

Literacy And Communication Needs For Effective Reforms In Nigeria

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Abstract

The Forth Republic in Nigeria holds much prospects for the political and socio-economic development of the nation, which in a way reflects what happens in the rest of Africa. Political reform is one of the programmes designed to foster progressive changes in the polity with the ultimate goal of enhancing the human and social development of the nation and her over 150 million people. This paper examines the literacy and communication requirements needed to make the electoral reforms effective and makes appropriate recommendations to this regard.

Background

Sociologists and political scientists posit that the truest test of a functional democracy is the choice of leader through a credible, fair, free and acceptable election. This is so because democracy is said to be government of the people, by the people and for the people. In a true democracy, power belongs to the people, and they choose whom they want to lead or govern them through an open process of elections. The need for credible elections is therefore a sine-qua-non for every democracy.

Nigeria is one of the modern states that have adopted representative governance or democratic system of government. Since independence, the nation has held about five national elections aimed at constituting and instituting government at various levels. The current dispensation came in on 1999 when the military handed over power. Elections at different times in Nigeria have been plagued with a lot of irregularities resulting in protests, violence, judicial cases, deaths and incredibility of elected government at different levels.

Concerned about these unwholesome outcomes, the Yar'Adua Memorial Forum organized by Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation conferred in 2005 on the theme: "Electoral Reform: the Next Milestone in Nigeria Democracy". At that conference, the Keynote Speaker, Princeton Lyman concluded his presentation thus:

Electoral Reform may sound pretty small within such a grand vision (Nigeria will continue to be a leader in Africa). But electoral reform is the key, the opening up

of the political system, the means of restoring hope and confidence to the Nigerian people.

Recently, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua proclaimed that one of the legacies his administration will bequeath to Nigeria is a reformed electoral system that will guarantee democratic growth, political stability and economic prosperity. The Nigerian President has admitted that his Seven-Point Agenda to lead Nigeria into one of the 20 leading economies in 2020 will remain a mirage if the thorny issue of credible elections is not adequately addressed.

The efforts of the President and his team will dovetail into a new electoral law to replace the current Electoral Act 2006. The search for the new law itself requires consultation with the Nigerian people who alone can decide what they want electoral system-wise.

The Independent National Electoral Commission is the body saddled with the responsibility to regulate the conduct of Federal, State and Area Council Elections. Part of its functions read inter-alia: power to:

- a. Conduct voter and civic education
- b. Promote knowledge of sound democratic election process

The above are the functions of INEC in addition to the statutory function of conducting elections.

(1) Parameters for Conducting Elections

- Elections follow statutory processes. First, an electoral body of literate men and women has to be put in place. This is how INEC came into being all its members are functionally literate in that they can read, write and communicate in Nigerian languages and English, one of Nigeria's official languages.

- The people through their elected representative who must be literate, enact an Electoral Act which, in addition to the Constitution, spells out the constitution and functions of the electoral body as well as the electoral laws. These have to be effectively publicized and communicated to the citizens for their awareness and participation.

- A national register of voters must be compiled through a credible voter registration. This process must be preceded by a wide voter education for the citizens to know the qualification for registration (electoral franchise). The 2006 Electoral Act provides that a registration officer shall demand from any applicant the information necessary to enable him to ascertain whether the applicant is qualified to be registered as a voter in accordance with the provision of the Act. This process requires a certain level of literacy for both the officers and the candidates or their representatives, for effective communication and appropriate outcomes.

- Campaigns and Political education. Before the elections, the electoral body and political parties engage in rigorous enlightenment and sensitization campaigns in different dimensions. The political parties engage in propagation of their manifestoes and visions to persuade the electorate to vote for them. The

electoral body also carries out its campaigns to raise the political consciousness of the electorate, to warn them against breaking electoral laws and undermining the electoral process. These activities are carried out via information dissemination as well as educative and persuasive communication through posters, billboards, flyers, handbills, booklets, releases, etc, all of which need to be read and understood for appropriate responses.

- **Fielding of candidates for Elections.** In partisan elections such as is practiced in Nigeria, political parties field in candidates who must meet certain requirements stipulated in the Constitution and Electoral Laws. One of such conditions is that the candidates must have a certain minimum educational qualification. Inputed in this requirement is the fact that the candidates must be 'literate' – able to read and write. This is important because candidates will be required to fill some sensitive and non-sensitive forms in the course of their screening for accreditation.

- **Voting: (Contact with papers) Voting through balloting (thumb printing on ballot papers)** is the actual act of elections which also requires some level of literacy for the voter to recognize the latter or figure symbols representing the political parties or/and the candidates to be voted for. Voting demands not merely ability to read and write but as defined in Oxenham (1980:83), deliberate and required instrument of instruction, reflection and independent and divergent expression. It is only a voter who can reflect independently that can be adjudged as having voted within his conscience and conviction.

- **Election Petition** constitutes a right of aggrieved candidates to seek redress if they feel electoral injustices have been inflicted on them. This part of the electoral process demands special (technical) literacy as the participants are mostly legal experts. The Electoral Tribunal judges are usually specially selected men and women from the Bench who know their onions. Parties hire the best hands in litigation to defend them. In all, they (parties to the cases) too must be adequately literate and of good communicative competence to outline their cases. Claims, pains, disagreements to both their counsels and judicial officials.

