

Hegemony and subordination: governing class, power politics and electoral democracy in Nigeria

Usman A. Tar¹ &
Abba Gana Shettima²

Abstract

As African countries continue in their march towards neo-liberal democracy, elite power politics has assumed new but macabre heights. The continent's governing class is demonstrating dramatic behaviour in achieving and sustaining power by all means possible. In this article, recent experience in Nigerian 2007 general elections and the upcoming 2011 elections are recalled to argue that rival elements of the governing class are engaged in a vicious circle of subordinating one another, albeit with no threat to their hegemony. The paper appropriates Michael Foucault's concepts of 'new economy of power relations' and 'legitimation' as well as Antonio Gramsci's terminology of 'subordination and hegemony' to demonstrate that, by both design and default, dominant form and structures of power are reproduced and sustained by the governing class. The paper shows that dominant elites (incumbents and their allies) use state structures and an emerging single-party machinery to get an upper hand over opposition elites.

Keywords

Hegemony, subordination, democracy, election, political elites, power struggle, Africa, Nigeria

Introduction

In much of Africa, elite power politics plays a defining role in public and, to a large extent, private affairs. The nature of elite political behaviour defines the mood and fate of national politics. This is perhaps because in many countries, politics is constructed as a *game* of 'winner takes all', rather than a *task* of nation-building

¹ Department of Politics & International Relations, University of Kurdistan-Hawler, Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Email: usmantar@ukh.ac

² Department of Sociology, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. Email: agshettima@gmail.com

conditioned by rule of law, tolerance, liberty and peace. The holder of power rules with impunity, and the benefits of power accrue to a narrow fraction of elites – the so-called ‘Mr President and his men’ while large swathes of society wallow in object poverty, marginalisation repression and hopelessness. A related factor is relative weakness, sometimes sheer absence and/or dysfunctionality, of key democratic institutions – such as a strong multiparty system with a principled opposition; a robust civil society; an empowered and enlightened voting public and a functioning economy. This reality contrasts sharply with developed countries of Europe and North America where there are strong party systems, a vibrant civil society, a richer and more enlightened citizenry and a more affluent economy. In Europe and America, the political class is conscious of its challenges – how to make the economy stronger, society happier and play politics by the rule – and limitations – failure to perform will result in loss public support, even utter election defeat.

In this article, we recall empirical evidence from the Nigerian 2007 and 2011 general elections to examine the behaviour and performance of Africa’s political class in constructing legitimation, subordination and hegemony. The elections remain relevant because it provides fresh empirical evidence on the nature elite contest for power which, though characterised by injustices and imperfections, nonetheless remained relatively unchallenged either by local or international forces. As we noted by Tar and Zack-Williams elsewhere, in spite of the fact that the elections

generated widespread anger and fury amongst Nigerians, as well as local and foreign observers ... both the outgoing President and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) defiantly declared that the election though far from perfect, yet the faults do not warrant cancellation. Indeed, Obasanjo cautioned that the elections should not be judged against the standards of mature democracies of Europe and America (Tar and Zack-Williams, 2007: 540).

It is argued that the desperate attempt by governing class majority of who are aligned to ruling political parties, ‘is informed by the need to maintain the status quo... [the political class] has been indicted for manipulating the entire process and brokering the victory of Musa Yar’Adua, the president-elect’ (Tar, 2007:549). As a demonstration of support for Nigeria’s seemingly shaky *status quo*, the African and international ‘peers’ of Nigeria’s political class extended a flurry of support through letters of congratulation and continued support:

it is no surprise that Nigeria’s African peers and international creditors remained apparently supportive of the country’s ruling class, as its struggles to reproduce dominant power. Their aim is to ensure stability in Africa’s most populous nation, rather than sanction principled observance of democratic ethos. It is thus reasonable to argue that both the ruling class and its international allies are complicit in the game of reproducing hegemonic stability in Nigeria (Tar, *ibid*).

