

A Review of the December 8 Local Government Election in Nigeria

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Introduction

The December 8 local government election in Nigeria is part of the programme drawn by the present military government, headed by General Ibrahim Babangida, to return the country to a civil democratic rule come 1992. That was not the first time local government elections were held under this administration. The first time was in December 1987. What distinguished the 1990 election from the former was the fact that it took place under an entirely different political atmosphere. While the 1987 elections were held on non-party basis, those of 1990 involved the two political parties; Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) created by the federal military government to put in motion a two party system in the country. On their creation, many political analysts feared a division of the country into two, fuelling the north/south, muslim/christian cleavages that already exist in Nigeria. Are the parties based on these cleavages? The only way to know is to review the December 8 local government elections.

Despite the relative political significance of local government in the national set up, the 1990 local elections attracted more attention than expected. The attention given to it shows the political importance of that election not only to the federal government but also to the two political parties. The government; having sunk a lot of money to return the country to civil rule will not want the election to fail. The political parties too attached a lot of importance to the elections for two reasons. Firstly, the success or failure of the local elections will show how serious and ready the politicians are after eight years of military rule to assume the control of power in the country. Its failure might make the military change its intention to hand over powers in 1992. Secondly, the success or otherwise of the parties at the polls will have repercussions on their performances in the other elections, gubernatorial, legislative and presidential elections, schedules to come up before October 1992. The results of the election will either boost or kill the morals of their sympathisers. Hence, the 1990 local elections, being the first inter-party competition for political power since the two parties were created, was seen as being mainly a test for the two political parties.

What this paper intends to do is to analyse the preparatory steps for the election, to describe its organisation and to consider the implications of its results on the politics of Nigeria's Third Republic.

Preparations: Choice of Candidates and Political Campaigns

The preparation for the election was more pronounced at the national and state levels than at the local government level where the elections were scheduled to take place. The national character given to the polls down played local sentiments. Two issues are going to be discussed under this section, namely the problem of choice of candidates and the political campaigns which preceded the election.

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The primary elections to nominate candidates to contest the elections took place in all the wards throughout the country in October 1990. What was really interesting about the results of the primaries were the protests that followed. Many of the defeated candidates went to court to challenge the results. This led to a series of intra-party disputes which eventually affected the electoral show-up of the parties in certain states. This was the situation in Akure local government of Ondo State where a SDP presidential aspirant wanted his favourite to contest the chairmanship despite the fact that the candidate had lost in the primaries. This feud continued to the extent that a week before the election, it was not certain that the party would file any candidate in local government². One other state affected by the results of the primaries was Lagos. About one hundred petitions were filed and as such the primaries had to be rescheduled³.

The campaigns for the elections were launched by the two parties on October 20 in different parts of the country. The SDP launched its own in Lagos and the NRC in Kaduna. What all the two parties did was to recite what was written in their manifestos. These manifestos, produced by the federal government, showed one party, the SDP as having a socialist sympathy with emphasis on state controlled investments, free education and comprehensive social welfare programmes for disadvantaged groups in society. The other, the NRC, was shown as a party which favours privatisation of the economy, supports the role of the private sector in the development of the economy.

On the whole, the campaigns were not as interesting as they used to be in the past. As Olugbenga Ayeni wrote:

The political campaigns which kicked off in October held hopes of sparkling oratory from the budding politicians who were stepping into the shoes of their older but banned breed. No doubt ... with the exit of powerful orators like Zik of Africa, late Chiefs Obafemi Awolowo and Ozumba Mbadiwe (all politicians of the First and Second Republics) from the scene, political campaigns were bound to be flowerless. The difference was clear⁴.

Nonetheless, certain promises were made by the two parties. For example, the NRC promised to create a new state out of Benue while the SDP said a new state will emerge in Ibadan⁵. Other promises made include NRC's pledge to re-organise and re-orient all existing tax laws. The SDP on its own promised not to grant pardon to wanted politicians in exile. What one noticed in these promises was the complete absence of issues that really touch the local people: rural electrification and water supply for example.

There were certain incidents which occurred during the campaigns that marred the political atmosphere and which eventually made the President to intervene. In Okene, Kwara State, for example, a clash between the two parties during rallies led to the death of one NRC official. And in Lagos, some NRC members, armed with cutlasses, stormed a meeting in which the national chairman of the party was participating, to protest against the continued maintenance of the state chairperson in the post. President Babangida then sounded a note of warning:

It seems that your two parties are already being rent by factionalism; therefore unless you confront this emerging trend and resolve it now, the graver would be the consequences for the party system and Nigeria's democracy⁶.

