

# Time to rescue democracy from highest bidders

**T**he report by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), raising the alarm over the excessively high cost of running for political office in Nigeria, is worrisome. It should be of concern to all Nigerians because failure to address it positively poses a threat to democracy. While the report merely reminds Nigerians of something they always knew, it should serve as a wake-up call for the rectification of the anomaly. In its latest report, titled: *How Money is Undermining Nigeria's Democracy*, launched recently in Abuja, the WFD, a UK non-departmental public body established in 1992 to support democratic institutions overseas, noted that, given Nigeria's political economy, a House of Representatives ticket can cost up to N500 million. The WFD also revealed that post-election litigation in Nigeria might require as much as N1 billion to contest or defend a mandate. Some senior lawyers now reportedly charge between N500 million and N1 billion per client to handle election disputes, from the tribunal level up to the Supreme Court. Even more shocking, the WFD disclosed that top governorship candidates in Edo and Ondo States spent between N2.3 billion and N3.8 billion in the 2024 off-cycle elections. The report points sadly to a rip-off that Nigerian democracy is becoming, guzzling an enormous amount of money without yielding commensurate democratic dividends. It is not only scandalous and offensive to good conscience—it is a threat to Nigeria's democracy—that a House of Representatives ticket can cost up to N500 million. It suggests that positions in the Senate, presidency and even governorship can cost much higher. This notion corrupts the political process, excludes ordinary citizens, promotes bad governance, and turns elected offices into private fiefdoms. It prices democracy out of the reach of patriotic Nigerians, who may be genuinely motivated to serve their fellow citizens through politics. Granted, democracy is expensive everywhere, but the astronomical costs in Nigeria are abnormal and corruptly excessive, especially when citizens hardly benefit from any democratic dividends.

The enormous spending violates the electoral spending limits stipulated by law. Section 88(4) of the Electoral Act 2022 clearly states that the maximum amount of election expenses to be incurred by a candidate shall not exceed N100 million for a Senatorial seat and N70 million for a House of Representatives seat. So, for a House of Representatives ticket to cost N500 million is not only unethical—it is illegal and reeks of fraud. In essence, the fact automatically shuts out competent, patriotic Nigerians who lack access to vast personal wealth or political godfathers. It means that only the wealthy elite, or those backed by corrupt sponsors, can participate—turning democracy into an exclusive club for the rich. It entrenches inequality and promotes a politics of wealth, rather than one of ideas or public service. Candidates who spend such amounts on elections will naturally want to “recoup” that “investment” once elected. This is often done through corrupt means such as inflated contracts, budget padding, bribes and kickbacks, or the misappropriation of constituency project funds.

Consequently, such lawmakers focus less on lawmaking or oversight and more on shady deals and lobbying for juicy committee appointments to gain access to public funds and contracts. This defeats the very purpose of public service and turns politicians into profit-seekers instead of servant-leaders. In such a system, candidates become accountable not to the voters, but to their political godfathers and financiers. Public interest inevitably suffers, as officeholders prioritize private and political returns over national development.

Is it surprising that some members of the National Assembly complain that the N100 billion allocated for constituency projects is not enough, even though the funds are not subjected to any meaningful audit? Many constituency projects are abandoned shortly after commencement, with no tracking or accountability whatsoever. On December 9, 2023, a former leader of the National Assembly threw an extravagant party to celebrate his birthday. In addition to N150 million allegedly donated by various senators, a huge amount was allegedly withdrawn from the public till to fund the

birthday celebration. Diversion of such public funds is part of a larger pattern of politicians attempting to recoup campaign expenses after securing office.

Nigeria must do away with expensive democracy. Politicians and public officeholders should abolish the outrageous costs associated with running for political office. These costs undermine democratic ideals. Democracy should thrive on participation, competition, and merit—not on the power of the highest bidder. When the cost of obtaining a political ticket is scandalously high, internal party democracy collapses. Only the highest bidder emerges. Party primaries become auctions, not elections. Voter choice is reduced to moneybags, not the most qualified candidates.

This situation breeds political violence and godfatherism. Desperate aspirants who cannot raise the required funds through clean means often turn to political godfathers and become their stooges, solicit money from criminal groups or cults, or resort to vote-buying, thuggery, and rigging in order to protect their “investment.” Politics becomes violent, predatory, and inaccessible to ordinary Nigerians. Considering the foregoing, Section 88(4) of the Electoral Act 2022, which states that the maximum amount of election expenses to be incurred by a candidate for a Senatorial or House of Representatives seat shall not exceed N100,000,000 and N70,000,000, respectively, must be enforced. Similar provisions guiding other elective positions should equally be enforced. To address other excessive costs—such as the cost of party nomination forms, delegate fees, and party primaries—legal caps should be introduced. Forensic tools should be deployed to track campaign expenditures and donations. Sanctions must be imposed on erring political parties and candidates, free from political interference. It is noteworthy that a few years ago, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) uncovered uncompleted National Assembly constituency projects worth over N45 billion. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and the ICPC should collaborate to audit campaign finances. Similarly, INEC should work with the EFCC, ICPC, and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB) to investigate candidates' financial backgrounds, detect suspicious wealth linked to campaign financing, and block the use of state or illicit funds in elections. Laws should be enacted to lower the cost of nomination and expression-of-interest forms, encourage independent candidacy, eliminate exploitative party primaries, and increase public funding for parties that meet transparency standards. State governors, federal ministers, and directors-general using state funds, vehicles, media, and personnel to support campaigns must be stopped. INEC and anti-graft bodies should investigate the misuse of state power.

INEC itself should be reformed to become a truly independent body. The INEC Chair and commissioners should be appointed through a non-partisan, merit-based process. INEC should also be granted full financial autonomy to reduce political interference and the cost of politics. Voters should be continuously educated to reject money politics and vote-buying. Civic values and electoral integrity must be promoted. Voters should demand financial transparency and reward candidates who run modest, issue-based campaigns. Civil society and the media should continue to expose vote buyers and corrupt financiers.

Nigeria is at a critical moment in its history and must choose between the pursuit of democratic ideals and the path of destruction. To achieve greatness, the political class must reject money politics and embrace genuine democratic values. No nation can grow while corruption thrives. Most stable democracies in the world have been built on democratic principles. Empires founded on greed, money politics, kleptomania, and selfishness will eventually crumble. But empires built on noble ideals endure forever.