

FEAT

Presidential polls of fraud and violence

By Okey Ndiribe

THE situation at a polling booth located at a primary school close to Girls High School, Azuiyokwu, Abakiliki during last Saturday's presidential and National Assembly election was like a family affair. At the end of polling for the day, the presiding officer at the polling centre had handed over a heap of thumb-printed ballot papers to PDP agents to "help me count them". Two policemen who were on duty watched indifferently as the drama went on. The polling officer's explanation for his very strange action was that he did not want to waste time counting the ballot papers alone, as he did during the previous week's gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections. Earlier on, many voters at the same polling booth were disenfranchised by these same polling officials.

Voters who wanted to vote for their various presidential candidates were frustrated when they were told by the presiding officer and the polling clerk that they had exhausted ballot papers for the presidential poll. When queried on why he had exhausted his stock of ballot papers for the presidential poll, the presiding officer said the polling centre was only allocated 300 ballot papers for the presidential contest; 300 for the senatorial poll and only 100 for the House of Representatives election. He further stated that the number of registered voters at the polling booth was 460.

Earlier on, it was learnt that a man who was believed to be a fake AC agent had entered a classroom with a PDP agent who had fresh ballot papers. Shortly after counting of votes began, VF looked for the man who had earlier on introduced himself as an AC agent. He had disappeared into thin air!

The irregularities which characterised the elections last Saturday were legion. It was a repeat of what transpired during the governorship and state House of Assembly elections in the state penultimate Saturday. For instance, Vanguard learnt that a man who had gone to vote at Sharon located near the NYSC camp, Abakiliki was told to go home without voting after his thumb had been marked with INEC's indelible ink. The man's protests were said to have fallen on deaf ears as 'a big politician' in the state who was in-charge of affairs at the polling station told him to simply go home and be rest assured that his vote would count.

It was also gathered that polling officials at Arondizuogu Hall located along Afikpo road initially refused to count the votes cast at the end of both elections. When they were asked what was their reason, they gave no explanations. However, they were eventually pressurised to declare the result. PPA had 82 votes while PDP scored 38 in the presidential poll.

Earlier on, there was a mild drama at the same booth when a man who was hailed as 'honourable' arrived the polling



A plank market near Daura INEC office set ablaze in Katsina State.

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booth to demand that some ballot papers be given to him to take to another polling booth where there was serious shortage of voting materials. However, his request was refused by the polling officials who told him to go to INEC and make his complaint.

There was an observable high voter apathy during the election. Unlike penultimate Saturday when voters began to arrive various booths as early as 8 a.m. in the morning, only few voters were sighted even at 10 a.m. when voting was scheduled to start. In addition to this, INEC officials still arrived late at their duty posts in various parts of the state.

There were no INEC officials at Ezzamgbo- Governor Sam Egwu's home town- up till 11.30 a.m. The popular Okwor Market in the area was filled with buyers and sellers like any other market day- an indication that the election attracted little or no interest from the people of the area. Reports received from Ngbo East, Ngbo Central, Ngbo North and Ohaukwu local council areas of the state showed that the situation was the same. At Amuzu-Ezza, INEC officials arrived at the Community primary school there at 11.35 a.m. at the same time with Vanguard. At Amegu-Echara, in Ikwo Local Government Area, voting also started late. It was also gathered that fighting had broken out between Omege and Abaomege communities. Although the cause of the inter-communal dispute was not clear, it was learnt that violence erupted in the area after the governorship election of

penultimate Saturday. Sources in the area said three people had been killed in the conflict which some people believe has a political undertone. Soldiers were also reported to have cordoned the INEC office in the area to prevent hoodlums from gaining access to it.

Reports from many other parts of the country showed that the poll was marred by serious irregularities and violence. Cases of irregularities included hoarding and snatching of ballot papers and boxes. It also included under-aged voters alongside intimidation and harassment of voters. There were also attacks by political thugs.

Reports from Katsina State indicate that there was political violence which resulted in deaths of several persons in Daura, hometown of the presidential candidate of the ANPP Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (rtd).

The widely reported attempt by unknown persons to bomb the headquarters of INEC at Abuja was another incident which shocked many Nigerians across the country. The plot was foiled after a truck fully loaded with petrol was found close to the entrance of INEC headquarters with a heavy stone tied to the accelerator pedal in the driver's chamber. Although no one was found inside the truck, the tanker was said to have been stopped when it ran into barriers and a power pole which prevented it from ramming into INEC's headquarters. INEC officials said the purpose was to burn down the building.

In Oyo State, the situation was highly charged as soldiers

arrested 51 hoodlums suspected of perpetrating electoral fraud. Forty of the thugs were reportedly nabbed at some villages in Lagelu Local government area of the state for allegedly forcefully thumb-printing ballot papers and stuffed ballot boxes in some polling stations located at Kiree and Eleruko villages. The thugs who were believed to be members of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) had invaded several polling stations in the area leading to a situation where the ballot boxes in both villages had been filled by 10 a.m. Some of the INEC officials on duty were also arrested along with the hoodlums. At Igbo-Elerin area of the state, 10 hoodlums were arrested for electoral mal-practices. Despite the presence of the heavily armed soldiers and anti-riot policemen, a big time politician in the state was said to have personally led political supporters round the city to ensure the politician's son who was a candidate in the election was voted into office.