After this intervention, things came back to normal. This shows that the campaigns went on under the watchful eyes of military government.

The Electoral Process

One big hurdle to cross during the preparatory period for the elections was the system of voting to be used. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) insisted the open ballot system was going to be used⁷. The Commission arrived at this solution after considering different means of minimizing, or even of eradicating rigging in the election. Rigging has always been a problem in all elections in the country.

The decision by NEC to use the open ballot system did not augur well with certain people who argued that the system will disenfranchise a lot of eligible voters, especially traditional rulers and other respectable citizens in the society, who would not want to queue up behind any candidate. For NEC, there was no going back as its chairman declared.

In all the elections, foundation of our existence as a nation was severely shaken and required extra-constitutional intervention to ensure our continued existence as a nation... shall we continue to try a system that has failed us? Shall we not try another one as we did in the choice of political parties?⁸

The answer to some eminent Nigerians was NO. Leading the NO group was the Sultan of Sokoto, Ibrahim Dasuki, who argued that the open ballot system would cause animosity among the people, create enemies and break up friendships⁹. Close behind the Sultan was the leader of Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) who said the workers could be victimised if the opposing candidates win the elections. The decision to use the system was also challenged in court by the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), a civil right movement which claimed that "The public right to privacy and freedom to exercise their franchise during elections would be violated"¹⁰.

Despite the opposition, NEC stuck to its guns, making people realise the efficiency and effectiveness of the system, having been used during the ward party elections some months before. The Chairman (NEC) said

The results of that election (the ward party elections) led to a reappraisal of our voting system and how best to involve the majority of Nigerians in this national exercise... The choice of a system most appropriate in our circumstance at this stage of our national development, something indigenous, simple, uncomplicated, cost effective and credible is the open ballot system¹¹.

NEC was not the only advocate of this system. Also supporting it was the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He said

One of the fundamental root causes of instability in Nigeria is the inability of Nigerians to accept results... There can be no question about the legitimacy and veracity of the result obtained. When you collate all the results and you announce them at local government level, you will have a picture of the political allegiance of the various parts which everybody can witness¹².

To ensure that the election takes place in a peaceful atmosphere, the NEC laid down its programme for the election day. Voting was to start by 12.00 noon all over the country. But before noon, all registered voters whose names were on the voters' register and who had voter's cards were accredited at the polling station where they registered between 8 and 11 a.m. This consisted of showing one's voting card, getting his/her name ticked on the voter's register to signify his/her intention to vote that day. This implied that the voters had to hang around from 8 in the morning till noon. A lot of criticisms were raised against this style. Some of them were based on the fact

that a lot of voters would prefer to stay at home than to go and queue up in the sun for more than four hours.

The government had earlier on enacted a decree to ensure orderliness. It said

Any person who threatens, intimidates or uses violence to influence a voter to cast his vote or to restrain him from voting is guilty of undue influence and is liable to imprisonment for one year or a fine of N 1,000 or both¹³

Besides, he could be barred from being registered as a voter in any local government election.

The NEC on its own made certain security arrangements which include the mobilisation of about 37,000 National Youth Corps members, 90,000 policemen and 50,000 War Against Indiscipline (WAI) to join about 30,000 teachers as presiding officers and polling clerks.

One should also mention the suspicious attitudes of one party against the other. They cross alleged each other of trying, in collusion with NEC, to rig the elections. The allegations ranged from the sale of voter's cards to the circulation of fake ones.

On the election day, the government restricted the movement of non-voters to their homes. Movement of vehicles, excepting service vehicles, was also prohibited. Voters started to troop out as from 8.00 a.m. for accreditation. As against what was previously announced that voters stay put at their polling booths till being counted, they were allowed to go back home and come back by 11.00 a.m. for counting. Most people did not come back. Others came back but late, as such they were not counted.

The voting procedure was rather simple. Pictures of the two contesting candidates were pasted on the booths: one on the left, the other on the right. What all the voters had to do was to queue up before their candidate. After the queues were established, the electoral officers in place counted loudly the voters in each queue and the results were accordingly announced and noted down.

Contrary to what the critics of open ballot system expected, that is chaos and uncontrollable crowds, the election was peaceful.

