

Electoral Process and the Dramatics of Beneclientelism: A Conceptual Analysis of Orubebe's Grandstanding and Jega's Stricture

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Introduction

Democracy is a government for all. The rich, the poor, the weak and the strong, all make the system tick. The system gives the people the freedom to participate and choose those that will rule them. It also gives them the liberty to associate freely and talk freely against and about their rulers.

In a democracy, there should be justice for all citizens regardless of social status, economic power or political leverage. These are the theoretical foundations of democracy. They are the sacrosanct elements of democracy and the bedrock of participatory governance. However, the reality of the situation is that some of these features are simply academic because they are not operationally obtainable in some cases especially in developing nations. However, what is sure is that in the course of setting up the structure of government, intense competitions and competitiveness for power develop among political parties and the individuals.

This situation is further exacerbated by the loose nature of the system which allows every citizen to be active in the process if they are to guarantee the realization of their individual and collective aspirations as citizens. In developing countries like Nigeria, the desperation for political power is heightened by the prevalence of poverty and rampant cases of injustice against those who lack the power to protect themselves and their kith and kin. It is expected that tension and temper will rise in a system which gives participatory status to all and sundry, the rich, the poor, the weak, the strong, the good, the bad and the ugly.

In a country like, Nigeria, it is evident that most of those who seek power through the ballot box are motivated by the desire to improve their economic status and raise their capacity for participation in resource sharing.

These days, there are more claimants to scarce resources than can simultaneously be accommodated. Some of these resources are being depleted with avaricious rapidity by

the consuming ruling class. Besides, there are additional pressures on existing state resources as a result of the greed of those scrambling for them.

The picture painted above illustrates the general view that politics is fundamentally about the struggle over scarce resources. With regards to acts of injustice, this is one example that produces its own paradox. In this group, you have different categories of citizens with different reasons for participating in democratic governance. There are those who lack the means of protecting themselves and thus seek refuge in politics believing that success in politics automatically confers on them immunity from state humiliation and protection against state persecution and prosecution for atrocities committed in their private capacities.

The second category includes people who, despite their economic power, still suffer some indignities from the political class. Such people tend to realize that political power is a complement to economic power. Though the economic power gives them leverage for enhanced social image, the power of the state over them is grossly overwhelming. Therefore, their foray into politics was meant to garner sufficient political clout that can protect their economic empire and fortify them against state persecution.

Elections and Electoral Process

The struggle for political power among the competing entities begins with the election of candidates into various positions at all tiers of government. This process therefore requires elaborate organization, planning, coordination, thoroughness and security arrangement. In view of the stakes involved, which, in Nigeria for instance, are often very high, massive resources and personnel are mobilized by the organizing agency to ensure that the process is smooth, orderly, violence-free, credible, free, fair and transparent. In specific terms, the recent elections in Nigeria conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under the Chairmanship of Prof. Attahiru Jega, between March and April, 2015, were very challenging and tasking. The two major Parties, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the major opposition Party, All Progressives Congress (APC) engaged each other in serious political intrigues, campaigns of calumny, character assassination, strategic mind-games and mudslinging.

The electoral body (INEC) was not spared in the crossfire. The Commission was at different times accused by the two Parties of working for their opponents. When the Commission shifted the polls from February 14 and 28 to March 29 and April 11, there were protests by the local and international communities. The US, for instance, condemned the postponement in very strong terms:

“Political interference with the Independent National Electoral Commission is unacceptable, and it is critical that the government not use security concerns as a pretext for impeding the democratic process”.¹

At the local level, the APC Presidential Candidate, Gen Muhammadu Buhari had this to say:

“...This postponement which came on the heels of the bogey of the National Security Adviser that half of the registered voters were being disenfranchised, was exposed as a crude and fraudulent attempt to subvert the electoral process... the PDP administration has now engineered a postponement, using the threat that security will not be guaranteed across the length and breath of Nigeria because of military engagement in some states in the North-East.”²

The APC candidate was not done yet:

“It is important to note that although the INEC acted within its constitutional powers, it is clear that it has been boxed into a situation where it has had to bow to pressure. Thus, the independence of INEC has been gravely compromised”.³

The general notion in this environment is that public service is a thankless job, a job where tantrums and jibes are thrown at you by the same people you are serving. Though Jega was once the national President of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), he was never exposed to these kinds of accusation and public stigmatization. Rather, it was the government that was receiving jibes and pebbles from Jega and his “solidarity forever choir”. If Jega felt that it was only the APC that was doubting his impartiality and sincerity in conducting free, fair and credible elections, he was mistaken. During the distribution of the PVCs, the PDP placed an advert to chastise Jega for the untidiness of the PVCs distribution. Here is a sampler: Prof. Jega was caricatured holding

a briefcase with the inscription “with love from China” and was further mocked in the advert this way. “How long will it take Jega’s INEC to give Nigerians their PVCs? Imagine the problems Jega tried to cover up stridently claiming he was ready to conduct a smooth and credible election last February 14? Would Nigerians have voted in China... Hmmm... Prof., when will the remaining PVCs leave China and get to eligible Nigerian voters.”⁴

Jega was also accused of lopsided distribution of PVCs. It was alleged by the PDP that while Lagos has the third lowest level at 63%, Ogun has the lowest level at 44%. But that in states like Adamawa, Borno, Yobe with challenges such as insurgency, displaced population, and insecurity, they were able to distribute 88% (Adamawa), 68% (Borno) and 75% (Yobe)⁵. This, according to the PDP was suspect. This was reinforced by another allegation against Jega with regards to polling units and voting units. He was accused of creating additional 30,000 voting units aimed at giving advantage to the North. These and many more of such allegations and accusations were made by both parties as the pendulum kept swinging from one side to the other.

There was no doubt that the two Parties were doing mind games with INEC and each of them was expecting the Commission to play the game their own way. In an election that was full of expectations and anxieties, it was not surprising that the intensity of the campaigns got to a disturbing level. Political contestations in Nigeria are always full of drama, thrills and frills all because power remains the ultimate zenith of electoral competitions. In this case, the PDP was naturally reluctant to lose its political dominance, a position it had enjoyed for almost 16 years. Though President Goodluck Jonathan never saw the election as a do-or-die affair, his aides and Party associates saw it differently. To them, it was a matter of life and death. He was seen by most of his political aides and associates as their benefactor on whom their political and economic survival was placed. In addition, their material accumulation and the acquisition of more prebendal possessions could only be secured and guaranteed if their benefactor remained in power. These associates, also known as clients, are more desperate than even their benefactor.

Clientelism, Beneclientelism and Elite Fraternity

The stage had already been set for the drama that played out when results of the elections were being released one after the other by returning officers from different states under the supervision of the Chairman of INEC, Prof. Attahiru Jega, who was the Presiding officer. The pre-election tension had escalated into the election and was carried over to the venue where the results were being announced.

For historical purpose and dramatic effect, I am reproducing unedited the Orubebe's drama as captured by The Punch Newspaper:

The fever generated by the eagerness of Nigerians about the outcome of the collation of the Presidential election results in Abuja inched to its peak on Tuesday when the Peoples Democratic Party's agent, Godsdan Orubebe, caused a row at the venue.

Tension rose as those within the hall and others watching the exercise on the television acts in their homes began to entertain fear that Orubebe's attempt to stop the proceedings from going on could truncate the electoral process.

The drama had barely ended when Orubebe's profile was immediately updated on Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, as attempting to disrupt the announcement of the presidential election on Tuesday.

The exercise started on a dramatic note at about 11.30am when Orubebe signified his intention to raise an observation. At that time, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Prof. Attahiru Jega who presided over the exercise, had already invited the Ebonyi State Collation Officer to announce the result of the presidential election from the state.

After he was handed the microphone he took some steps further towards the podium where he could be well captured by cameras mounted by both domestic and foreign journalists.