In this article, we examine the elections (and politics in general) in terms of the following propositions: (1) elections and its outcome (government) are

appropriated by elite political coalitions who go to any level in achieving and sustaining power (2) elections are framed by class, gender and generational divisions such that the masses, especially women and youths, remained marginal - albeit symbolically construed as 'relevant' as voters and beneficiaries of party promises (3) elections are a complex social and political process in which actors play class roles, marked by conflicting interests. Political actors employ both rational and profane rhetoric in their pursuit for power. Rationally, they promise to ensure national unity, economic stability and rebuild Nigeria's dilapidated infrastructure. Rhetorically, they employ sectarian (ethnic, religious and geo-political) discourses as a means of appeal to popular support. (4) Elections are a theatrical game manipulated by contending actors to favour their ominous whims and caprices. In this scenario, there are neither clear rules of engagement, nor a level playing field.

Power politics in Africa: some theoretical notes

African chief executives have to work through...the 'politician's dilemma'. National leaders depend on selective incentives (patronage, graft) to build up their political base. Yet an excess of selective incentives yields fiscal deficits, inflation and economic stagnation. Poor economic performance will threaten the leader's hold on power. The politician's dilemma is to distribute sufficient resources to keep the loyalists happy (so they will finance campaigns, canvass neighbourhoods, intimidate rivals), while avoiding economic hardship that may alienate the rest of society and destabilize the government (Goldsmith, 2004: 89-90).

Faced with the prospect of losing power, those who make political decisions may engage in pillage, rather than pursue developmental policies that would enhance the welfare of their successors. But they may also react differently, trying to increase the welfare of their constituents so as to enhance their chances of surviving in power. (Przeworski et al, 2000: 189).

A cursory scan of African politics clearly demonstrate the relevance of Foucault's terminology of 'legitimation' and 'new economy of power relations' (1982:208), one in which dominant forms of masculine power are systematically reproduced. Foucault's emphasis on the instrumentality of *wealth and knowledge* in executing masculine power is spectacularly at display in electoral and power politics of many African countries. Foucault also uses the term 'legitimation' to show the power of certain groups (e.g. men, 'experts' – also mainly seen as men) to shape and confirm the production of certain kinds of knowledge and power. Thus, the political class exerts power by the control and legitimation of structures of power and knowledge (Forgacs, 1988). Foucault's conceptualisation has been in spectacular display in post-colonial Nigeria. As Aggar (1991) argues the reality is not limited to Nigeria; it pervades politics in many societies, particularly those experiencing state fragmentation and decline.

Since independence, politics in many African countries have been constructed as an exclusive domain of elderly and middle-aged men, the majority of whom have accumulated massive wealth, both through corrupt means and opportunistic

investment, which they use to fund their political careers. They are a product of a targeted western education, the so-called strategic 'model-schools' built by the British colonial masters to produce Nigerian politicians, bureaucrats and military men. In the post-colonial dispensation, however, the new political class oversaw the collapse of Nigeria's burgeoning educational system. Their reasoning appeared to be that allowing the mass of society access to a decent modern education risks the emergence of enlightened subjects capable of questioning irrational power and contesting hegemony. Meanwhile, members of the political class could afford to send their own children to overseas universities (mainly in Europe and America) where their kind will be safely reproduced.

Marginal social groups such as women, youth and the poor, appear as victims of masculine plutocratic hegemony; despite resistance demonstrated by organisations.³ Such subordinations takes place both in liberal democratic and authoritarian state systems. The statistics of political inequality remain grim all over Africa. The Nigerian situation is quite revealing and worth considering here. In 2007 women are massively underrepresented in the Nigerian parliament, comprising only 6.6 per cent of members in the lower House of Representatives (comprising 300+ members) and 3.8 percent of the 103 Senators (CDD, 2007). The so-called 'women wings' of political parties are actually women treated as sex objects, recruited to serve the intimate desires of key party actors and for demonstrating male power over the bodies and beauty of women in party functions. A few educated women are incorporated into party machines as a symbolical gesture for political correctness: but in general, women party leaders are perceived as a genetically 'weaker sex'. Youths (defined in Nigerian terms as men below the age of 40) have a better representation in the Nigeria parliament and politics at large, but it should be noted that most of these so-called youths are beholden to their elderly peers. In fact the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) asserted that their political role was 'usually limited to that of campaigning footsoldiers, hired muscle or political thugs' (CDD, 2007:4).

