



Addressing election violence and money politics in Nigeria

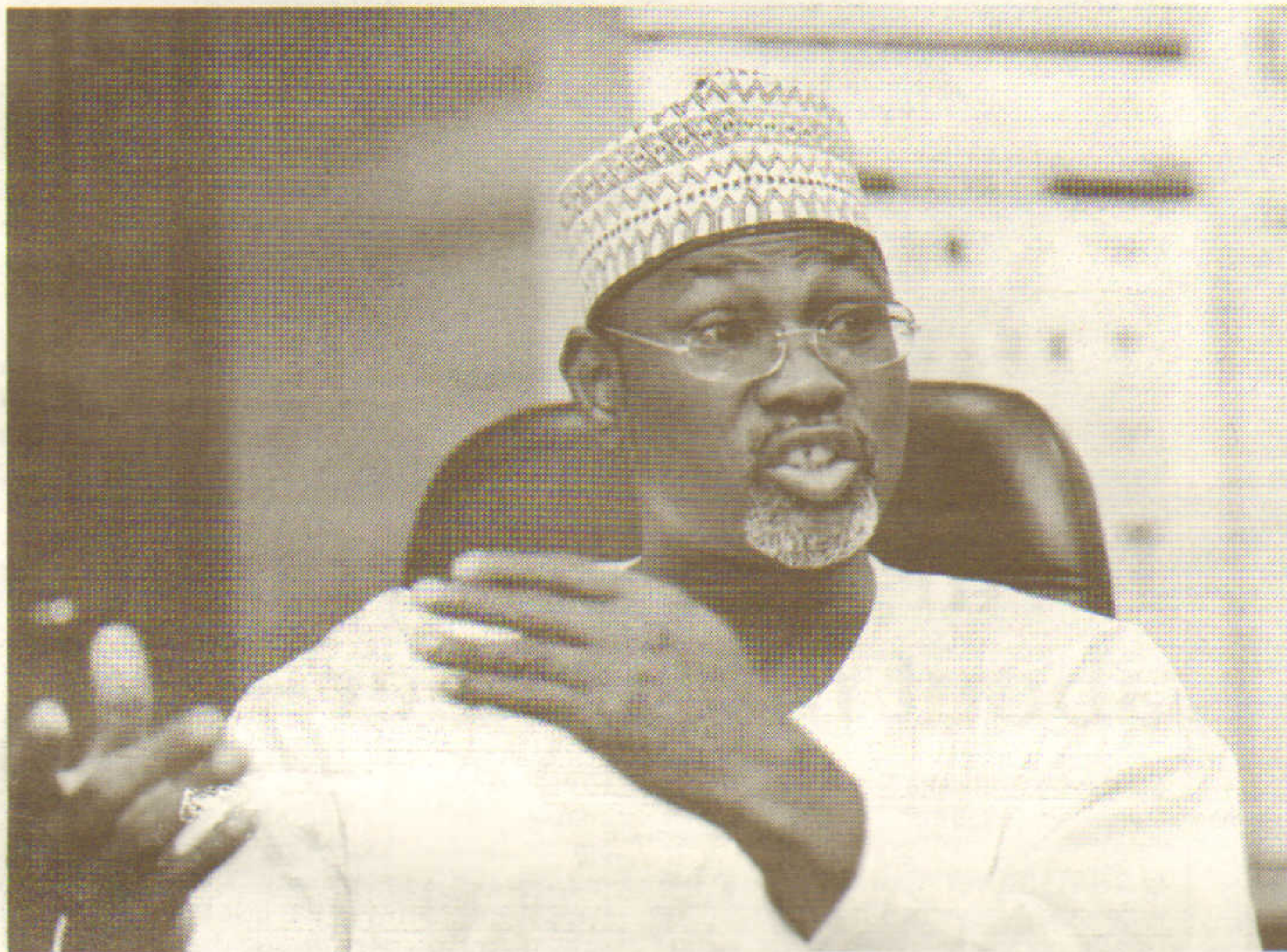
Lateef Raji, special adviser, information and strategy, Lagos State Government, argues that until the business of politics is done by the rules and for the sake of service, violence and voter apathy will continue to characterize our democratic process.

THE GREATEST impediments to the growth and development of democracy in Nigeria are electoral violence and money politics. While electoral violence creates fear leading to apathy among the electorates, undue influence of money in politics ensures that the wrong people get nominated and elected for political offices. According to the National Human Rights Commission, a total number of 58 deaths in 61 separate incidents of election-related violence from 22 States occurred in the run off to the 2015 general election.

