

The New Nigerian Conspiracy Against Democracy

Perhaps the most consequential political reform contained in the Electoral Act 2026 is not in the general election itself, but in the process that comes before it: the nomination of candidates by political parties. Under the new framework, the familiar route of indirect primaries, otherwise known as delegate elections, has been removed from the legal options available to political parties. Section 84(2) of the 2026 Act now recognizes only two methods for the nomination of candidates: direct primaries and consensus. On paper, this is revolutionary. In practice, it is already generating a new battle over the soul of internal party democracy. For years, indirect primaries became the golden bazaar of Nigerian politics. Delegates, theoretically elected from wards and local governments to represent the will of party members, often became political merchants in Abuja hotels. The delegate system was supposed to be representative democracy within political parties. In reality, it often became an auction house where conscience, loyalty and ideology were overwhelmed by envelopes, foreign-currency and the brutal arithmetic of stomach infrastructure. To become a delegate to a presidential convention of any of the major parties was, for many, like winning a political lottery. Aspirants no longer needed to persuade the ordinary party member. They needed to identify the delegate, trace the delegate's handler, negotiate with the state leader, settle the middleman, and pray that the dollars reached the intended receiver. Sometimes, even that did not happen.

There were stories from past conventions of delegates who arrived in Abuja expecting to be "settled," only to discover that the money allegedly released for them had disappeared somewhere between the aspirant's war room and the state caucus. At the APC presidential convention that produced Bola Tinubu as candidate ahead of the 2023 election, stories circulated among some delegates of leaders who allegedly collected on their behalf but failed to deliver. Whether embellished or exact, such stories captured the moral rot that indirect primaries had come to represent.

That is why the removal of indirect primaries deserves commendation. It cuts off, at least in law, one of the most notorious channels through which money politics invaded party nominations. But Nigeria's political class is never short of alternative routes to the same destination. If the delegate bazaar has been closed, the new danger is that consensus may become the fresh instrument for elite imposition. The law envisages consensus as a voluntary democratic settlement. Section 87 of the Act requires the written consent of all cleared aspirants, showing their voluntary withdrawal and endorsement of the consensus candidate. Where that consent is not secured, the party must revert to direct primaries. In other words, consensus is not the governor's announcement. It is not the communiqué of a few elders. It is not a photograph at the Government House. It is a legal process requiring consent, documentation and ratification. Yet the early signs across the country suggest that consensus is already being stretched beyond its democratic meaning. In Nasarawa State, Governor

Abdullahi Sule's preference for Senator Ahmed Aliyu Wadada as successor has produced significant movement within the APC. In Oyo State, the situation is even more instructive. APC leaders reportedly endorsed Senator Sharafadeen Alli as consensus governorship candidate for 2027, with some stakeholders claiming the decision followed consultations and meetings with President Bola Tinubu. But former Minister of Power, Adebayo Adelabu, swiftly rejected the endorsement, describing it as invalid and insisting that any process lacking the consent of aspirants and the broader party structure could trigger crisis. That is the heart of the matter. Consensus without consent is not consensus. It is coronation.

Edo State offers another troubling illustration. The Edo South senatorial ticket of the APC is already attracting major interest, with Pastor Osagie Ize-Iyamu and Omoregie Ogbeide-Ihama both in the race. But beyond the formal declarations is the subterranean politics of power, loyalty and repayment. Ize-Iyamu was not just another Edo APC figure. He was a former national vice-chairman of the defunct Action Congress of Nigeria, ACN, and a known political ally of President Tinubu's old progressive tendency. In the 2024 Edo APC governorship contest, his withdrawal and support for Monday

Okpebholo helped shift momentum at a critical moment. Now, reports and political whispers in Edo suggest that Okpebholo may be under pressure to support Ogbeide-Ihama, a longtime ally of FCT Minister Nyesom Wike. If that happens, Ize-Iyamu's camp will frame it as betrayal. The moral argument will be simple: if Ize-Iyamu helped clear the road for Okpebholo, the governor should not now be seen building a barricade against him. This is why direct primaries are returning to the centre of the debate. For aspirants who fear consensus imposition, direct primaries appear to offer a safer democratic route: let party members vote. Let the real owners of the party decide. Let governors, ministers, senators and godfathers test their influence among card-carrying members rather than behind closed doors. But even direct primaries come with their own credibility burden. Nigerians remember previous exercises where figures announced from direct primaries appeared to outnumber realistic membership strength, and sometimes even voter population in affected areas. If direct primaries are to become the cure, party registers must be credible, membership lists must be auditable, and INEC monitoring must go beyond ceremonial attendance. The 2026 Electoral Act has removed one disease from the bloodstream of Nigerian politics: the delegate-dollar convention. But unless consensus is kept within its lawful meaning, and direct primaries are made transparent, the country may merely replace one form of manipulation with another. The challenge before political parties is therefore clear. They must not turn consensus into conspiracy. They must not turn direct primaries into manufactured figures. They must not kill delegate corruption only to enthrone governor-made candidates.