Furthermore, African politics illustrate the Gramscian imagery of *hegemonic order* in which members of the dominant political class (men) struggle to outwit one another, not in order to replace the existing *status quo* but rather to reinforce it, based on their narrow visions and interests (Gramsci, 1978). Gramsci argues that in a democratic entity, the governing class is often poised and desperate to impose, sustain and consolidate its stranglehold on wider society and, specifically, marginalised elites. Naturally, he argues, such a system is likely to give rise to resistance:

[Gramsci] deeply understood that the democratic project expresses also a radical demand of emancipation and is not a mere constitutional devise regulating the selection of a majority. In relation to that understanding, Gramsci's hegemony may recall the notion of an active democracy.' (Urbinati, 1998: 371).

The keywords in Gramsci's political Thesaurus are *hegemony* and *subordination*. By subordination is meant the process through which a more powerful fraction of the

³ Examples of resistance movement include, in Nigeria, Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the Nigeria Youth Council. Similar movements abound all over Africa.

political class – e.g. incumbents, and ‘power brokers’ – outwit the weaker and vulnerable elites or ‘scavengers for power’ in capturing, sustaining, consolidation and, paradoxically, abusing power: ‘subordination entails a relation of domination by which the subjects are deprived of their self-reliance as persons as well as citizens. It denotes both a factual condition of powerlessness, and a representation of oneself as an impotent hostage in the hands of ineffable destiny’ (Urbinati, 1998: 370). On the other hand, hegemony denotes a transformation from within, both of the subject and its environment such that the dominant class systematically perpetuates domination, even on the face of resistance (*ibid*).

In other words, hegemony refers to the process through which the overall dominance of the political class is ensured, sustained and consolidated, even though internally it seems to be divided along diverse divisive tendencies – ethnicity, religion, gender, geography and generation. In the specific context of Nigeria – and perhaps Africa in general – hegemony is a grandiose project involving (a) the strategic management of elite fragmentation in what Nyong’o (2007: 534), writing on Kenyan political elites, terms ‘joining ranks’ in the most powerful collation that is likely to capture and sustain power. This way, not only is politics constructed in the mould of Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’, but most importantly elite hegemony is ensured by default. (b) the sustenance of existing structures and systems of power, however repressive undemocratic. (c) the prevention of real and imagined threat to the elite-dominated *status quo* – for instance, the challenge by anti-establishment voices, actors and interests.

In sum, it is argued that Foucault’s concept *legitimation* and *dominance of masculine power* (Foucault, 1980; 1982) and Gramsci’s concepts of *hegemony* and *subordination* (Gramsci, 1978) are manifest in the nature of elite power politics in Africa. The following sections further explore the dynamics of elite power politics in the particular context of Nigeria.

Elections and power politics in Nigeria

Elections provide a theatre of power politics amongst elites in Africa. Such moments lay bare elites’ desperation to hang on to power for incumbents, or achieve power for marginal elites. For incumbents, state resources and other privileges associated with state power are invested in retaining power. And for those wanting to gain power, personal wealth and those of “power brokers” are patronised to fight their way into power. In this section, the Nigerian 2007 General Elections is used as a case study to reveal the nature of elites struggle for power, and the issue that influence such struggle. The elections were held against the background of the country’s lingering crisis of democracy, in particular, the legendary failure of the political class to administer a hitch-free transition from one civil regime to another....

Events before, during and after the 2007 general elections revealed the *real politik* of the extent to which Nigeria’s governing elites have ‘played’ the game of power struggle and, by extension, how legitimation, hegemony and subordination were played out.

A number of events are pertinent:

- (a) Politics of incumbency – particularly the move to extend the tenure of incumbents who have served two consecutive tenures
- (b) Politicisation of corruption – as a means of hegemonic control
- (c) Privatisation of violence – as a means of asserting might
- (d) Politicisation of sectarian difference – as a tool for political bargain
- (e) Personalisation of state apparatus, particularly by incumbents to their advantage, thereby raising doubt about 'level playing field'.
- (f) The nature of party politics

On 29 March, 2006 during the official visit of President Obasanjo to the US, an umbrella coalition of Nigerian Diaspora community in the US – Concerned Nigerians in the Diaspora (CND)⁴ – sent a memo to President Obasanjo, copied to the US President, George W. Bush; Senate and Congress as well as the Nigerian National Assembly, calling President Obasanjo to abandon his bid to contest for a third term:

We, the undersigned Nigerian citizens in North America, write to express our outright and implacable opposition to on-going legislative moves in our country Nigeria to amend the constitution to allow, *inter alia*, the executives in Nigeria (president and governors) three four-year terms. This is being widely interpreted as intended to immediately benefit the affected incumbents, including yourself....