In Bauchi and Katsina States, for instance, there were reports of attack on the convoy of President Jonathan. Furthermore, in Rivers State, the APC secretariat was reportedly bombed while its campaign ground in Okirika was violently attacked on two occasions. There were equally pockets of violence in Akwa Ibom, Benue, Ebonyi and Edo. Lagos State had its fair share of violence. Before election, a member of the APC was shot dead by a sniper holding forte in the hotel where the victim died. In the Mafoluku Area of Oshodi, on Thursday preceding both elections, gunshots that lasted well over an hour held the entire community down in fear. One person was later shot dead the second time.

Most analysts have suggested that the hate speeches and vicious adverts that typified the 2015 electoral campaigns were partly responsible for the heightened tension that the election generated.

Careless talks by some prominent political figures, no doubt, created undue tension in the land. The comment credited to the Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Godswill Akpabio, that the only way to guarantee peace in 2015 is to re-elect President Jonathan, is a typical example. The implication of the statement is that if President Jonathan did not win the election, the country would



• Jega

be thrown into chaos. Ex Niger-Delta militant, Asari Dokubo, was similarly reported to have said that the country would not experience peace if Jonathan fails to win the 2015 presidential election. Statements such as this could only make their followers to be spurring for warfare.

It doesn't in any way portray our democracy in good stead when political leaders resort to abusive words and vulgar languages all in the name of the electoral campaign. It could only send the wrong signals to the younger ones thereby making them to have the impression that politics is meant for gangsters. Rather than making hate speeches, one would have expected the political class to hinge their electoral campaigns on serious socio-economic issues needing urgent attention. While we were expecting to hear concrete pronouncements on issues such as fuel subsidy, power supply, the economy, security and job creation, the political landscape was filled with explosive speeches.

Religion and tribal sentiments were also used to further heighten and complicate the electoral process. In Lagos State, for instance, where indigenes and non indigenes have been co-habiting peacefully for years devoid of tension, the ethnic card was cruelly played by the People Democratic Party, PDP to cause division among the people. We have been having elections in Lagos State since when the colonialists were here, and tribal consideration has never been an issue. However,

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out of the desperation for power, ethnic and tribal campaigns suddenly became a central feature. This further worsened tension. Indeed, the rumpus created by this ethnic dimension in Lagos might take some time to settle.

Money politics is another bane of our democratic culture. Investing in politics has suddenly become a profitable venture. Today, money is the language of politics. With good money, you could be sure of the support of local leaders, the youth and other stakeholders. You could also dominate the air waves and local tabloids. In the recently concluded elections, the Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria, (TAN), working for the ruling PDP, paid for a 36-page glossy advertising supplement in major newspapers for weeks in addition to the dozens of full-page ads it bought every day for three months. The PDP also paid for lengthy television documentaries, which disparaged the persons of General Muhammadu Buhari and Asiwaju Bola Tinubu. These are resources that could have been spent to improve the lots of Nigerians.

In the days of the Ahmadu Bello, Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Aminu Kano and Michael Okpara, ideologies, principles and patriotic convictions were the ideals that spurred political discourse in the land. Political parties and their candidates were chosen based on the depth of their manifestoes and the integrity of their leaders. All that has, since, changed. After feeding hapless electorates with

hate speeches that were laced with tribal and ethnic landmines, politicians later queue them up to lure them with cash gifts and other material incentives. Take the back seat, politics of idea and principles. Enter stomach infrastructure!

The influence of money has so much corrupted the political process that political parties could now hardly boast of genuinely committed party members whose sole motivation is the interest of the party. It has become so ridiculous that party agents at polling centres even hold their parties to ransom for monetary concerns. I experienced this first hand when party agents from my ward refused to present the result sheets with them, unless they were paid their agent fee. They did not until I intervened. Some could even collaborate with opposing political parties and security agents to scuttle their parties' interest if the momentary conditions on offer are good.

If we must become a truly democratic nation, this is the right time to deal with the twin evils of election violence and money politics. For one, election violence is rampant because instigators and perpetrators always go scot free. We need to enforce all relevant laws against electoral violence to the letter. The only thing that makes evil to thrive in a society is for evil to go unpunished. With regards to money politics, it is about time we go back to the foundation laid by our founding fathers. The political parties need to re-evolve by laying more emphasis on hitherto revered political principles that launched our political heroes into the limelight. We can de-emphasize money politics by enjoining card-carrying members to start contributing a particular sum of money monthly. Such funds will create leverage and ensure probity and accountability.

We should discard the idea of paying agents and other party workers during elections, and leave the job to committed members who are willing to serve as volunteers, and just love doing the job. In most part of the country, the ordinary people who supported the Buhari/Osinbajo Campaign Groups are mostly volunteers. At least, I can say this for the Idowu Martins office where I participated. I join other Nigerians who meant well for the healthy growth and deepening of this democratic culture to encourage and support the incoming administration to tackle headlong these twin challenges. Until some people are jailed or sentenced to death for electoral violence, the threat to participatory democracy would continue, and lesser people would dare to come out on election day to vote.

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