2. **Literacy and Communication needs in an electoral system.**

Our account of the parameters for the conduct of a free and fair elections in 1 (above) clearly points to the key role of literacy on the part of the participants in the electoral process as well as need for effective communication. Writing on "Language, National Unity and the Democratization Process" in Omole etal (1996:2), Abdullahi points out clearly:

So significant is literacy and enlightenment that bureaucratic cliques have always tried to prevent access to writing by common man in order to keep him ignorant and in bondage. There has been an age-long practice of denying knowledge of writing to woman so as to prevent their access to secrets of men. People

without writing have always been the easiest to subjugate.

The main goal of democracy is to empower all the citizenry politically by ensuring that they choose their leaders through a free and fair election where the acceptable franchise is upheld. Going by Abdullahi's frank observation, it is pertinent to enhance the literacy (writing) level of the other vulnerable populace. Writing in English should particularly be encouraged since the language is the main channel of communication in Nigeria.

The electoral reform requires adequate dissemination of both oral and written information. And it is instructive that for a good mobilization of the citizenry, including women, the feedback mechanism in the form of written comments is only functional when the target audience can also write back. Communication experts have a truism that human beings can NOT communicate if they must congregate. Umanah (1996:49) observed that 'we cannot organize without communicating', meaning if we must organize elections effectively, then we must communicate effectively.

The success or failure of any human activity is predicted upon the success or failure of organizing the patterns of communicative behavior and relationships amongst the human structural agents and units within any organized settings' Umanah further states that for an effective inter-group communicational process, the following elements must be present: reciprocally acknowledged attention, mutual responsiveness, congruent functional identities; shared focus, and reciprocal or social objective.

Electoral reforms can best be carried out through the social mobilization mechanism which is describable as a process of conscientizing the people of any given community to appreciate and be motivated to put into effective and meaningful use, the natural and human resources, with which it is blessed, for both individual and communal development. The awareness created by this process of conscientization enables the people to establish the culture of social, political and economic self-reliance and independence (Dadirep 1996:88).

The mass media as agents of mass communication have an important role to play in the conscientization process as its form of communication aims among others to accept or reject, but essentially to act upon the information received. This power of persuasion that the mass media possesses is an excellent tool for socio-political mobilization, for a positive election reforms. For the persuasion to be effective, however, the persuader and persuaded must speak the same or a common language, since meaningful communication required that the sender and receiver share a common fields of experience.

Mobilizing Nigerians for electoral reforms must be carried out in a language that Nigerians speak and understand. This implies that in Nigeria, not only must the mobilization be carried out in English, but also in the indigenous Nigerians languages/dialects as well as Pidgin, a simplified English that serves as the nation's lingua franca.

This way, the mass media can work towards reaching all Nigerians irrespective of their educational, economic, social, cultural, political and ethnic background. Suffice it to say that the use of English in its present forms in Nigeria can constitute and indeed does constitute a hindrance in attaining effective mobilization of the people. Attitudinally, people who are not able to speak and write English see others who are literate in the language as exclusive elite. The exclusivism works against effective mobilization. The use of Pidgin English, seen by many as a debased form of English does not fill this gap. In the light of the above. Ihebuzor (1996:40) suggests a minimal literacy programme in English encored on teaching basic vocabulary and structures of English organized around key survival themes such as health, family, agriculture, education and politics.

Based on principles derives from applied Linguistics, Ihebuzor suggests that this basic vocabulary and choices should be governed by such considerations as coverage, range, frequency, communicative urgency, transfer potential, generative strength, familiarity and hypogyny. This basic literacy programme would than make it possible for government to reach the populace in a very elementary and reduced English language. It would equally be cost and time saving, particularly, given the fact that it would then be feasible to reach the entire country in one fell swoop since the electoral reform policy would be put in a language that does not require translation in pidgin or any of the indigenous Nigerian languages.

Both the literary programme and its special English language content would be put out on the national radio and television stations monitored clearly across the country. The programme can be designed and implemented by a team of experts from the domains of English language writing and teaching, applied linguistics, the mass media, sociology and political science.

This proposal is in line with global thinking today. Literacy viewed as a right of every citizen of the world. The ability to speak, write and enumerate has become a *sina qua non* in the effective running of a system. Indeed, it appears that the right to know, the right to literacy is at per with the rights to life, food, drink, shelter supportive social and political relationships within and beyond the family, personal security and all that is necessary to a physically and psychologically healthy human life, irrespective of the kind of society in which a person finds himself.

Conclusion

In summary, we have highlighted the parameters for carrying out a free and fair election, as well as the literacy and communication needs for effective electoral reform.

Our conclusion is that, an electoral reform project is a vital ingredient of the prospect for a free and fair election which is the center point of true democracy and that the mass media constitutes the main channel of persuasive and informative mass communication which should be explored to conscientize and enlighten the citizenry based on a special English literacy programme anchored by the radio and TV stations as well as the print media. The special

English literacy programme should be developed by a special team of experts in Applied Linguistics, Political Science, Sociology and the mass media.

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