All the governors and yourself who have sworn twice (in 1999 and 2003) to uphold the two-term limit of the 1999 Constitution must respect and obey it...Consequently you must resist any temptations of "sit-tightism" of which too many of our African leaders have been accused. Such schemes to remain in power willy-nilly have tarnished the reputations of some of your predecessors in Nigeria....

Nigeria must act as an example to the rest of the West African sub-region, to Africa, and to the World. We do not want "*things to fall apart*" in our country on your insistence to remain in power beyond 2007. The consequences will be too dire...Your current visit to the United States therefore presents another golden opportunity in the glare of the whole world to right matters. (CND, 2006)

Obasanjo's plot to seek third term was eventually scuttled by Nigeria's National Assembly. In response, it was generally agreed that Obasanjo used state resources

⁴ CND comprised of the following (a) civil society organisations: the World Igbo Congress (WIC); Forum for the Advancement of Nigeria (FAN); South-South Peoples Assembly – North America (SSPA-NA); Zumunta USA Inc.; Egbe Omo Yoruba - North America; Nigerian Democratic Movement (NDM); Okop Usem Leadership Council (OULC); Pronaco-USA and Nigerian Policy Council USA. (b) Individuals resident in the USA: Tony Nammor, Oloye Awojoodu, Samuel Ayodele, Muminu Badmus, Clement Ikpatt, Omoyele Sowore, Godson Nnaka, Titus Folayan, Ezekiel Macham, Olu Oreofe, Titus Folayan, Okey Ndibe, Philip Adekunle. The memo was copied to the US President, Senate and Congress as well as the Nigerian National Assembly (available: <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/nvs/letter-to-president-obasanjo-on-third-term-agenda-on-his-visit-to-the-white.html>, accessed 2 May 2010).

to spoil the chances of those who worked against his anti-third term agenda. Obasanjo enemy-victims spanned members of both the executive and legislature. Examples include Senator Mantu (legislature), Atiku Abubakar (executive; former Vice President).

The key points from the foregoing is that politicians go to any extent, legitimate or otherwise, to achieve power and/or remain in power. In the process, they encounter opposition from those who desire to get access to power. A tug-of-war ensues leading to: (a) incumbents patronise state resources to institute reprisal against anti-incumbency elements (b) opposition become victims of incumbents' reprisals (c) the incumbent support friendly elements or clones "newbreed" to take over power; the latter is ensured through electoral malpractice. We will return to this issue in a subsequent section.

Underlying Factors: high stakes, stakeholders and 'bones of contention'

Nigeria's election since independence (1963, 1979, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007) have been highly contested. A number of factors underlie these elections, and determine the perceptions, actions and strategies of the political class as elements within it competitively jostle to win power – for those who have been out of power and desperate to win it – and/or sustain it – for incumbents who want to remain in power. Between these actors all sorts of sentiments and divisive tendencies – ethnicity, religion, generation, geography etc – are politically unleashed on poor and powerless communities of the voting public. Effectively, these communities are cajoled to vote on the basis of deceitful reasons.

Below we identify the key factors that were at play during Nigeria's 2007 general elections.