The turn out was low. NEC expected the participation to be about 30% of registered voters. Only 12.5 million people voted. This represents only 22% of registered voters and just 11.9% of the total population. There is no doubt that the electoral system used, the open ballot, contributed to the absenteeism. This was the view of the Chairman of SDP, Ambassador Babagana Kingibe who said

The society is a very closed one especially at the ward level; therefore, many people stayed away to avoid counting the wrath of their neighbours, friends and relations¹⁴.

Quite a number of voters were found in a situation where the only option was to stay home. That was the situation of a voter whose landlord's son had as opponent her friend. She said

I found myself in a dilemma; whom should I vote for in that open place without getting into enmity with the other. I may even lose my apartment if I failed to vote for my landlord's son. The best I could do under that circumstance was to stay away¹⁵.

Another reason given for the low turn out was the fear by certain voters of being assaulted by the sympathisers of the other party. Some voters preferred to stay at home in order to keep out of trouble. Others who stayed at home also did because of the litany of "don'ts" enumerated by the government some days before the election, and which had as punishment imprisonment or fine.

Certain communities in the country boycotted the election for other reasons entirely. To protest against the omission of their community in the delimitation of local government wards and constituencies as contained in the Imo State Gazette number 3 of March 14, 1990, the people of Osemoto in Okaji local government of the state did not show up at all for the election¹⁶.

As for Isokan Community in Ondo State, the location of the local government headquarters was their bone of contention. To them, as far as the cite remains where it is, they will not participate in the transition programme. Effectively, no election was held there on the 8th of December because they refused to file nomination papers for the 10 wards in the area¹⁷.

There were also those electors who were officially disenfranchised. Among them were the President, state governors and other officials who had to sacrifice their voting rights in order to ensure fairness and neutrality in the election¹⁹.

The Election Results

The results of the elections as announced by the NEC were as shown below.

Table I: December 8 Local Government Election Results According to States

| State* | Parties | | State | Parties | |
|-------------|---------|-----|---------|---------|-----|
| | NRC | SDP | | NRC | SDP |
| Akwa Ibom | 1 | 16 | Kaduna | 1 | 7 |
| | 2 | 152 | | 2 | 67 |
| Anambra | 1 | 13 | Kano | 1 | 15 |
| | 2 | 261 | | 2 | 156 |
| Bauchi | 1 | 18 | Katsina | 1 | 5 |
| | 2 | 117 | | 2 | 72 |
| Bendel | 1 | 8 | Kwara | 1 | 2 |
| | 2 | 95 | | 2 | 59 |
| Benue | 1 | 4 | Lagos | 1 | 2 |
| | 2 | 98 | | 2 | 43 |
| Borno | 1 | 12 | Niger | 1 | 6 |
| | 2 | 132 | | 2 | 64 |
| Cross River | 1 | 4 | Ogun | 1 | 4 |
| | 2 | 60 | | 2 | 39 |
| Gongola | 1 | 11 | Ondo | 1 | 6 |
| | 2 | 115 | | 2 | 85 |
| Imo | 1 | 13 | Oyo | 1 | 10 |
| | 2 | 167 | | 2 | 150 |
| | | | Plateau | 1 | 4 |
| | | | | 2 | 88 |
| | | | Rivers | 1 | 7 |
| | | | | 2 | 104 |
| | | | Sokoto | 1 | 37 |
| | | | | 2 | 349 |

| States | | Parties | |
|--------------|----------|--------------|--------------|
| | | NRC | SDP |
| Abuja | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| | 2 | 29 | 16 |
| Total | 1 | 206 | 232 |
| | 2 | 2,558 | 2,934 |

* The figures 1 and 2 under state represent chairmanship and councillorship seats respectively.

Source : *Newswatch*, December 24, 1990.

As can be seen from the table above, the SDP emerged ahead of the NRC. That is not the most important observation from that election. What was of significance was the absence of religious or north-south divide factor. This means the NRC cannot be regarded as Hansa-Fulani, muslim party; and the SDP cannot also be referred to as belonging to minority tribes or christians. The two parties enjoyed nation-wide support. Their influences spread across all the states with the exception of Sokoto where the NRC won all 37 local government chairmanship seats. In spite of that success in the state, the SDP was able to win 52 council seats. This first constatation showed that the government realized its objective to encourage the emergence of truly national parties. Before the election, certain states were supposed to vote in a certain kind of way based on their political tendencies during the Second Republic. These predictions were not true. For example, Benue State was given to NRC because it was won by the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) in 1979 and 1982. The NRC being a rightist party just like the NPN was expected to control the state. This was not the case. The SDP won 15 out of the 19 local government areas (see Table I).