He began his observation with an allegation that Jega was bias and had exhibited ethnic partiality with the promptness with which he (Jega) treated the All Progressives Congress' petition about alleged fraud in Rivers States and conversely the scant attention the INEC Chief had paid to the PDP's petition about suspected irregularities in some states in the North-West where Major Gen. Muhammadu Buhari of the APC, won resoundingly.

Orubebe said, 'We have lost confidence in what you are doing. If we can send a protest and you cannot take that protest then what are we doing here? Because the essence of why we are sending any protest is to enable you to look at the matter and see whether it has merit or demerit. But when the APC (leaders) brought their own, you went all out to send a delegation to Port Harcourt.

'We have complained about Kano, we have complained about Katsina, we have complained about Kaduna, and Jigawa you have not done anything.

'Mr. Chairman, we are not going to take that, we have lost confidence in you because you are partial, you are selective. We don't believe in you anymore. We cannot go on the way you are going because you have compromised. You have compromised and we are not going to take it from you until something is done on our letters, we will not continue with you.

"Until you do something to our letter the way you did to the APC we will not continue with you.

"That is our stand we will not; until you do something the way you did to the APC we will not continue with you"

At this point, some security personnel tried to take the microphone from him, but he resisted it and went on to sit on the podium.

He said, "Don't come and collect the mic (microphone) from me. Don't come. The press should look at it this is already printed. We cannot take it, you are tribalistic, you are selective. You are selective, you are partial we will not take it from you. Until something is done to our protest we will not allow you to continue with this. You will not. We will not allow it. Nigerians will not allow this, Nigerians will not allow this.

"This matter must be taken seriously, we will not allow it. We will not allow it. Look at the result that has already been printed by Jega and the APC. Look at it (waving some papers), the press should take it. This is already printed by Jega and the APC. We will not take it. Look at it, 'This was done yesterday, this was done yesterday (Monday).

Jega, who had maintained his calm, asked that he be allowed to respond to Orubebe's allegations but the PDP agent refused to allow the INEC boss to speak. He held firmly to the microphone and continued to shout on top of his voice.

Orubebe said, 'This country belongs to everybody, Jega cannot take us for granted. We will not take it, we will not allow it, Jega has nothing to say here, let him go back to his office to set up a committee for Kaduna, Kano.

"Jega has nothing to say here he did not come here before he did something about Rivers State, let him go to his office, I will not leave here".

Orubebe replied again when Jega made a second attempt to respond to the allegations. "You cannot respond here, you cannot respond here, you cannot respond here. You did not come to respond on the issue of Rivers State. You cannot respond here, he cannot respond here.

"You cannot respond here. In Rivers State he did it in his office, let him go to his office and respond there.

"Go to your office and respond. Let him go to his office and respond to our protest".

The drama had continued but Orubebe eventually succumbed to persuasion from security operatives and other persons who intervened.

But he threatened to return if Jega refused to address his grievances.

Afterwards, Jega sought to continue the exercise by calling on the Ebonyi State Collation Officer to continue to render his collated results, but Orubebe, who had held on to the microphone stepped forward again to disrupt the exercise.

Orubebe said, "Prof. Jega you cannot continue. You cannot continue. You said you are going to respond to the issue. Prof. Jega you cannot continue. You cannot. Why is he not responding? Why did he not respond to our protest, why did he not respond to our protest?"

"Why is Jega not responding to our protest when it was the APC he was quick to respond? We protested to Jega yesterday (Monday), he threw the protest at us.

"The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria did not empower Jega to be selective, to be partial, Jega is tribalistic and we will not take it".

At this point, the second PDP agent, Bello Fadile, took the microphone from Orubebe and said, "Chairman sir, I think you should speak on this result we have here (displaying a paper which he said was obtained from the APC website).

“If you compare it with the results you have released, it is the same thing with the one that has been released and similar with the one here, we don’t know if the ones that have not been released are similar with those from the situation room of the APC. That is our point. Who gave them this? How did they come about this result? We have seen that the ones that have been released are the same with those that are here from some of the states. We have compared them and that is why we are raising observations”.