(a): Power-relational Factors

In Nigeria, politicians are more interested in the *ends* rather than the *means* of achieving power. 'Get power by all means, the rest will be sorted out', goes the popular Nkurmahist saying amongst politicians. There are different, albeit cross-cutting, manifestations of the struggles for power: for instance, between the ruling party (PDP) and the opposition; politicians from the 'populous' north and the more 'educated' south; majority and minority ethnic groups; resource-bearing and 'resource-guzzling' constituencies; as well as Muslims and Christians. In Nigeria, the stakes for power have been phenomenally high, often violent and mysterious, as exemplified by the nocturnal assassination of Chief Bola Ige, a serving Minister of Justice by hooded gunmen who stormed his residence in 2001 or, more recently, the murder of Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmood Adam, a Muslim spiritual leader with a populist following, on the eve of state elections in Kano. The point is, politically-motivated violence appeared to intensify and mystify the stakes for power. In certain circumstances, however, there have emerged compromises and pacts as demonstrated by the election of Obasanjo in April 1999. At that point, Obasanjo appeared to be acceptable to nearly all shadings of Nigeria's political spectrum (Obadare, 2006:665). Since then, Obasanjo has dramatically developed some 'gothic' traits, not least his reinvention of militaristic tendencies in dealing with civil

matters – as demonstrated by his role in the promulgation of a new Act to lynch organised labour (2004) or his issuance of presidential orders to the Nigerian Army to liquidate the Odi community for allegedly providing shelter to armed bandits attacking oil companies in the Niger Delta (1999). Power politics in Nigeria is murky, violent and ‘winner-takes all’.

(b) Institutional-Systemic Factors

Here, we have a number of structural short-comings capable of undermining both politics and elections. For instance, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD)] identified the following, which it called on the Government and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to address, to no avail:

- The subservience of the INEC to the Presidency, rendering the former beholden to the latter’s whims;
- The ill-defined and contradictory nature of electoral laws and codes of conduct, particularly regarding exclusion of independent candidates, disenfranchisement of the Nigerians living abroad or members of the security forces, and the rules which permit functionaries of political parties to take up position in INEC.
- Lack of ground rules on party funding leading to disagreements between ‘power brokers’, party financiers, party officials/members and candidates.
- Lack of a transparent voting mechanism – particularly, INEC’s characteristic failure to organise a credible voter register and/or ensure that all voters cast their votes on voting days.
- Reluctance of the state and INEC to allow for widest possible participation of local and international election monitors, and the media.
- A dysfunctional party system characterised by a strong ruling party (PDP) but a plethora of weak oppositional parties.
- Pervasive violence and impunity for offenders: those who commit electoral fraud and acts of violence (e.g. party militias and their patrons) are buoyed up by the knowledge that, as very few such offences are successfully prosecuted ‘they can expect to enjoy almost complete impunity for their actions. More usual is that beyond an initial police intervention, politically-related crimes and human rights abuses are simply not investigated’ (CDD 2007:4).

(c) Election-Specific Factors

Here, we factors relating to fairness in the conduct and outcome of elections. Event leading to the 2007 general elections clearly demonstrated that within the political class, there was a feeling of mutual suspicion as each contender was poised to win power by all means. While incumbents were building strategies for retaining power, opposition parties and civil society were worried about how far elections could be ‘free and fair’, given the pathological manifestations of fraudulent tendencies amongst incumbents in their bid to stay in power. In the context of the 2007 elections, Ibrahim identified the following key election-specific issues of fraud:

- Compilation of fictitious names on voters’ registers

- illegal compilation of separate voters' lists
- illegal printing of voters' cards
- illegal possession of ballot boxes
- stuffing of ballot boxes
- falsification of election results
- illegal thumb-printing of ballot papers
- voting by children
- illegal printing of forms used for collation and declaration of election results
- deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas
- announcing results in places where no elections were held
- unauthorized announcement of election results
- harassment of candidates, agents, and voters
- change of list of electoral officials; and
- box-switching and inflation of figures

(Ibrahim, 2007:3)

These were confirmed by both local and international observers (for details, see Tar and Zack-Williams, 2007; Tar, 2007). It is worthy of note that, therefore, that to a greater or lesser extent, all political parties and politicians were/are implicated in these acts as they struggled to enhance their stake in the political game.

Stakeholders in Nigerian General Elections of 2007: an exemplar of power politics

Below we classify the key actors involved in the elections of 2007. We identify the *villains* and *vanquished* from amongst key political contenders; those who played *cameo* roles, particularly from state institutions; and *spectators* from civil society.

