricity supply, and bad roads. That trend is abnormal. If the results do not reflect the votes cast, then the elections were massively rigged and grossly manipulated. Either way . . . this country is doomed."

President Obasanjo is extolled for having freely handed power over to an elected civilian government in 1979. Of course, it is largely overlooked that the 1979-83 civilian government, led by Shehu Shagari, constitutes one of the most infamous chapters in recent Nigerian history. The civilians of that government destroyed the economy so completely, that the ensuing military coup became inevitable. The manipulated elections of April 2003 suggest that a new disastrous chapter of rule by the raw power of Nigeria's political class has begun.