But Jega’s response eventually served as the soothing balm as he calmly and patiently addressed the issues the two party agents raised. Jega, who went on to debunk the allegations leveled against him by Orubebe that the PDP had submitted a petition to the commission, said the attempt by the party to submit a protest letter to INEC in the middle of collation exercise could not be tolerated.

Jega said, “I cannot receive petitions in this hall on this platform. As we speak with you now, I have not received anything from the Secretary of the Commission. That is as far as the so-called petitions.

“With regards to what you said about the result allegedly published by the APC on its websites, I didn’t release result to anybody. The results that are announced formerly by INEC are results that are declared here. And we have warned everybody to be careful and to ensure that they did not declare results which are not officially announced. So, as far as I am concerned, I have not seen any result and I have not given anybody any result. So for you to even engage me on that issue, I think frankly it is not fair on me. I have not seen the result. How can I speak on something I have not seen?”

Jega’s final words appeared to have struck Orubebe and brought him to his seat.

“Mr. Orubebe, you are a former Minister of the Federal Republic, you are a statesman in your own right and you must be careful about what you say and about the allegations or accusations that you make and certainly you must be careful about your public conducts. Thank you”.⁶

Godsday Orubebe’s action was not strange to any analytical template or any theoretical construction. A lot of scholars have described it as clientelism. In a parody of a review on

Roman Politics done by the historian S.E. Finer at the end of the Republic, Francis Fukuyama wrote:

“if you strip personalities away... you will find no more sophistication, disinterestedness, or nobility than in a Latin-American banana republic. Call the country the Freedomian Republic; set the time in the mid-nineteenth century: imagine Sulla, Pompey Caesar as generals Garcia Lopez, Pedro Podrilla, and Jaime Villegas and you will find clientelist factions, personalist armies, and military struggle for the Presidency that parallel at every point of the collapsing Republic”.⁷

In expanding his argument on this concept, Fukuyama says politics to a large extent is dependent on personalistic patron-client ties, that is, a “reciprocal exchange of favours between leaders and followers, where leadership is won rather than inherited, based on the leader’s ability to advance the interests of the group.”⁸

However, a broader perspective of clientelism was advanced by Richard A. Joseph. According to Joseph, clientelism often referred to as patron-client ties is as essential to a satisfactory analysis of Nigerian politics and society as are the features of ethnicity and class.

He puts it succinctly:

“Clientelism therefore is the very channel through which one joins the dominant class and a practice which is then seen as fundamental to the continued enjoyment of the perquisites of that class”.⁹

Articulating this further, Joseph contends that clientelism is a situation whereby an individual seeks the support and protection of an oga or a “godfather” while trying to acquire the basic social and material goods – loans, scholarships, licences, plots of urban land, employment, promotion and the main resource of the patron in meeting these requests is quite literally a piece of the state.

Both Fukuyama and Joseph may need to re-work their analysis of patron-client ties or better still, clientelism considering Orubebe's theatrics and the new dimension that was introduced. I have opted to refer to this new political twist as "Beneclientelism" in view of the strategic setting and the critical element of this political dramatics. Before explaining any further what Beneclientelism is all about, I wish to draw attention to other authors who disagree with the myopic interpretations of clientelism given by both Fukuyama and Joseph. In his own interpretation, James C. Scott contends that clientelism, "patronage systems", "patron-client clusters" are terms that are used interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon. He posits:

"The patron –client relationship-an exchange relationship between roles-may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits or both, for a person of lower status (Client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron".¹⁰

The problem with some of these definitions is that there is too much emphasis on social relationship and governmental set-up. None of them seems to anticipate the effect of this on the electoral process and its implications generally on the political system. Even though the impression has been created by these authors that the client is expected to offer "general support and assistance", a political relationship of this nature ought to be explored beyond the personal services both the patron and the client render to each other and any other existing fraternal mutuality. The experiment here is to substitute benefactor for patron so as to make the theory more impersonal. The term benefactor connotes a 'superman' with omnibus and infinite political power, who is shielded from political reality by some pharisaic clients who are always desperate to do anything to protect their political colony.