(a) Villains & bullies: Obasanjo, the State and PDP

Since 1999, when the military handed over power to civilian democrats, Nigeria's fledgling democracy has remained hotly contested and unstable. Key 'bones of contention' include the monopoly and abuse of power by ex-President Obasanjo and the ruling Peoples Democratic Party – both of whom effectively transformed from democratic actors to *political monsters*, displaying lack of transparency in governance, and prebendal practices. In principle, the 1999 constitution has set clear provisions for checking abuses of power and there are rules of engagement for party politics as provided in the Electoral Act 2003. For instance, parties must ensure 'internal democracy' by making sure that membership and leadership reflects Nigeria's 'federal character'; and the President must submit to parliament his choice of candidates for all political appointments. In reality, however, both the President and his ruling party have either defied these regulations or manipulated them to their advantage. *Money and muscle* were in constant display in ensuring that political appointments, legislation and policies are favourable to the president and the ruling party.

A key example in this regard was the foiled attempt by outgoing president, Obasanjo, to contest for a third term by seeking a review of the 1999 constitution (which provides for only two consecutive terms) and unleashing a carefully-planned legislative lobby. Obasanjo's failure to secure a third term led to more dramatic consequences. First, it effectively disallowed the president and some state governors from pursuing their incumbency agenda. This led to desperate last-minute deals by the outgoing president and governors to *secure* safe successors. Obasanjo chose Umaru Yar'Adua, a hitherto little-known Governor of Katsina State and sibling to a former close ally assassinated by a previous military junta – General Shehu Yar'Adua. Secondly, it led to party scandals and personal rivalries – e.g. between Obasanjo and his Vice President (Atiku Abubakar). The former suspected the latter of undermining his third term bid and therefore sought to destroy his political ambition. Atiku was eventually sacked from the ruling party (PDP) and forced to form his own party, the Action Congress to allow him to contest for presidency.

(b) Circumstantial beneficiaries: Umaru Yar'Adua, Goodluck Jonathan and Others

Nigeria's late president, Umaru Yar'Adua, and his successor Goodluck Jonathan emerged from relative promiscuity to national prominence. Both were relatively unknown prior to their announcement as the flag bearers of the ruling PDP. Both were fortuitous beneficiaries of uncertain party politics and personality rivalries within PDP. Yar'Adua was, by profession, a chemistry teacher and a graduate of Ahmadu Bellos University Zaria. As the son of a former minister and the sibling of late General Shehu Yar'Adua, he inherited massive wealth. In 1999, he was elected the governor of Katsina State. Though soft-spoken and influential in his state, he was inconsequential in national and party politics. Nobody expected him to emerge as a presidential candidate. Indeed, until recently, many saw the former ex-Vice President Atiku as the President-in-waiting. As a result of personal rivalries, by mid-2006, the ruling party was in deep crisis. In the end, Obasanjo succeeded in manipulating party primaries, rigging the defeat of many popular candidates and imposing Yar'Adua as PDP's candidate. After leaving power in May, Obasanjo has assumed the role of party Chairman of PDP and regularly commutes to Abuja to consult with the new president. To sell the candidacy of Yar'Adua, Obasanjo and the ruling party successfully staged a spin regarding Yar'Adua's transparency profile and stewardship in Katsina State. On assuming power in 2003, Yar'Adua declared his assets to Nigeria's Code of Conduct Bureau – a statutory requirement for all public officers, although many of Yar'Adua's peers either refused to declare their assets or presented false figures. Apart from this, Yar'Adua did not perform any economic miracle in Katsina – like his counterparts elsewhere, he struggled to justify the state's massive federal revenue by building schools, and renovating hospitals and roads (some of which have already begun to break up). A formidable campaign was mounted to trumpet Yar'Adua as a pristine and transparent figure – a rarity in Nigeria! In reality, Yar'Adua transparency rhetoric was an exaggerated scam aimed at over-shadowing more questionable aspects of his candidacy – such as his being Obasanjo's choice, his military connections, and failing health (in the heat of electioneering campaigns, Umaru Yar'Adua was flown to Germany for urgent medical attention).

On the other hand, President Goodluck was a former university lecturer who came to power initially as a selected deputy Governor of River State following the impeachment of the elected office holder. Thereafter, Goodluck eventually “inherited” the seat of the Governor following the impeachment of former Governor on grounds of corruption and abuse of office.

