Beyond the 2011 Elections (1)

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INEC deserves kudos for successfully changing the bad image of Nigeria as a country where free and fair elections are impossible

At last, the much-awaited general elections in Nigeria have come and gone but their outcome has continued to evoke lively discussions within and outside the country. Notwithstanding whatever level the discussions are going on, there seems to be a common feeling among the discussants that free and fair elections are now possible in Nigeria. Credit for this new era of free and fair elections must go first to President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and then to the team of Independent National Electoral Commissioners as well as other supporting staff of the Commission led by Professor Attahiru Jega. Jonathan has proved to Nigerians that he is a man who keeps his words and promises. Before the presidential election on April 16, he had repeatedly assured Nigerians that even though he was a candidate, he would not interfere with the electoral processes of INEC. In other words, he promised that the people’s votes in the election would count. Unlike others before him, the president was prepared to allow the people determine with their votes who should lead Nigeria at any point in time. Apart from his readiness to abide by the electoral verdict, he went a step further to warn his party members and supporters not to rig the election for him. According to him, his political ambition was not worth the blood of any Nigerian shed in the process of rigging. Unlike former President Olusegun Obasanjo who relied on the rigging machinery of his party because of his belief that election is a do-or-die affair, Jonathan preferred to be popularly elected by the people. For this reason, he took his campaign to the people and was able to persuade rather than coerce them to buy into his transformation agenda. Above all, the president had implicit confidence in Jega and his team despite the bungling of the electoral processes at the initial stage. Jonathan resisted the urge to use his presidential sledge-hammer to disband the INEC team for embarrassing Nigeria with a false start. Instead, the president displayed a rare statesmanship by showing understanding and co-operation which INEC needed to overcome its initial problems. By this examplary ministration, Jonathan has proved that a president can still win in a free and fair election if the people believe in his person and programme. On the other hand, INEC deserves kudos for successfully changing the bad image of Nigeria as a country where free and fair elections are impossible. The outcome of the elections has proved the cynics wrong that something good can come from Nigeria. Jega and his team achieved that feat through raw courage and determination to succeed where others failed. They refused to allow the initial problems which resulted in false starts of the electoral process to overwhelm them. Over the years, the electoral body in Nigeria has remained a graveyard of integrity but this time around, Jega and his commissioners were determined to break that jinx. They did and gave integrity to Nigerian elections by introducing some innovations which gave more credibility to the electoral process. One other decision that greatly helped INEC was that its leadership was very open in whatever action it took. As a result, it was able to take the people along at every stage of its electoral preparations and execution. Moreover, Jega was always forthright in accepting honest mistakes and pleading for understanding and co-operation to enable them to overcome whatever problems they faced. That explained why the INEC had more of the people’s sympathy than outright condemnation during the initial bungling process. Notwithstanding the initial hiccups and the race against time (because of the very short period at its disposal for meaningful preparations), INEC was able to conduct free and fair elections which most Nigerians, local as well as international monitors and observer groups, attested to as relatively free and fair. For instance, the European Union Elections Observer Mission, which had been monitoring election processes in Nigeria since March this year, said so in its final report on the elections submitted to INEC in Abuja on May 31. According to Alojz Peterle, leader of the Observer Mission, “the elections laid a foundation for successful elections in the future. Overall, the 2011 elections were remarkable improvements on the previous elections in Nigeria.” Jega did not hide his emotion when he received the report which contained some 50 recommendations on how to make future elections better. Receiving the report, Jega said it was his resolve to make INEC the best elections management body not only in Africa but also in the world. Nobody doubts that Jega can achieve this feat if he and his team spend some time to carefully study the reports and recommendations submitted to the INEC by various local and international elections observer and monitoring groups in respect of the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections. In all the reports, there are issues that re-cur in every election. Jega must find solutions to the recurring problems so that future elections may attract little or no petitions from the losers. We want to rapidly graduate to a level whereby losers in elections will call to congratulate the winners instead of sponsoring post-election protests and wanton destruction of lives. To be continued. SMS: 08023880068