

# ANALYSING THE STRATEGIC ROLES OF MUSLIM WOMEN ON FREE, FAIR AND CREDIBLE ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

Election as one of the most essential ingredients of democracy, its conduct has remained a challenge to democratic governance, not only in Nigeria, but also almost all over the world. Nigeria's electoral process has since the first one in 1922, during colonialism to the last in 2019 been characterized with fraud, such as imposition of candidates, rigging, stuffing ballots, violence etc. The recent 2022 gubernatorial elections in Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states were characterized with vote buying. This paper reviewed the features of what is and what is not democratic governance, election process as well as free and fair election from Islamic view point. An attempt was also made to describe the important roles of Muslim women at maintaining peace and orderliness in the society, through proper upbringing of their children and playing complimentary and supportive roles to men folks at all time. Terms like voters' education, political participation, voting, voting behaviour, credible election, vote buying were explained in relation to expected responsibility of Muslim women. It concluded by recommending and suggesting strategies that would tackle challenges of electoral process thereby having viable, free, fair and credible election in the country.

**Key words:** Muslim women, Political Participation.

## Introduction

The terms like 'free' and 'fair' have no easily verifiable content and often being used subjectively, they have been accepted as the simplest way to explain complicated and so much debated standards of democratic elections. 'Free and fair' becomes important catchphrase to explain the standard of democratic election and to measure the success of an election. Normally, this term includes the requirement that an election must be periodic, sustainable, transparent and genuine. The term not only widely used by popular mass media, but also widely referred to in scholarly writings and some formal documents. Started with Gill's works in 1994, the term 'free and fair elections' seemed to be more precise and extensive terms for electoral benchmark compared to the other terms, such as 'periodic and genuine election' and 'free election'.

According to Berger (2017), the principle that elections in a democracy should be 'free and fair' is now established, as there are also the international standards governing what this means in practice. The term has been officially used in an international document in 1994, when the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) adopted the Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections. The declaration affirms that in any state, the authority of the government can only derive from the will of the people as expressed in genuine, free and fair elections held at regular intervals on the basis of universal, equal and secret suffrage.

A free election implies that all citizens including electors, parties, candidates and media enjoy all their fundamental rights. These rights including the freedom of expression, association, movement and assembly; freedom from intimidation and violence; freedom of

access to and by electors to transmit and receive political and electoral information messages; freedom of access to the poll. Fair election ensure that all candidates and parties compete on a basis of equal and impartial treatment under the law and by the authorities. It also necessitates a level 'playing field' in enforcement election-related law, access to state facilities and media. Under this principle, there should be a clear separation between the state and political parties, and public facilities and resources should not be used unfairly to the benefit of one party.

Fair election also protects all citizens' rights to universal and equal suffrage; and rights to vote by secret ballot. The election management body should be credible, independent, non-partisan and should be able to conduct their affairs with impartiality and a maximum of transparency. Generally, "free and fair elections" refers to periodic, genuine, clean, transparent, free and fair, competitive elections that are in compliance with the principle of democracy, human rights and natural justice.

Odo (2015) described Election as the process people follow to elect or choose their representatives in federal, state and local governments. However, the first election was organized and conducted in Nigeria in 1922 by the British colonial government in response to the pressures by the nationalists who were agitating for better involvement in the colonial administration and leadership positions.

Later, Nigerians had series of elections, which include those organized by the British people, military and the civilian administration. After the series of elections by the colonial administration, Nigerians were offered the first opportunity to occupy certain political offices. Though, the right for franchise was limited and representation was inadequate, it was nonetheless an achievement for the nationalists who struggled for the enthronement of democratic order as a pre-requisite for greater membership in the process of governance. In 1922, several elections were conducted in different parts of the country at national, regional and local government levels, but none was recognized as free, fair and credible in the Nigerian context.

Election in Nigeria was classified into three viz: elections prepared by the colonial government, those prearranged by the military regimes and the ones prepared by civilian administration respectively. (Odo, 2015). Among these three classes, it is understood that the elections organized by the civilian regimes were neither peaceful nor free and fair compared to the other two organized and conducted by the colonial government and the military administration, except 2015 and 2019 elections which were organized by the civilian administration. The just concluded 2022 gubernatorial election of Anambra, Edo, Ekiti and Osun State were a total improvement on the type of elections organized in the country in the recent time.

However, it was the 1959 General Elections that paved way for the emergence of Nigeria as an independent State. Since then, various elections have been held either in a transition from one civilian government to another or in the transition from military regimes to the civilian administration. Yet, Nigeria was unable to hold a free and fair election, because of some underpinning factors which include; corruption, religious differences, ethnicity, regionalism and power of incumbency. Though, International Observers Reported that 2015 and 2019 general elections were considered as free, fair and credible elections in the country to some extent compared to the previous elections.