At the state level, many candidates for Governorship and parliamentary positions emerged, in a similar manner, as fortuitous beneficiaries. For instance, in Nasarawa State, ex-Governor Abdullahi Adamu, stroke deal with his long time rival, Aliyu Doma, who decamped from his party and join the ruling PDP as a ‘winning candidate’. Doma was strategically recruited by Adamu because he was desperate to become a governor (having lost in all elections since 1990s) and, therefore, very prone to succumb to Adamu’s whims and caprices. Doma won with a landslide victory.

(c) Vanquished & victims of circumstance: Atiku Abubakar, Muhammadu Buhari and the Opposition

Expectedly, there were more losers and victims of circumstance than winners and villains – this is common in most situations of conflict and power struggles. First, ex-vice president Atiku Abubakar was indicted by Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) on trumped up charges of corruption and was eventually banned from contesting elections. Atiku filed series of court motions questioning the legality of his ban. He lost in both high court and the court of appeal. On appeal to the Supreme Court, however, Atiku’s ban was over-turned. Meanwhile, in the course of court proceedings which lasted till the eve of presidential elections, the presidency issued a circular in which all civil servants and political appointees attached to the office of the vice president were redeployed and/or sacked. By the time he had cleared his name, the game was too late for Atiku. Suffice it to say that even if Atiku had succeeded earlier in clearing his name, his exclusion from the ruling PDP was enough to effectively curtail his presidential ambitions. Other losers and victims of circumstance include Ibrahim Babangida, a former military dictator who presided over one of the longest period of military rule in Nigerian post-colonial history. He was seen to be instrumental in the behind-the-curtain deals which brought Obasanjo to power in 1999, but fell out with Obasanjo for his alleged role in aborting Obasanjo’s third term plan. It also includes General Muhammadu Buhari, a former military head of state and the candidate of the strongest opposition party, the All Nigeria Peoples Party. Many see him as one of the most transparent political leaders in Nigeria. Other party leaders who were marginalised were Abahiru Bafarawa of the Democratic Peoples Party and Odemegwu Ojukwu of All Progressives Grand Alliance. Buhari, Bafarawa and Ojukwu were the strongest opposition figures but together their vote was far less than that won by Yar’Adua. In sum, opposition parties and figures were unable to withstand the monstrous machination of Obasanjo’s ruling party.

(c) Spoilers, cameos & opportunists: Maurice Iwu, Nuhu Ribadu and the politics of ‘gatekeeping’

Of course, there were spoilers as well as those ‘out make the most of the game’. This is particularly the case in Obasanjo’s camp and the ruling party. The opportunistic figures were recruited both from/into state ‘gatekeeper’ institutions,

and amongst party stalwarts. Key examples include Professor Iwu, the Chairman of INEC (Nigerian Electoral Commission) and Nuhu Ribadu the boss of EFCC (Economic and Financial Crimes Commission). Both INEC and EFCC became formidable state institutions for indicting specific actors (those in the bad books of Mr President) and banning them from contesting for power. Most individual *cameos* and *spoilers* are controversial characters. For instance, until his mysterious appointment in 2004 as INEC Chairman by President Obasanjo, Iwu led a controversial professional life style. A recent investigative report titled 'Maurice Iwu: the Full Story of a Fraudulent Umpire' reveals 'shady activities surrounding Maurice Iwu and his non-profit organization – Bioresources Development and Conservation Inc. (BDCCP [registered in the USA]) which Iwu founded and piloted as his research outfit since 1993' (Sowore & Ellis-Ezenekwe, 2007). The Report indicts Iwu of tax evasion, dubious research activities, personal enrichment and immigration scams. If such staggering revelations are anything to go by, it shows that Iwu lacks the moral integrity to lead a national electoral institution. Similarly, Ribadu was accused of 'selective justice' in indicting some, rather than all corrupt politicians. Paradoxically, it is a common practice of the Nigerian political class to recruit dubious personalities into its rank to shamelessly execute certain strategic class functions.