Locating this within the context of the Orubebe saga, one can define beneclientelism as a strategic ambush arrangement or strange public show by a client to impress his benefactor by attempting to truncate, frustrate, abort and terminate an on-going electoral process. It can also mean a conscious attempt by a client to cause confusion in a political

system by trying to discredit an electoral process organized by an agency whose leadership does not enjoy the confidence of one or more of the competing groups. Better still, beneclientelism can also mean a soap-box performance by a desperate client in the full glare of local and international publics aimed at destabilizing an electoral process that is leading to the defeat of his benefactor and a sudden termination of the benefits of the client.

In his official capacity, Orubebe was an agent of the ruling and the losing PDP, but he was a client to President Goodluck Jonathan being a tribal associate of the President. Both of them are from the Niger Delta area where there is high concentration of the minorities. From the report of the incident, it was obvious that Orubebe's behaviour, despicable and shameful as it appeared could trigger a national crisis if there had been simultaneous and corresponding support for his action by official and unofficial clients that are spread across the nation. In what some people regarded as Divine intervention, the security agents at the venue were uncharacteristically civil towards him while other parties' agents remained glued to their seats for the duration of the one-man show. The only official reaction to this drama came from INEC Chairman, Prof. Jega who scolded Orubebe for his undignified conduct. His words:

“Mr. Orubebe, you are a former Minister of the Federal Republic; you are a statesman in your own right, and you must be careful about what you say and about the allegations or accusations that you make. And certainly you must be careful about your public conducts. Thank you’¹¹

There was a general approbation for Jega's response with people commending him for his maturity and the manner with which he handled the situation. However, Jega himself, being a member of the elite class cannot absolve himself from blame except of course, he is claiming to have a moral authority to condemn another member of his class. From his statement, it appeared Jega was more concerned about the status and stature of the personality involved than the grave implication of Orubebe's action on the electoral process in particular and the political process in general. His 49-word stricture was a sentimental appeasement to Orubebe to respect his personality, social pedigree, class and of course, his political status as a Statesman.

This in a sense, was more of a personal and emotive appeal to Orubebe not to desecrate the elite institution which they both represent. It was simply an ego-massaging vituperation that evoked more of social identification than political morality.

It was baffling that Jega chose a sentimental approach to manage the Orubebe's rantings. Though it worked for him, there was the possibility of Orubebe rejecting such patronizing supplication, an action which may stimulate mob protestation that would disrupt the process and eventually put the whole political system in grave danger.

In his book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith puts everything in perspective:

“The principle by which we naturally either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, seems to be altogether the same with that, by which we exercise the like judgements concerning the conduct of other people. We either approve or disapprove of the conduct of another man, according as we feel that, when we bring his case home to ourselves, we either can or cannot entirely sympathize with the sentiments and motives which directed it. And, in the same manner, we either approve or disapprove of our own conduct, according as we feel that, when we place ourselves in the situation of another man...”¹²

By adopting a moral option in resolving the Orubebe's drama, Jega underrated Orubebe's desperation to ensure that Jonathan remained in office at all cost. There were obvious political options and actions that could have been taken and that would have helped in strengthening our political institutions and protecting their inviolability for posterity.

Jega's moral position was more of a personal rapprochement that is too weak to serve any political referral in case of future occurrence(s). A statement drawing Orubebe's attention to the sanctity of our political institutions would have been appropriate. There was, however, no crime in interspersing such statement with some moral preachment. Jega should not have been silent on the sacred responsibility of INEC to ensure the completion

of the electoral process. The impression should not have been created as if Jega was playing a personal role instead of an establishment and bureaucratic role.

