



How Democracy Crumbles: The Nigerian Case

By Dakuku Peterside

Democracy, by its design, nature, and practice, is not a light toggle switch that is turned on and off. It is not a wall that crumbles in one fell swoop. Democracy is always a process, both in its growth and demise. History is replete with how democracies collapsed in other climes. Disregarding the rule of law is the root of all the cases. The most consequential disregard for the rule of law is the one that affects the entire population, and that is when they lose faith in the electoral process. It often led citizens to conclude that there is no difference between democracy, authoritarian rule, and other forms of government. Using electoral fraud to decimate democracy is far easier than any other means. Every attempt to compromise the electoral process makes it harder for the people to believe in democracy. In almost all nations where democracy crumbles, they followed the same playbook – whether in Peru under Alberto Fujimori(1990-1992), Hungary under Viktor Orban, Venezuela under Hugo Chavez , or Chile under Salvador Allende/ Augusto Pinochet(1979). Destroy or compromise the institutions of the state, the police, judiciary, military, security apparatus, parliament, and most importantly -the institution and mechanism of the electoral process and democracy begins to crumble.

The 2023 general election is a watershed in our electoral history, and all see the reverberation of its impact. Never in Nigerian history has the people been highly committed to an election with hope, optimism and great expectations. The final verdict of the outcome of the electoral process is yet out because the process has not concluded, but some came out disappointed in the structures and procedures of the election. Most of the political actors became Machiavellian and threw

caution to the winds in their pursuit of electoral victory. Some politicians bought the electoral victories with pain and blood. The strategy was to win at all costs and care less about the consequences on our democracy. Little wonder there is a mixed feeling of progress with our democracy yet high despondency and frustration among many Nigerian post-elections. Nigerian political class seems unmindful of the consequences of some of its actions and inactions. The politicians who ought to guard democracy are inadvertently investing in destroying the guard rails of democracy. Politicians compromise judges, corrupt electoral officials, buy up security personnel and buy votes. This is after investing in the mass impoverishment of the populace and weaponising poverty.

Our democracy seems to be unravelling in front of us. The gradual dismantling of our democracy is in seemingly random events, sometimes isolated and unrelated, but when pulled together, it shows our descent into anarchy or autocracy. The last general election witnessed three stages of dismantling Nigerian democracy by politicians, political parties, and their sympathizers.

The first stage is known as capturing the referees. If you wanted to rig a football, one of the first things you would do is 'capture' the referees and get them to rule in your favour. In the last election, evidence suggests that politicians and their cronies captured INEC officials, and in time we will know whether they captured the judges in the many court cases that are still ongoing. The second stage is side-lining the opposition players. Their opponents entirely stifled the political opposition in some parts of the country. And not

given a level playing field to compete in the elections. They were denied opportunities to campaign in some states and were molested, beaten, and arrested for no just cause. Some politicians told opposition members not to come out and vote unless they wanted to die. Opposition politicians and their supporters were subjected to various inhuman treatment, often in the open and where you have security operatives. They were blackmailed, and their supporters were ethnically profiled and denied their franchises. Unfortunately, society did nothing about it, and the perpetrators have gone without punishment or consequences. They are emboldened by their victory to keep brutally raping our democracy and dismantling it bit by bit. The third stage of dismantling democracy is disregarding rules—actions and reactions fuel losing faith in democratic institutions. The interpretation and actions of INEC on the position of the Electoral Act on the use of technology, especially Bimodal Voter Accreditation (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IRev) is the core of diminished trust the people have in INEC. It is also the plausible reason we have too many disputes about the declared results. INEC is generally believed not to respect constitutional provisions and its regulations. The dismantling of our democracy implies that Nigerian voters may have no reason to act rationally but will rely on primordial and survivalist sentiments to deal with future elections. If Nigerians believe their votes do not count, what is the point of elections? If we allow the prevailing feeling of disenfranchisement to continue, our democracy will become a mere nomenclature and not reality. In that case, there is virtually no reason to think our votes will change anything. There is also no reason to behave rationally. We will act emotionally and vote only based on ethnicity, religion, and other base sentiments. We will disconnect voting and elections from governance since voting does not decide who leads. Therefore, there is no reason to change our beliefs regarding electoral politics. As a result, people will continue to vote for whatever politician or party is closest to their emotionally determined beliefs. In other words, there's no reason for people to vote rationally; instead, sticking to their biases or emotions is much more comfortable. Understanding this reality is essential since our democratic system assumes that rational voters are in the majority. And this is a danger to our democracy! At the extreme, if we don't find ways to sanitise the electoral process further and, by extension, democracy, we would incentivize popular revolt to redefine democracy in the image of the people's wishes.

Suddenly, our democracy is tainted with politicians who reject the rules of democracy. They often are suspicious of elections and their results and sometimes rail against the laws and constitutions of Nigeria for their selfish reasons. They discredited their political opposition and sometimes tagged them as enemies of the state. They tolerate and encourage violence in elections and brag about their link to the mafia, militant groups men of the underworld. They quickly desire to reduce the civil rights of people, institutions, and protesters and actively silence the media.

We have seen too many cases where results were declared under gunpoint, and the opposing parties and INEC appeared

helpless. This gave rise to the insertion of Section 65 of the Electoral Act 2022, which stated that: "The Commission shall have the power, within seven days, to review the declaration and return where it determines that the said declaration and return was not made voluntarily or made contrary to the provisions of the law, regulations and guidelines, and manual for the election." Going by what transpired in the March 18 and supplementary elections, this challenge is still very much around. Two strings of incidents in recent times have raised the red flag on the efficacy of the electoral process. The latest wave of electoral malfeasance is the Adamawa case. Too many inconsistent stories and conjectures are flying around. INEC owes us the obligation of full disclosure of what happened. A situation where the INEC REC, flanked by the commissioner of police in the state, unilaterally declared the APC gubernatorial candidate as the winner, but INEC changed course in a few days to announce the PDP candidate as the winner, leaves a sour taste to most Nigerians. It killed our democracy a little. Interestingly, both INEC and President Buhari have authorized the REC's suspension from office, his investigation and possible prosecution by the police, but to give confidence to the citizens, it will be imperative to make the findings public.

Another embarrassing interference in the electoral process is what happened in Rivers State during and after the elections. How INEC conducted the governorship and state assembly elections in that state can earn her a spot in the Guinness Book of Records of electoral heist. The orchestrated mob action and drama that followed the attempt by APC to inspect and collect from INEC RVS certified true copies of electoral materials is a big dent in the electoral process. The fact that all the drama happened in the presence of security agencies and INEC officials makes it difficult to dispute the conspiracy theory that followed.

Even the lawyers preparing to fill election appeals were molested, arrested, and manhandled. The supposed guardians of democracy raised no voice to condemn what happened in Rivers State. Although "the protesters" trying to stop opposition parties in Rivers State from inspecting and collecting true certified copies of INEC materials used for the elections were at the INEC office for days, no single arrest was made, nor was anybody invited for questioning. Our democracy is the victim of these shenanigans; we are all casualties. No doubt these anti-democratic forces are emboldened.

These trends are laying the foundation for the complete demise of our democracy. All lovers of democracy must not allow these anomalies to continue unchecked. We must protect our democracy and bequeath it to posterity. We should not take things for granted simply because our democracy has survived the shenanigans so far. Democracy remains the only system of government that will lead our multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-language and heavily diverse country into meaningful growth and prosperity. Let us defend it!