At Port-Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, there were intermittent explosions believed to have emanated from bombs dropped at Marine Base Area of the city. The bombing was suspected to have been carried out by militants in the state with the aim of instilling fear in the voters and thereby discourage them from coming out to cast their votes.

The situation in Anambra State remained very tense last Saturday. In Orumba North Local Government Area of the state, 50 anti-riot policemen accompanied by 20 soldiers stormed the local INEC office in the area and carted away all the ballot boxes and papers shortly after they had been delivered by an INEC team from the state capital. In Nassarawa State, nine police officers were reportedly killed in an election violence which shook Lafia the state capital to its foundation last Friday. On that same day, Goodluck Jonathan, Bayelsa State Governor and running mate to Musa Yar'Adua- narrowly escaped assassination as militants in the state nearly overran the Government House after they had sacked the Police headquarters at Yenagoa, the state capital.

Elections: What the kids said

By Mike Ebonugwo

THOSE who think that children are unmindful of the issues surrounding the recently concluded general elections in the country or have no say on what transpired during the contentious exercise should have every reason to read this. Contrary to the thinking in some quarters, the kids are not oblivious of all that took place before, during and after the elections.

This much was gathered last Sunday during a gathering of some children at a sandy playground in Ikotun, Lagos. The children had earlier been engaged in a game of football before they stopped to take a break. It was while they were resting and swapping jokes and stories that one of them noticed that a playmate had ink stain on one of his fingers. His question on how his playmate named Ade got the stain received this answer: "Don't you know that when you vote, they will put ink on your finger?"

Obviously incredulous, the first boy whose name is Nonso had sneered thus: "Are you trying to tell me that you voted; you that is not even up to 15 years? Don't you know that they will not allow you to vote if you're not up to 18 years?" Ade's reply to this was: "Ah, me I don't know that one, but I voted sha". One of the kids by name Ubong then asked Ade which of the presidential candidates he voted for. "Okay if it is true that you voted, which person did you vote for; is it Atiku or Yar'Adua?"

Ade's response was: "No-oo, I voted for Chris Okotie". But this reply immediately elicited derisive laughter, with one kid by name Maxwell asking: "How can you vote for somebody that will not even win?" Ade's bright answer was: "I voted for him so that he will win. And I'm sure he will win except they do ojoro for him". Most of his mates, however, were in no way impressed both with his claim of having voted in the election which they obviously did not believe and his claimed choice of candidate that he had supposedly voted for.

To make this position clear, Nonso had informed thus: "My father said that it's Yar'Adua that will win because Obasanjo is supporting him". Ade's immediate retort was: "If Obasanjo is supporting him nko? Does it mean that it's Obasanjo that will vote for him? Is not the person that people voted for that will win? If people say that it's Okotie they want and vote for him, how then will Obasanjo come and say that it's Yar'Adua that has won?"

Maxwell laughed at Ade's interrogative response and said: "Look at this one O; you don't even know anything. Don't you know that if Obasanjo wants Yar'Adua to win he will win because he(Obasanjo) is the President? Before everybody was thinking that it's Atiku that will win but he will not win because Obasanjo does not like him again. That is why two of them have been quarrelling because Atiku knows that if Obasanjo does not support him, he will not win".

But Ade would not be discouraged as he continued to root for Reverend Chris Okotie. "But they say Obasanjo did not rule well that is why things are very difficult in Nigeria. So, why is he saying that people should vote for Yar'Adua when he did not rule well. If Yar'Adua is Obasanjo's friend, it's means that Yar'Adua will not rule well if he becomes president," he reasoned.

But Nonso disagreed, saying that President Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua were two different individuals. "Ah-ah, Obasanjo and Yar'Adua are not the same person now. Obasanjo did not rule well because he is not a good man. Yar'Adua looks like a good man; and so I think he can rule well," he stated.

In his own contribution, a boy who identified himself as Chibuzor had queried thus: "Is it true that Yar'Adua is not well?" To which one of his playmates responded in the affirmative. "Then if he is not well, why did they allow him to contest? Don't they know that if he is sick he will not be able to rule very well? Anyway, I don't even think he will win; my Uncle said that it's Orji Kalu that will win because all Igbo will vote for him," Chibuzor stated. "Is it only Igbo that will vote?" queried Ade. He did not stop there. "Supposing other people don't vote for him, will he be able to win," he further queried.

Ubong at this point jocularly suggested that Buhari would win. This produced the expected reaction as his mates loudly dismissed the suggestion as quite impossible. Maxwell based his own objection on what he regarded as Buhari's stern visage. "I don't like Buhari to win because his face is hard and he doesn't like to smile; he is always frowning his face as if he wants to flog somebody".

For Nonso: "One man said that if Buhari wins, he will arrest everybody and lock them inside police cell. He will even arrest Obasanjo because he and Obasanjo are not in the same party". Chibuzor found this rather incredible and said so. "It's a lie joo. How can he just arrest everybody and lock them up when he is not a police man and a soldier. It is only the police and the army that will arrest and lock people up like that," he said.

"Look at you," retorted Nonso. "Don't you know that Buhari is a soldier before? That is why they call him General Buhari," he added. "He is a General but he is not in the Army now because they have retired him," Ade informed. "But Obasanjo sef was in the Army before they retired him. And when he became a president, he was still behaving like an Army man. Don't you know that Buhari will do the same if he becomes president?" Nonso returned.

The kids soon got tired of discussing the topic and went back to their game of football.