In the words of Mehran Kamrava:

“The role of the bureaucratic apparatus as an agent of political institutionalization... is particularly important, in fact, so much so that the bureaucracy has come to be one of the most central of state institutions itself... Bureaucracies are, in fact, by far the most omnipresent symbols and extensions of the political establishment. They frequently serve as the sole source of contact between the average citizen and the government and are thus the only forum for political input and participation.”¹³

Judging by the way the whole issue was resolved as if it was a minor family disagreement or misunderstanding gives the impression that it was a grand conspiracy by two influential members of the elite class to protect the integrity of their class at the expense of the sanctity of our political institutions. When Orubebe eventually accepted to listen to Jega, it was an opportunity for Jega to chastise Orubebe for creating a situation that was capable of threatening the electoral process. But instead of doing that, Jega waxed moral. The fact that he was applauded for his short comment was not sufficient to excuse his failure to promote the ideals of political morality. This is the only way similar occurrence(s) in future could have been handled. An institutional resolution of the drama could have offered the nation a procedural precedent and a resolution mechanism for future occurrence(s). If Jega was applauded for his statement, it was because Orubebe refused to react. In the future, another actor with similar stunt may decide to ignore Jega’s moral preachment.

The truth is that when Jega had the opportunity to respond to Orubebe’s accusations, that was not the time to sacrifice the sanctity of the institution he was heading for brevity and moral expediency. Kamrava reacts again:

“Political institutionalization enables a movement from the erratic practices and arbitrary decisions stemming from a high dependence on personalized role. In its success, it also reduces the likelihood of abrupt, drastic change in basic

structure, including revolution, since change is made possible in legal, evolutionary manner by established procedures.”¹⁴

Though Orubebe could not have been ignorant of the various channels opened to him and his Party to seek justice or redress, Jega should have publicly called his attention to this critical and important option. In a way, this would have helped in letting the whole world know that our judicial system is credible and reliable. The mischief in Orubebe’s drama was clear: to rubbish our political institutions and create the impression that the institutions particularly our judicial system lack credibility and that seeking justice through them was an herculean task. So, his mischief failed because people know that the failure and the success of the institutions depend largely on our elite. If therefore our political institutions malfunction and collapse, the society puts the blame on the likes of Orubebe who are the custodians and operators of the institutions.

The People As Democracy “Burnt Offerings”

There have been various arguments among scholars as to the role of the people in democracy or democratic government. Lord Bryce, for instance, believes that democracy is government in which the will of the majority of qualified citizens rules. But Lord Plamenatz sees democratic government as government by persons freely chosen by and responsible to the governed.¹⁵

In a categorical manner, J.A. Schumpeter tried to put to rest once and for all the seemingly metaphysical notions about how democracy serves the will and seeks the common good of the people, ideas which are subject to endless disputation. Democracy for him is an institutional process which is subject to verification as to whether it does or does not exist.

“The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote”.¹⁶

Schumpeter’s position is reinforced in an article titled: The African Peasantry: Neglected by African Political Science, written by Ebitini Chikwendu. According to her, “in any polity, there is a distinction between the elite and the mass”. In describing the elite,

Chikwendu posits that the elite are those who exercise power while the mass have power exercised over them.¹⁷

This struggle for power, ultimately snowballing into scramble for scarce resources, has always been responsible for the conflict situation between the rulers who desire to preserve their power and the ruled who demand to be heard and considered.

In the Orubebe - Jega saga, the protest was about the preservation of power and protection of group or individuals' interests. The elite, a very dominant and domineering class was exhibiting the greed tendencies with one part trying to hang on to power and the other struggling to take over power though legitimately through a democratic process that was under threat for the period the process was on. In the final analysis, the strategic re-alignments and alliances of old political friends and the fisticuffs that took place in the National Assembly over power sharing have clearly demonstrated that the wish and will of the people are of little or no relevance to our rogue leaders. While power remains primary to them, the interest of the people which was the basis for the conferment of power on them by the people, constantly suffers because such interest is conveniently abandoned by these rogue leaders.

Conclusion

The Orubebe's drama and Jega's strategic reticence were manifestations of the degeneracy of our political system. The poor people who lack the capacity to understand the dynamics of our politics expect the ruling elite who are responsible for this rot and mess in the system to fix it back into shape before Nigeria finally becomes a rogue state ruled by rogue elite.

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