Spectators and Observers

In this category, we find the most influential as well as the inconsequential. There were civil society groups – both local and overseas – who monitored the elections and criticised the events as fraught with violence and fraud. There were also individual by-standers, such as Nobel laureate Wale Soyinka and novelist Chinua Achebe who have been fearlessly persistent in criticising the lowly conduct of politics in Nigeria. In the aftermaths of the 2007 presidential election, Soyinka was the first to demand a re-run and asked both Iwu and Obasanjo to resign immediately. He even attended a congressional hearing in the US where he called for a stiff sanction on Nigerian elites. Sadly, the impact of civil society in influencing rational behaviour has remained severely limited.

Election 2011: Unfolding dramas in elite power politics in Nigeria

At we write, and as Nigeria prepares for a general election in January 2011, an intense elite power struggle is taking place in the country. The core of this elite politics is happening within the ruling PDP. A precursor to the drama was the election in 2007 of Umaru Yar'Adua (a northern candidate) to replace former President Obasanjo (a southern candidate) who was forced out of power following an unsuccessful bid to run for a third term. Within the PDP, there is an informal "elite pact" to rotate key elective and political posts between geopolitical regions of the country. Through this intra-party arrangement, Yar'Adua's presidency was slotted for the north, the vice presidency to the south, the national chair of the party to the South and so on. This arrangement remained in place until the untimely death of President Yar'Adua.

Since assuming power, Yar'Adua was embattled by poor health. His reign was characterised by prolonged absence on sick leave and/or hidden trips abroad for urgent medical treatment. In May 2010, President Yar'Adua died after a prolonged illness in Saudi Hospital. Thereafter, his deputy Jonathan Goodluck was hastily sworn-in as provided by the 1999 Constitution. While the late President was on sick leave, an intense in-fighting was happening between the inner caucus of late President's kitchen cabinet (who struggled "hook, line and sinker" to shield the late President's state of sickness), and those in support of the then Vice President Goodluck. An intervention by the national assembly allowed Goodluck to assume interim responsibility as acting President and, following Yar'Adua death, he was effectively sworn in as substantive President. Since assuming power, Goodluck has executed a cabinet reshuffle aimed at consolidating his grip on power. He has also initiated an economic reforms (particularly in the energy and oil sectors), signed an Electoral Act into law and reconstituted the Independent National Electoral Commission, among others.

Meanwhile, in the run up to the 2011 general election, pro-Goodluck supporters called on him to contest for the Presidency, against PDP's internal zoning arrangement which sanctioned Nigeria's Presidency to the north between 2007 and 2015. The argument of pro-Goodluck supporters is that PDP's zoning arrangement is an informal and unbinding farce, and that Goodluck should not be deprived of his constitutional right to contest. On the other hand, the supporters of zoning claimed that if Goodluck contests, it will spell doom for both the party and country.

As we write, Goodluck has already declared his intention to contest for the Presidency. So also are his key "rival" northern candidates such as former President General Ibrahim Babangida, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, and former National Security Adviser to the President, General Aliyu Gusau. The drama is still unfolding and the outcome remains to be seen. The PDP will hold its primary in the coming weeks to choose a Presidential flag bearer. There are speculations that PDP primaries will be a litmus test for both the party and nation. Some argue that the party is in the precipice of doom, while others argue that it will emerge stronger with Goodluck (an incumbent) as its candidate. In any case, Nigeria has a weak, poorly organised opposition who do not pose any significant threat to PDP.

Conclusive remarks

This paper reveals the nature of elite power politics in Africa, based on empirical data from Nigeria. The paper reveals that power is constructed, in the main, as a domain dominated by elderly men who struggle to win and/or sustain it by all means necessary. Elections, it is argued provide a theatre for such power struggle. The following conclusions are derived from the foregoing analysis. First, electoral politics in particular and politics in general are gendered phenomena in which male and generational power is systematically reproduced. It is no coincidence that the key examples of actors cited throughout this piece – villains, victims, beneficiaries and cameos – are all adult men. Secondly, and by extension, the politics of hegemonic order was at spectacular display. Though the ruling regime effectively dominated the game and used state machinery to victimise potential enemies within the ranks of the political class, this has not degenerated into full-blown

national crises. In fact, the political class managed to scale through each potentially scandalous incident—exclusion of some from parties, court proceedings, electoral irregularities etc. Finally, as a game with stake and stakeholders, it should not come as a surprise that Nigerian 2007 presidential election was characterised by fraud, violence, spin and intimidation.

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