The outcome of the elections in the LOOBO states, was quite interesting. The LOOBO states are Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Bendel and Ondo. All five states were won in 1979 by the Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN, a leftist party. Before the elections, these states were regarded as potential strongholds of the SDP and as such, the penetration of the NRC was never anticipated. Factors counted upon by the analysts included the influence of the late Obafemi Awolowo who led the West (the Yorubas) until his death. It was a real surprise to see that the NRC won 4 out of 12 chairmanship seats in Ogun state, including Remo Local Government Area, homestead of late Awolowo, 10 out of 42 in Oyo, 8 out of 18 in Bendel and 6 out of 22 in Ondo, including Owo Local Government where the Action Group, AG¹⁹ was launched in 1953. These are indications of cracks in the monolithic pattern of voting in the country.

The election in the eastern states produced surprises too. The two states, Imo and Anambra, were strong supporters of the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, NCNC, a First Republic party and the Nigerian Peoples Party, NPP, of the Second Republic. In this election, the SDP was seen as a reincarnation of the NPP and the NRC as a continuation of the NPN. During the Second Republic, an alliance between the NPP and the NPN broke down because the former believed they were not getting enough compensation from the latter. The results of the election were largely influenced by personalities in the two states. In Anambra, names like Onoh,

one-time Anambra State Governor did it. The ex-governor lined up behind his son who defeated his opponent by 11,539 votes to 10,249 to win the Enugu council chairmanship.

The show up in Imo state was not different. The battle was essentially between, on the one hand, ex-senator millionaire Arthur Nzeribe in the SDP, and the millionaire business man with presidential ambitions, Immanuel Iwuanyamwu, on the other hand. The latter believed that the performance of the NRC in his state would determine the realisation of his presidential dream. At the end of the day, the SDP had 16 and 15 chairmanship positions in Anambra and Imo states respectively, while the NRC was left with 13 in each of the states.

Another state where the personality syndrome was felt is Kwara. The Saraki factor really helped the SDP to limit the performance of the NRC. Saraki is an ex-senator of the Second Republic under the NPN. He is actually a member of the SDP after deciding to have nothing again to do with his former party, the NPN. Those who sided up with Saraki in the SDP won. As such in Kwara, the SDP won 11 out of 13 chairmanship seats and had 152 councillors out of 211.

Did ideological considerations have any effects on the voting pattern? It is difficult to confirm or deny the fact that the electorate considered the ideological stands of the two parties. It is true that the SDP is leftist and the NRC rightist. In the manifesto of the SDP, there are certain provisions which could have attracted the voters. The SDP professes the provision of free education at all levels and believes that services are social rights which the state must provide and seek to guarantee. All these are absent in the manifesto of the NRC. Those who vote for the SDP during this election might have had a little penchant for the SDP programme. There is no data yet to prove the contrary.

The Aftermath

After the results were released, the chairman of the SDP acknowledged it by saying

I am satisfied with the conduct of the elections and the manner in which the results are being released²⁰.

This, however was not the opinion of the NRC's chairman who called for the cancellation of elections in certain local governments, alleging that the elections were rigged. Ever since, certain candidates have contested their defeats at the polls in election tribunals all over the country. A typical example was the case in Ogaru Local Government of Anambra State. After the SDP had been declared winner of the chairmanship election, NEC discovered that there was an error in one of the wards. The NRC candidate was recorded 32 instead of 558 he actually scored. Adding the new figures up to his earlier score would make him poll 6,288 to beat his SDP opponent, who had earlier on scored 6195 votes with 93 votes only. The error of NEC was challenged by the SDP in court. This is just a case out of many.

Apart from those contestations, the election could be said to be a success. It was a pointer to the democratic development of Nigeria. The fact that the elections took place in a peaceful environment relaunched the debate on the open ballot system. While some people felt that the system should be used for future elections in the country, others blame it for the high rate of absenteeism in that election, and so called for its replacement. The SDP, through its chairman, accepted that the system should be used for other elections in the country. He declared:

I should point out that we of the SDP recognise the open ballot system as a clear and uncomplicated system of ascertaining the wishes of the electorate. Although there is clearly the need to fine tune it, the open ballot system has already earned for itself the merit of being considered for all subsequent elections²¹.

