

## A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON THE DANGERS OF VOTE-BUYING TO NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Chidimma Nkemdilim Ezeador, PhD.

&

Kelechi Onyeka Ezeani, PhD.

### ABSTRACT

*One of the essential features of democracy is that elections to the highest public offices shall be on the basis of free and fair elections; for an election to qualify as fair, it connotes that votes must be counted accurately. Organizing credible, free and fair elections are more important during elections than the result itself. The proponents of democracy has it that an election is “free” when all the electorates entitled to vote are rightly registered and free to make their choice of candidate without imposition or inducement. Unfortunately, in Nigeria today the reverse is the case, the result seems to be the number one priority of the desperate politicians whose main interest is on how to enrich themselves at the expense of vast mass of people and not actually to protect the interest of the masses. Vote buying which involves the act of giving reward to a person for voting in a particular way is now raising its ugly head in Nigeria. Basically, the 2015 and 2019 general elections held in Nigeria witnessed a lot of killings and burning of ballot papers. Political party agents were seen in almost all the polling stations harassing the voters who came out to vote, discouraging them from voting for the rightful candidates and giving them money in a bid to vote for them, whereas those parties who knew that they will be defeated by their opponents, because they were not well funded engaged in burning of the ballot papers, violence, destruction of lives and properties. However, the questions that propel this paper are; what exactly is vote buying? What are its underlying causes? Why does it occur in some places but not in others? How does it affect political and economic development in Nigeria? Can it be educated or legislated away? All these questions constitute the problems that this paper tends to reflect on to know why Nigerians have been so unlucky to elect the leaders of their choice and why there have never been a free, fair and credible election since the democracy emerges in Nigeria. This paper argues that offering money, goods or services to induce voters to vote for a particular candidate makes the electorate to vote for the wrong leaders whose mission is not for the common good of the masses, but rather to embezzle the public funds for their selfish interests. This paper employs the method of hermeneutic and concludes by suggesting that for Nigeria to have true democratic system that geared towards the common good of the people all forms of electoral practices including vote buying must be abolished.*

**KEY WORDS: Philosophical Reflection, Vote buying and Democracy**

### Introduction

Buying and selling votes has become an acceptable norm in Nigeria's political system since the return of democracy in May 1999 till date. This phenomenon has taken the

centre stage in Nigeria's political arrangements. According to Onuohajide, (2018) "Going, going, gone" is a refrain commonly used to herald the determination of the highest bidder of an item being sold on auction.<sup>1</sup> He avers that this process of presenting items for bid, taking bids, and then selling them to the highest bidder aptly encapsulates a questionable practice that has permeated Nigeria's recent electoral experience: vote buying.<sup>2</sup> Vote buying is not fundamentally new to Nigeria's electoral politics or only restricted to Nigeria or Africa. Vote buying has steadily grown in scale. In the words of Onuohajide, (2018) several videos and images have emerged, showing unabashed sharing of cash, food and valuable items among the electorate by politicians and parties during recent elections in Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon manifested itself recently in the 2017 governorship elections held in Anambra state and Ekiti state and more especially at the 2019 general elections and 2020 Edo gubernatorial elections, where sharing of money and other valuables was the order of the day which later resulted to massive killings and violence in the country. Vote buying has led to the apt description of Nigeria's electoral politics as "cash – and carry democracy" which threatens her readiness to embrace democratic virtues.

This paper reveals that basically why this phenomenon of voting buying has become rampant in Nigeria today is because some elites at the corridor of power has vowed to remain in control because of their desire to benefit from extracting the resources that is, the ability to steal money meant for public use for their own selfish interests, thereby paving way for poverty, unemployment, insecurity and corruption in Nigeria. The paper concludes that until Nigerian politicians move from money politics and adopt the inclusive institutions which do not concentrate power in the hands of the few, but rather create an enabling environment, encourage investment and innovation, the advancement of the country's democracy might be a mirage.

### **Explication of our Concepts**

#### **Understanding the term Philosophical Reflection**

The very word 'Philosophical' "refers to thought about thought; a philosophical reflection is a serious and careful thought about something. Jahari, (2011) has it that it guides thinking and maximize the prospect that selected aspect of reality (politics) will be made intelligible.<sup>4</sup> it is for this reason that thinkers and writers subscribing to the philosophical approach or reflection look like advising the rulers and the citizens of a particular country to pursue certain higher ends.