## **Clarification of Concepts**

### **Voter Education**

Voter education equips the electorates with necessary information that educate them on their right to select the candidate of their choice. It contains vital aspect like when, where to register and vote casting (ECI, 2016). INEC, organised voters education updates or broadcasts through messages, aired on radio, television and the print media. The most recent call was the sensitization on the importance of permanent voters card (PVC). Nigerians were encouraged in so many ways to get their PVC ready in preparation for 2023 poll. State governments declared holidays for such purpose. People to a certain extent were encouraged with the sample of gubernatorial elections conducted by INEC in 2022. They already see the likelihood that their votes would be counted. This is seen from massive turnout of people at the registration centres.

Elections cannot be generally said to be credible unless the voters are aware of the right choice. In addition, detailed information on voting methodology should be available ahead of time of Election Day. Voters' education activities could be directed by either the INEC or other stakeholders like the civil society in disseminating information on what is required of the electorates throughout the electioneering process. In fact, Muslim women organizations were known for this activity in the time past. In 2019, Federation of Muslim Women Association (FOMWAN) and other Muslim women organizations played prominent roles in educating Muslim women, especially women in *pudrah* on proper method of voting.

### **Political Participation**

Political participation is the willful, non-coercive participation of electorates in politics of the nation. For Conway (2000), political participation is a political commitment. He added that it could equally be thought of as the citizens' rights and obligations manifest in formal political settings. Similarly, Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) had noted that the concept, 'Political Participation alludes to activities undertaken by the electorate in active participation in processes leading to selection of governmental representatives or leaders. Again, Gil de Zúñiga et al., (2012) described political participation as a movement that affects government activity; either directly or indirectly in constituting those involved in governance. Muslim women are encouraged to participate in politics in different capacities.

### **Voting**

Voting is a common practice in contemporary democratic political activities (Berger, 2017). Zahida and Younis (2014) considered voting as the function of electing representatives by casting votes in an election, and that citizens use this method to either express their approval or disapproval of government decisions, policies and programmes, by various political parties as well as selecting the right candidates that would maximally project the interest of the people (the electorates). Brams and Fishburn (2002)

conceptualized voting as a broad and encompassing procedure. Thus, voting encompasses various interrelated functions like selection of governors, influencing government policies, office holders and candidates, individual's allegiance to the existing constitutional regime; voter's disaffection from existing constitutional regime, emotional significance and expression of political group interest

From the foregoing, voting no doubt gives rise to the voting behaviour of the electorates. In fact, there is massive campaign for collection of Permanent Voters Card (PVC) in preparation

for 2023 poll. The massive turnout of women at different registration centres was an indication of women readiness to vote in 2023.

### **Voting Behaviour**

Voting behaviour is a form of political conduct and a good understanding of the voters' behaviour or conduct; clarifies how and why of the choices made in selecting leader, has become major concern for political researchers (Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno & Brusco, 2013). To conceptualize voting behaviour, political science and political psychology as related fields of study are fundamental in the study of human behaviour, especially regarding the choice of candidate (Lasswell, 2017). Political psychologists like (Harold Lasswell, George Gallup among others) examined the manner of emotional impact enabling voters' preference of a particular candidate to the other. Ridout (2018) posited that voters would always prefer a candidate to another regardless of their political mindfulness and complexities.

Achterberg and Houtman (2006) noted that valid deduction on behaviour regarding voting decision, takes into consideration certain factors like race, gender, culture, and religion. Furthermore, political socialisation, tolerance of diverse political views and the mass media can no doubt influence voting behaviour (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer & Bichard, 2010). Consequently, the concept of voting behaviour is best understood through attitudes, beliefs, knowledge structures and the style of information processing. For instance, individuals feel more relaxed in cultures or places where their voting rights remain unhindered. In addition, social influences from the mass media and pressure groups play important roles in determining outcome of elections and voting behaviour. The question now is what is the role of Muslim women at influencing positive behaviour? Muslim women are mothers of the society. They are to lead by example. They should dress properly, queue, cast their vote and wait if possible to see their vote being counted with peace. They must not involve in any activities that can tarnish their image.

### **Credible Election**

Credible elections are marked by inclusiveness, candour and accountability (Norris & Nai, 2017). It ensures that eligible voters take part in choosing their representatives. This liberty in exercising their franchise is however regulated by the provisions of the law. Stakeholders must therefore devise means of delimiting perceived hindrances to the electioneering process at both ethnic and religious divides. Elections are considered credible where each process is available for cross examination, by parties involved. The period of election allows citizens to decide whether government is accountable, yet there must be accountability in the process. There must be powerful penalties set up for infringement of citizens' election-related rights. There must be authoritative accountability for those conducting elections and those leading governmental activities identified with elections (Svara, 2016).