Yakubu Mohammed of the *Newswatch* magazine had a different opinion of the system and its use in future elections. He wrote

Let us not ignore the argument of those who were and who are opposed to the open ballot... The open ballot may not be primitive. It is just that its time has long passed... Nigeria... should at least not succumb to failure and discard the secret ballot... If the secret ballot is open and prone to rigging, it is not because it is secret ballot but because it is being conducted by Nigerians of low and dubious morality... Let's not, for fear of failure, disenfranchise a great number of people, decent and respectable Nigerians who would not troop out and line up in the open to exercise their rights. What is worse, let us not make ourselves the laughing stock of the rest of the world.²²

As at now, the government is still contemplating on the electoral system to use for other elections in the country.

The results of the election will no doubt affect the dreams of many presidential and gubernatorial aspirants. The popularity of an aspirant is going to be measured by his ability to deliver his local government. If a candidate has no home support, as they say, he can never get state nor national support. The Chairman of the NRC, Tom Ikimi, while launching the party's manifesto on September 26, warned the aspirants to gubernatorial and presidential posts,

The local government is very crucial; you just have to deliver your local government areas in December before you can make known your gubernatorial or presidential ambitions. Any action to the contrary will be treated as anti-party activity.²³

This explains the whole lot of energy and financial support put into the local government elections by certain presidential aspirants like Falae (SDP) in Ondo State, Iwuanymwu (NRC), in Imo and Shinkafi (NRC) in Sokoto. Those whose local governments were not won by their parties might have their dreams sealed.

Conclusions

The success of the December 8 local government election was a big step towards building a more stable and democratic civilian government in Nigeria. It was a success not only for the government but also for the political parties. It showed that the military administration's objective to set up a more enduring political structure is on the trend of being achieved. The results of the elections indicated that the two parties have disengaged themselves from the politics of tribalism and religion which characterized the former political formations in the country. The voting pattern in that election did not follow the pattern that emerged between 1979 and 1983. The results of the election could not be explained along ethnic, religious and geographical lines.

Further, the election showed that Nigerians are ready to have a smooth transition to civil rule. It is no exaggeration to say that the country saw a peaceful election, devoid of malpractices and political disturbances for the first time in its election history.

The newly elected councils have been sworn in by the military governors of their respective states. Their organisation and procedure are laid down in Section 7 and Chapter VIII of the New Constitution of the much expected Third Republic. Of importance are the provisions relating to the impeachment of the Chairman (Section 292) and the recall of a Councillor (Section 304). It's too early to discuss how the new provisions will affect the rapport between the two parties in councils.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. To the surprise of many organisations who wanted to be registered as a political parties, non of them, according to government, fulfilled the required conditions. As such, the Federal Military Government announced on October 7, 1989, the creation of two political parties, the Social Democratic Party, SDP, and the National Republican Convention, NRC. The citizens who had interest in politics were then enjoined to register with either of the parties.
2. *Newswatch* "The Left has it" December 24, 1990, p. 16.
3. *West Africa*, "Open Ballot Controversy" 5-11 November, 1990, p. 2782.
4. *West Africa*. "Lustreless Campaigns", 10-16 December, 1990, p. 2984.
5. *ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The government had to change the section relating to the voting system in the decree 15 of 1989 which stated that "voting shall be by secret ballot" (sec. 48 (2)) through a new decree, Decree 25 of 1990, legalising the open ballot system.
8. *Newswatch* "A vote for open ballot" October 29, 1990.
9. See *Newswatch*, *Ibid*, p. 11 and *West Africa*, "Open ballot controversy" op. cit. p. 2782.
10. *Newswatch*, *Ibid*.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Decree 25 Local government basic constitutional and transitional provisions amendment Decree, 1990, Section 65.
14. *Daily Times*, "Where were the voters?", Monday, December 17, 1990 p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Newswatch*, "No election, thanks to dispute", December 24, 1990, p. 24.
18. See *West Africa*, "Fairer elections", 29 October, 4 November 1990, p. 2751.
19. Action group, AG, transformed to the Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN, in 1979 was a party predominantly Yoruba, led by Obafemi Awolowo and Owo-born Adekunle Ajasin.
20. *West Africa*, "Local Election Success" 17-23 December 1990.
21. SDP, "Text of press statement by National Chairman of SDP, Ambassador Babagana Kingibe, acknowledging SDP victory in the local government elections of December 8, 1990 held throughout the Federal Republic of Nigeria", *The Punch*, Monday, December 17, 1990, p. 5.
22. Yakubu Mohammed, "Now, the Secret Ballot", *Newswatch*, December 24, 1990, p. 6.
23. *The Punch*, "Losers in the LG Polls", Monday December 17, 1990, p. 6.