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Elections (1/2): The Battle-Axe in Mortal Hands

As the country gears up for the 2015 general elections, emotions are stirring up, factions are forming and ordinary citizens are retreating to the thought that these elections may follow the paths of the past ones; times when politicians systematically and deliberately attempted to manipulate both the process of elections and the electorate. As parties head towards their respective primaries, we are yet to hear much about ideology and principles or about creed and deed. Rather, the same tactics are being employed by candidates: traveling round the country, inducing delegates and prospective voters with cash, putting up colourful posters with their photographs and declaring at rallies that they are best placed to represent the people without providing evidence to back up these claims.

Unfortunately, hunger and poverty have weakened the voice of the electorate. Many of us exchange our right, (that sacred vote) for what could go into our bellies. We significantly discount our future for the little we see today and make decisions based on worthless sentiments. We sit and complain, criticizing the government without using our voices and votes to make demands for accountability and improvement. It therefore belies the thought that we, the electorate, fully understand the power of voting and as such can exploit its powers to change the country.

When we go to the polls, I fear that many of us may go blindly. We do not know enough about the candidates or their philosophy to make credible decisions. We often rely on second-hand information, hearsay, in forming our opinions. We go to the polls without knowledge and without a basis for clearly selecting a candidate. We do so on the basis of religion, tribalism, ethnicity and hearsay. We do not follow the news on issues or follow through on evaluating the performance or lack thereof of candidates. We significantly discount history and make lifelong decisions on what we feel today. We depend more on our emotions than we do on evidence. If this is the plight of the majority of voters in Nigeria, then we are to be pitied amongst men for not seeking and leveraging knowledge and should be blamed for the things that do not work in this



UNFORTUNATELY, HUNGER AND POVERTY HAVE WEAKENED THE VOICE OF THE ELECTORATE. MANY OF US EXCHANGE OUR RIGHT (THAT SACRED VOTE) FOR WHAT COULD GO INTO OUR BELLIES. WE SIGNIFICANTLY DISCOUNT OUR FUTURE FOR THE LITTLE WE SEE TODAY AND MAKE DECISIONS BASED ON WORTHLESS SENTIMENTS. WE SIT AND COMPLAIN, CRITICIZING THE GOVERNMENT WITHOUT USING OUR VOICES AND VOTES TO MAKE DEMANDS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPROVEMENT. IT THEREFORE BELIES THE THOUGHT THAT WE, THE ELECTORATE, MAY NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF VOTING AND AS SUCH CANNOT EXPLOIT ITS POWERS TO CHANGE THE COUNTRY

land.

My vote, as an individual, is my right to make a selection for which of the alternatives I prefer. It is my affirmation of who I would like to lead me. More importantly, it is my prerogative to determine the things

that should happen to me and my community in the coming years. If I do not cast my vote, I should not have the right to complain. When I cast my vote and the overall selection is not my choice, it does not mean that I wasted my time but that there are things that the collective see or know that I am not privy to or more that they should be educated about. I can choose to become an influencer, to use my voice to convince others of my opinion or to become the influenced, to switch opinions based on new evidence. However, I am part of the process and an important one at that too.

Many have dreamed of an election cycle where candidates would hold debates and present themselves in their entirety. Attempts have been made in the past but no structure has been instituted to ensure that this is enshrined in the electoral process. Candidates must present their past experience, track record, lifestyles and more importantly a plan for what they claim that they can deliver. Like many, I love watching the United States of America's presidential and vice presidential debates. The candidates are put to test on issues and given the opportunity to convince all of their perspectives and their ability. The process forces the candidates to prepare and it educates the people on what they can expect from each one. The debates also provide an indication of how each candidate may respond under pressure and thereby gives the people further insight into candidates' aptitude and ability to think on their feet.

What can be done?

Institutions must live up to their responsibilities. The National Orientation Agency must engage Nigerians and inform them of the benefits of voting. Such institutions must distil information to citizens in the language of the people's understanding. Schools must teach children, from a young age, about their rights to vote and be voted for. The Independent National Electoral Commission must truly be independent (we will discuss institutions and their responsibility next week).

The electorate must seek knowledge from credible sources and follow the news on issues and their leaders. They must turn up at the polls to vote for leaders who would deliver on their manifesto. They must see beyond religion, tribe

and ethnicity to make a selection for leaders who will act in the interest of the people. The electorate should not vote for the belly but for the good of the land. They should not trade fortunes in their future for the proverbial morsel of bread. They should not accept to vote for people who only turn up at election time to seek their votes but rather credible candidates who relate with them over long periods of time. The electorate must demand accountability from their leaders and work together for the benefit of all.

Candidates must realise that every electoral process ends with winners and losers. As such, they must be aware that there is a probability for winning and an equal, if not greater one, for losing. They must learn to accept defeat and not clog up our courtrooms contesting results of free and fair elections. They must display political maturity and respect the wishes of the people. The recently concluded Scottish referendum provides some learning. The different factions accepted the result of the referendum despite their deep rooted opinions and beliefs. Alex Salmond, Scottish First Minister, felt so strongly about the elections, that he resigned from being leader of the Scottish National Party after the vote. Violence should never be the weapon of candidates. Furthermore, candidates in authority must shun the temptation to use state infrastructure to advance their own agenda and ensure that the playing field is level for all. Lastly, candidates should not use elective office as a means to enrich themselves. Public finance is for the public good and not for private purses. The common term for this act is stealing. The temptation to steal will be lessened if candidates resist the temptation to use money as the main object of their campaign.

We tire of hearing that schools and bridges will be built as we have come to realise that these are shallow promises that are usually not part of a larger plan. We crave free and fair elections governed by clear process; rid of all manipulation and intimidation. We seek elections that make sense and culminate in the voice of the voters being heard. We the voters must use this mighty weapon called 'our vote' to demand changes and progress.

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