### **Vote Buying**

Vote buying stresses gaining private material benefits by voters in return for their political support. It is about giving voters some benefits in form of gifts or incentives for them to reciprocate with their votes by voting for the giver or the candidate. Voters are given items for their private use and they are expected to return this gesture from candidates or political parties for voting them. Similarly, Fox (1994), sees vote buying as exchanging political rights for material gains, his focus is on the right of a person to exercise his or her franchise. Bryan (2005) defines the concept as the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters. While the first two definitions did not actually focus on the use of money, his definition, unlike other existing literature does not restrict vote buying to only money, but other materialistic

items like food. Again, voters are given these direct benefits and may be expected to abstain from voting or vote in a particular way.

The giving out of vote buying incentives conveys a positive message to some voters. On the other hand, the lack of it sends a negative signal to others. Nugent (2007) views that the failure to distribute material resources while on the campaign trail is perceived that the candidate is out of touch and does not understand the needs of the poor constituents. Indeed, failure to buy votes in this setting is a dominated strategy when others are doing so. Kramon (2011) posits that vote buying signals a willingness and capacity to deliver small private goods which tend to be more highly valued by poor voters. In other words, politicians buy votes because of the information it conveys to voters about their credibility with respect to the provision of targeted, particularistic or patronage goods to poor voters.

These incentives target poor or less educated class of opposition backers not to turn out and vote and is referred to as model negative vote buying, but swing voters and party supporters massive turn out vote is referred as model turnout buying (Cox & McCubbins, 1986). The poor and less educated electorates are always the target in distributing vote buying incentives. In fact, women are their target; they followed them on campaign tour where money and other incentives are distributed. Some will even wait for them on the day of election with their voters' cards demanding for money before voting. Muslim women are encouraged to get their source of livelihood from *halal* sources, putting accountability of all their belonging on the Day of Judgement in mind. Loitering around with aim of getting money or other material benefit will send wrong signal to people about the personality of the Muslim women in question. 'If you are not ashamed, do what you like' This statement was credited to the holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and is a signal that Muslims should not just do anything, but something good.

Though, vote buying motivates the poor to vote than the enticement of public goods, as the poor are often times forgotten in the distribution of public goods. A Muslim woman that is conscious of her behaviour will train her children properly. With prayer and monitoring, her children will not be used by the politicians. Poverty should not be an excuse for wrong doing. They should have alternative sources of income that will send signal of their not in need of the incentive before voting. It is better to engage on jobs like selling, assisting others and get paid, nanny jobs e.t.c than following politicians around.

### **Free and fair elections Islamic Viewpoint**

Islamic political system gives a great emphasis on the ethical and moral aspect of political process. Muslims' involvement in the political affairs is not meant for fulfilling personal interest or preference, but to get the pleasure of Allah. Thus, Muslims who involve in electoral process are bound to follow the Islamic ethical and spiritual principle, such as justice, trustworthiness, perseverance, and respect for each other as provided in *Al-Qur'an and Sunnah*. They must uphold the universal principle of justice and freedom, not merely as an observance to the state law, but as his spiritual responsibility to the Almighty.

Therefore, from Islamic point of view, everyone who involves in elections, including members of electoral management body, candidates, political party leaders, and voters are personally accountable to exercise justice and freedom in the electoral process. Islam strongly opposes any discrimination based on race, colour, gender or social status. Therefore, the principle of equal and universal suffrage corresponds to the Islamic political ideas. The Qur'anic expression "among themselves" (Chapter 42: 38) shows that the political right

belongs to the whole community. Therefore, the representatives of people must be elected by means of the widest possible suffrage. The Prophet (pbuh) indirectly indicated that women must not be excluded from political rights as he had received the oath of commitment (bay'ah) from them during *Al-Bay'ah al-Aqabah*.

This shows that Muslim women have vital roles to play in the development of their community, while non-Muslim citizens are also eligible to vote based on the rule of necessity and the principle of political equality in Islam. Besides that, the fact that the Prophet accorded non-Muslim citizens the right to participate in the political process as provided in some clauses of the Treaty of Medina upon which the Prophet established the first Islamic state, testifies their qualification to vote in elections.

Apart from that, Islamic constitutional law also unequivocally protects the rights related to free and fair elections, such as the freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of association. Involvement of citizens in political affairs is so significant therefore some of the political rights are not only regarded as privileges, but become religious duties, in order to apply *al-amr bil ma'ruf wa nahyu an al-munkar* (enjoining of right and forbidding of wrong). Muslim scholars endorse democratic electoral system as the appropriate system to rule since it guarantees the freedom to spread Islamic message to the public. Therefore, to have a functional and successful electoral system, it is important that the political rights and freedoms must be guaranteed.