#### **What is a Vote?**

According to Wikipedia vote is a formal expression of an individual's choice for or against some motion (for example, a proposed resolution); for or against some ballot question; or for a certain candidate, selection of candidates, or political party.<sup>5</sup> "In a democracy, a government is chosen by voting in an election: a way for an electorate to elect, i.e. choose, among several candidates for rule." Voting often takes place at a polling station; it is voluntary in some countries, compulsory in others, such as Australia. Many countries use a secret ballot, a practice to prevent voters from being intimidated and to protect their political privacy.

### **Defining Vote buying**

English Wiktionary defines Vote buying as the distribution of a material benefit to an individual voter in exchange for support in a ballot.<sup>6</sup> Scaffer and Scheller, (2007) defines Vote buying as a widespread phenomenon, a purely economic exchange in which the voter sells his or her vote to the highest bidder.<sup>7</sup> According to Wikipedia, Vote buying occurs when a political party or candidate seeks to buy the vote of a voter in an upcoming election.<sup>8</sup> However, vote buying can take various forms such as a monetary exchange, as well as an exchange for necessary goods or services. For instance during campaigns in Nigeria, most politicians pay visits to the traditional rulers, church priests, youth leaders and market chairmen given them money and valuable items in order to mobilize voters for them. Some politicians even go extra miles demanding for their voter cards.

### **The Concept of Democracy**

The term Democracy has been in use in the tradition of western political thought since ancient times. It is derived from the Greek root 'demos' which means 'the people' cracy which stands for 'rule' or 'government'. Thus literally, democracy signifies 'the rule of the people.' Johari, (2011) citing the great Athenian leader (Pericles) defined it as “a government in which people are powerfull.”<sup>9</sup> According to Abraham Lincoln, “it is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”<sup>10</sup> Johari citing Sir John Seeley avers that 'it is a government in which everyone has a share.’<sup>11</sup> To Dicey, “it is a form of government in which the governing body is comparatively a large fraction of the entire nation.” In the words of Gauba,(2003) Democracy as a form of government implies that the ultimate authority of government is vested in the common people so that the public policy is made to conform to the will of the people and to serve the interests of the people.<sup>12</sup> Gauba observes that several exponents of democracy have treated democracy chiefly as a form of government. John Austin (1790-1859), James Bryce (1838-1922), A.V. Dicey (1835-1922), John Seeley (1834-95) and A.L. Lowell (1856-1943) are some prominent supporters of this view.<sup>13</sup> For instance; Gauba citing Lowell says that democracy is only an experiment in government.<sup>14</sup>

Plato and Aristotle saw democracy at work in some ancient Greek city-states, especially at Athens. Its salient features were: (a) equal participation by all freemen in the common affairs of the polis (city-state) which was regarded as an essential instrument of good life; (b) arriving at the public decisions in an atmosphere of free discussions; and (c) general respect for law and for the established procedures of the community.<sup>15</sup> Gauba observes that the form of democracy prevalent in ancient Greek city-states was by no means regarded as an ideal rule.<sup>16</sup> According to him Plato decried democracy because the people were not properly equipped with education 'to select the best rulers and the wisest courses.'<sup>17</sup> Joharis avers that since the times of Herodotus, the word 'democracy' has been used to denote that form of government in which the ruling power of a state is largely vested not in any particular class or classes, but in the members of the community as a whole.<sup>18</sup>

In the world over, the term democracy is conceived generally as the best form of government. It is believed to be the bedrock of development because of its essential

features such as free and fair election, active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life, majority and minority rights, checks and balances and equality. But today most African leaders have decided to turn the true nature of democracy, and adopted the abnormal features which have led to the issue of vote buying and all forms of corruption that are raising its ugly head in Nigeria today. Those elites at the corridor of power are accused of embezzling and misappropriating public funds. Their misdoings have their impact on the people they are serving.

Haven looked at the various meanings of vote buying and as well the notion of democracy. This paper shall focus on the phenomenon of vote buying to see its manifestations in elections and as well indicate factors that gave rise to this problem in Nigeria.

### **Manifestation of Vote buying in Nigeria's election**

In the words of Onuohajide, (2018) vote buying has been an integral element of money politics in Nigeria. This phenomenon he argues, takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle; such as during voter registration, the nomination period, campaigning and election day.<sup>19</sup> It is more predominant during election day, shortly before or during vote casting.<sup>20</sup> Onuohajide captures is thus:

Like a typical market place, the politicians, political parties, and party agents are the vote buyers while prospective voters are the sellers. The commodity on sale is the vote to be cast while the medium of exchange could be monetary and non-monetary items such as bags of rice and other valuables.<sup>21</sup>

