

OPEN FORUM

Kole Omotoso is a citizen of the world but is, especially, a citizen both of Nigeria and of South Africa. A university professor, dramatist, novelist, movie star – but chiefly, intellectual – Omotoso is passionately interested in politics and public life in both countries. In late April, Peter Vale, Editor of the Journal of African Elections, sat down with Omotoso and asked him about his views on Nigerian elections and politics. This is an excerpt from their exchange.

Does the novelist Ben Okri's belief that Nigeria's elections are always 'fore won' still hold?

Maybe not any more. But in a more subtle manner elections are still manipulated to produce the result that those doing the managing want. Generally, there are no primary elections to choose candidates for elections. It becomes the privilege of the party leader and his cronies to choose the person they want. In doing this, a political party gets those interested in the positions to concede to the selected candidate before the voting takes place. This means that the rivals of the particular candidate concede his victory before the voting takes place. All this is going on on live television and everybody can see that pressure is being put on those others wanting to contest the position to withdraw their candidacy.

What is the single biggest obstacle to the acceptability of Nigerian elections: the law or politics?

The biggest obstacle to the acceptability of Nigerian elections is the culture of unpunished corruption rampant in the country. There are electoral laws. Rigging elections is breaking electoral laws. There are courts set up to deal with these types of crimes. But invariably those who are rigged out of their mandates sometimes think it is not worth going to court because they believe, rightly or wrongly, that the judiciary can be bribed to give a biased judgement. In recent times, more and more candidates done in by rigging have gone to court and won. As a result, it is noticed that while there were far more contested results in the elections of 2007, there were fewer candidates in the elections of 2011.

What forms of electoral fraud take place in Nigeria? Are there remedies for these?

There are three forms of electoral fraud: those committed before the voting, such as gerrymandering and tampering with the voters' list; those committed during the process and period of voting, such as ballot-box stuffing or ballot-box hijacking; and those committed after the voting, such as declaring results contrary to the voting outcome. There are no remedies for any of these frauds

except preaching against them before they happen, and prosecuting them when they take place.

Are you confident that elections can continue to contribute to the building of democracy in Nigeria?

Elections are crucial to the building of democracy in any society, more so in a place like Nigeria. We come from a background where the obas, the obis and the emirs cannot imagine that their vote is not more important than the vote of the talakawa, the mekunnu, the ordinary man and woman on the street. It is like saying that if the captain scores a goal it should count more than the goal of ordinary members of the team. So we need elections and we need people to understand that whatever their status in life when it comes to the time of voting they have the same power as the mighty as well as the mite.

You have an acute sensitivity to cultural issues, Kole. What role does culture – both national and local – play in the electoral process in Nigeria?

The word 'vote,' both as verb and noun, translates into various terms in the countries of the later democracies. In the Arab world it translates as 'voice' and the countries of Asia have found their own words for the concept. The Yoruba word that does duty for 'vote' and 'to vote' has to do with handing over one's secret decision to someone who will keep it and cherish it. There is a stubborn sense of freedom to cast one's vote as one thinks fit. There are even people ready to be bribed to vote for someone and will then confess that they took the money but did not vote for the person who bribed them. Since voting is secret and individual there is no reason for anyone to see what one is doing.

Do you think that academics who publish in this or other journals have a sound understanding and explanation of elections in Nigeria?

Usually academics tend to use a generalised template against which they write about elections. While they would not bother to explain why Queen Elizabeth II of the UK and the British royals would not be caught voting, no attempt is made to understand the particular culture against which democracy is being nurtured in Nigeria. Of what use are political parties with ideological differences, for instance, where the need is for basic infrastructure, an issue that has nothing to do with ideologies. What this means is that there needs to be some infrastructural basics on the ground before democracy can begin to play a role in political choices. Of course, you could have a choice between modernising and remaining traditional, between industrialising and remaining subsistence, between Western education and Islamic traditional education. This is what happened in the northern part of Nigeria and the North is reaping the negative consequences today in uneducated

(in a Western educational system), unemployable youth and disillusioned, educated sons and daughters of the traditional rulers, who refused to go for mass Western education. Without any well-grounded ideological tenets it is easy for politicians to move (to decamp) from one political party to another. How this situation could affect what is written about elections in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular is impossible for me to say. All one can say is that it should make a difference.