### **Muslim Women Involvement in Free, Fair and Credible Elections in Nigeria**

Muslim women can contribute positively to the development of the society. They are charged to maintain law and order and also call people to the part of truth. Qur'an 3: 104 reads 'And from among you there should be a party who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong, and these it is that shall be successful'.

The holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW) received the oath of allegiance (bay'ah) from them during *Al-Bay'ah al-Aqabah*. and also sought for their advice on important political matters. Their contributions were enormous during the reign of the rightly guided caliphs and beyond. Train a woman and you train an entire nation, give a woman candle and she lights the whole world. This adage describes the education given to a woman. She needs to involve in matters that affect her society especially on election. When problem happened in the society, women and their children are mostly affected. They form the vulnerable.

In 2019 general elections, Muslim women involved in sensitizations of voters, especially among their fellow Muslim women in *purdah* in collaboration with government and non-governmental agencies. There are also Muslim women who are involved in partisan politics. Different Scholars discussed the extent at which they can get involved in politics, but this paper looked at their efforts at promoting peace and maintaining law and orderliness during elections that will result into free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria. In Lagos and Ogun states for example, Muslim women have served as Deputy Governors, Alhaja Idiat Adebule and Alhaja Salmot Badru, and incumbent Deputy Governor of Ogun State Engineer Noimot Oyedele. There are Muslim women as senators, House of Assembly members, Ministers, e.t.c and to a greater extent, we have not heard of their misconduct or negative involvement in election processes.

Also Muslim men politicians, the Chairmen of Local Government Areas, the Governors, senators and even the President, their wives are women that should play supportive roles and

not leading their husbands to wrong doings. Asking them to keep their family name and follow the instruction of Allah in the Qur'an is the responsibility of ideal Muslim women. They should disassociate themselves from any act that can tarnish their image. They should not involve in election misconduct.

### **Conclusion**

It is worthy of note that, the struggle for democracy in Nigeria was not conceived only as an end in itself to end the military rule or as an externally oriented initiative, but also as means for achieving responsible political institutions, which promote a government that is accountable to the people (Bello, 2011). Meanwhile democratic governance is not merely about election and the transfer of power to civilians, but about the rule of law, respect for the constitution and for fundamental human rights, socio-economic empowerment and peace, security of lives and property.

Islam provides general principles on the concept of free, fair and credible elections. The principle of justice, freedom, equality and mutual agreement can be found in Islamic teaching. These basic principles also supported by other political conception, such as *al-amr bil ma'ruf wa nahyu an al-munkar* (enjoining of right and forbidding of wrong) and the oath of commitment (*bay'ah*). With that general standard, it is possible for researchers to examine the freeness and fairness of elections according to Islamic principle.

Islamic principle should be followed by Muslim women at all cost by supporting what is right and against things that are wrong. They should be at the fore front and allow their voice to be heard. Muslim Women Organisations, especially FOMWAN should start campaigning for true democratic governance. They should not allow themselves to be used by any political party, but involve in voters education.

### **Recommendations**

- a. Muslim women are charged with the responsibility of proper child upbringing. They should nurture their wards in a way laid down by shariah. An ideal Muslim child will never involve in any act that will create societal unrest like political thuggery, election rigging, etc.
- b. The task ahead of Muslim women organization (FOMWAN) is to start educating the general public, especially women on the importance of free and fair election. Sensitizing women on the reasons why they must get involved in politics and how to do it right.
- c. Political parties, INEC and stakeholders in electioneering processes in Nigeria are to continuously improve on voters' education before the next election, and not only during the period of election. There is also the need for inclusive electoral reforms that emphasise on political leadership dedicated to the rights of Nigerian citizens.
- d. Voters' education combined with national dialogue involving parties, the media, and related institutions are also to be encouraged.
- e. Voters' education club should be encouraged in schools and colleges to ensure eligible voters know their rights, avoid vote buying and other related electoral malpractices in a bid to safe guarding the democratic process in Nigeria.

- f. INEC can achieve a lot if there is diffusion of power, such that sub institutions are established to reduce the risks of operational failure.
- g. The government should consider expanding the scope of ministry of transportation by including sectors that provide logistic supports for INEC, while other parastatals in connection with services required by INEC should be expanded to cover EMB timelines on logistics.
- h. Finally, there is need for INEC to increase its budget on voters' education as this will achieve tremendous results. Also, government should as a matter of urgency set up an Electoral Crime Commission for easy prosecution of electoral offenders.

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