

Lessons and scandals of this Election

By Lasisi Olagunju

Who registered the kids we saw in the election queues in Kano on Saturday? I watched video clips of women on lines with four, five, six-year-old kids. They were all there to cast votes. I saw, in another video, a boy - a child - who was emphatic that he was at the polling unit not to joke but to vote. He even knew the candidate who would receive the blessing of his precious vote. The boy couldn't be more than five years old but he was old enough for Nigeria's INEC to gift him a voter's card. And he fished it out for us to know how privileged he was. That child is truly privileged.

When I was his age, I was still running after my mother's breasts. But this one was a voter, confident, and standing firm to elect our next president in a brutal violation of our electoral law.

When a law is broken, what should the law enforcement people do? I saw the Commissioner of Police in charge of elections in Kano telling us not to call the kids kids. They could have stunted growth, he told us. The police boss is a genius to have invented that explanation for the subversion of the law. Is that how he would reason if he encounters a minor driving a car on the Kano-Kaduna highway? To be stunted is to have delayed growth. We've not been told that the Pygmies of Congo have migrated to Kano, Nigeria. Between a puppy and its mother, should there be any ambiguity or argument about age? Someone cynically said the police boss might be saying something very profound because man, actually, is a stunted creation. Alexander Graham Bell, the Scottish engineer who invented the telephone, said "man is the result of slow growth." He noted that adulthood, which a pup achieves in a few weeks, takes man many years to gain. Is that what the Kano super cop was trying to say? No. What he said insulted all of us. It was an audacious assault on reason and sense. It was scandalous to see minors in voter registers. The bigger scandal is the normalization of the abnormality by the police.

Nicholas Murray Butler was the president of Columbia University, New York, in the early 1920s. In an address published by the American Bar Association in February 1923, Butler deplored what he described as the nationwide character of "disregard for law, disobedience of law, and contempt for law" in America. The consequence of these, Butler said, was his country



becoming a "law-breaking nation par excellence." What Butler saw with America exactly 100 years ago is what we see with Nigeria today. Our law says if a person is not yet 18 years old, they must not be registered as a voter. So, how did those Kano kids get into our voters register and on election-day queues? Someone said no one would dare challenge the system and the principalities that enrolled those kids to serve their periodic electoral purpose. Our electoral commission is shameless – it enabled that crime and should be called to account for it. The lack of shame in the conduct of our public affairs and institutions is seen

throughout Saturday in diverse places. Attack on votes and voters; snatching and burning of ballot boxes and ballot papers and shooting of the innocent – all these with the masterminds known but walking free and even angling to sleep with their victims. Nigeria should be a nation governed by the law if it will ever live and excel. But it was not created and structured to obey rules. It is a jungle where the law serves the lawless. I watched videos of threats and forced evictions from polling stations. I saw rough men who threatened the spick and span voter with brutal rough handling if they insisted on voting. I saw a policeman pleading with a felon who asked voters to leave if they wouldn't vote for his candidate. Law is no law if it is spineless before criminals. Where law enforcement begs lawlessness, there cannot be hope for anything noble.

There were great moments amidst the uncertainties of Saturday. Did you see the photo of the bloodied lady in Lagos who came back to vote after a vicious attack by thugs from the pit of hell? She came heavily sutured and with resolute visage. Someone described her as a heroine. I think she represents the spirit of the new Nigeria which has been on the loose for weeks now. It was the flaccid capitulation of the past that encouraged the serial rapists to come in repeated times. This election truly is a palm kernel-retrieving process; it takes gritty, nut-cracking efforts to dislodge entrenched principalities. Steve Maraboli, author of 'Life, the Truth, and Being Free', said "life doesn't get easier or more forgiving," what the unease of life gives us is that "we get stronger and more resilient." Against all odds, Nigerians voted on Saturday – and on Sunday. I watched a crowd of voters at Magodo Estate, Lagos keeping an all-night vigil and insisting that the result of their unit be uploaded onto INEC's server in their

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presence. I read reports of voters staying in the queue till 4am on Sunday to cast their votes. It was quite pleasing to see how resilience became the people's battle tank. I saw determined people pushing through the iron curtains of entitlement and impunity to repossess their lives. As I write this, the results are not officially out but we've seen what a people would achieve if they are determined. We saw so much at the weekend. We will see more of the efforts going forward this week.

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should serve as a lesson. But our husbands don't learn any lesson. They think they are the ultimate teacher.

Professor Toyin Falola recently told me that Nigeria is a low trust society which no one can fix. "No one can fix a low trust family, a low trust community, a low trust nation," he said. I agree. You saw President Muhammadu Buhari showing to the cameras the person he voted for and thus frontally breaking the law of secrecy of balloting. Of course, he knew he swore to protect the law without fear or favour. But he also knew that the person he voted for did not trust him with his ambition; so, he had to do the illegal. There was also Orji Uzor Kalu who displayed what turned out to be a void vote split between the APC and APGA. Was that a mistake or a deliberate act of subversion of loyalty to party and clan? Such duplicity is seen everywhere. And when you saw people staying put at polling stations after voting, it is because they did not trust INEC to protect their votes. It is not possible for democracy to not fail where the people have leaders they cannot trust with their lives.

The final results of the presidential election have not been released as I write this, but we've seen polling unit results in places where there was no darkness. Never think the people cannot think because of their challenges of survival. Never take them for granted. A friend was an observer at a unit near Osogbo, the Osun State capital. He told me he knew something strange was happening with the election when the House of Representatives election result showed that the Labour Party candidate got one vote; the one for the Senate got three votes but the presidential contest returned 21 votes for the same Labour Party. Those votes announced for Peter Obi, I told the friend, were not Obi's votes. The votes belong to anger and indignation at what the political class has made of our country. People knew what and whom they wanted and what and whom they did not want. And, they carefully ticked their ballots in carefully selected boxes. We saw that unusual pattern in states across the country. No matter what the final outcome may be, this election may have birthed a new nation.

I was far away from where I should have voted on Saturday but it was enthralling seeing students of the Zik Hall of the University of Ibadan turning the positive result of their 'structure-less' struggle to a song. It was beautiful seeing medical students of the University of Lagos chanting their figures in rhymes of conviction. I saw young men and women on popular Lagos streets counting their votes of rebellion. I saw youths of Lafia in Nasarawa and in Kaduna standing firm to count the little-big blessings of their labour of faith. Victors are men and women who stand on the rubble of insult to aim high at the stars. Mizuta Masahide, 17th century Japanese poet, has an interesting line here. Having his stock charred was not going to be the end of his flight to success: "My barn having burned down, I can now see the moon," he wrote.

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