He avers that the market force that determines the value or price of a vote is the level of desperation of politicians to win in a locality.<sup>22</sup> Although money and other valuables can be used to effectuate vote buying, political actors have adopted two main Approaches to buying votes for election day. First is the cash for vote approach which involves giving or promising the prospective voter some agreed amount of money before the individual casts his/her vote at the polling station. This payment is done before the actual voting, and could be within the vicinity of the polling station or farther away. A typical example of this can be seen during the 2020 Ondo State gubernatorial election, whereby the first lady of the State was seen in the market two days before the election, sharing wrappers and other items to the women at the market. In the words of Onuhajide:

The settlement is made secretly or in the open, the vote buyers' demand evidence of ownership of a voter's card and assurance that the voter will vote for their party before offering the money. In this approach, trust is the key to the contract. It is also known as the pre-paid method of vote buying.<sup>23</sup>

The second approach according to Onuohajide involves the vote for cash; that is giving or rewarding the voter with the agreed amount of amount of money or material

compensation after the individual has shown evidence that he or she voted for the party.<sup>24</sup> He enumerates several ways the voter can prove to the vote buyer that he or she voted for the agreed candidates. The first method is, where the voter shrewdly displays the ballot paper that (s)he has thumb printed in favour of a particular party, so that the party agent standing strategically nearby can confirm compliance with the unholy contract as (s)he emerges from the cubicle at the polling state. Another method is for the voter to photograph the thumb printed ballot paper to show as evidence. Thereafter, compensation in cash and/or kind can occur either immediately or at the close of balloting, and may take place within the precinct of the polling station or at an agreed place. In this approach says Onuohajide, evidence is the key to the consummation of the “see and buy” or the post-paid method.<sup>25</sup> This practice of vote buying in Nigeria has become a common feature of party primaries and general elections conducted in recent years in Nigeria. For example, during the 2017 gubernatorial election held in Anambra state, the rate of vote trading was massive. The two ruling political parties APC and PDP were accused of giving out cash from 5000.00 to 10000.00 for votes in several polling units. Similarly in 2019 general elections also held in Nigeria, it was observed that members of APGA, APC and the PDP were giving money to the voters at most polling stations across Anambra, Imo, Rivers, Enugu, Ibadan and Lagos states. In Anambra state precisely, some polling stations in Idemili North and South local government areas were giving out 5000 to 10000 voters each. Many law-abiding citizens and observers condemned the brazen incidences of vote buying as an eyesore to democracy. It obstructs the democratic process by interfering with the rights of citizens to freely decide who will represent them and their interest. This can result in the candidate who would best serve their constituents.

In 2018, widespread acts of vote buying were also reported in Ekiti state during the governorship election, for instance, the punch newspaper documented the case of a retired teacher who claimed that an APC agent offered him money to vote for the party. According to a retired teacher who spoke on how he was given money to a particular party states;

I was offered five thousand naira to vote for the party but I rejected it. I am a 73-year-old retired teacher. I cannot allow the future of my children to be bought by money bags. I don't know how we descended to this level when people brazenly offer money to people to secure their votes. It was not like this in the past. Will our votes count with this problem?<sup>26</sup>

When the result was finally announced, Kayode Fayemi of APC won the governorship election, polling 197,459 votes while Kolapo Olusola scored 178,114 votes. Both the APC and PDP were alleged to have paid voters three thousand naira to five thousand naira each. Now the question remains, after spending this huge amount of money just to win the election, when he gets to that seat, will he still work for the masses or focused on how to recover back the money he spent.

This impunity of vote buying is becoming the norm in Nigeria's electoral politics with the political parties trying to outwit each other in the amount paid to voters. Elections create a “social contract” between candidates and constituents who voted with the presumption

that the candidates will govern along the lines of their stated policy platforms. Vote buying deters aspiring political leaders from running for office because it suggests that money, rather than ideas or experience is how to win an election. There are good numbers of Nigerians who are willing and have the experience and passion to move the country forward, but those desperate and corrupt leaders who are at the corridor of power will never give such men of integrity the chance or privilege to occupy the seat. What happened in Rivers state before and after the 2019 general election was an indication that the motive of these vote buyers is just to remain there and be developing their pockets with the tax payers' money, not minding the sufferings, pains, unemployment and the rate of poverty the masses are passing through. This is not what a true democracy is, according to international standards, in a true democracy every citizen has the right to stand for office. Vote buying makes it impossible to meet these standards by penalizing potential candidates who are at an economic disadvantage especially women and minority politicians. Results seem to be the main priority of political parties and politicians in Nigeria particularly where the Independent National Electoral Commission is the body vested with the powers to conduct elections. In Imo state a prominent and well known politician was said to have pointed a gun on an electoral officers to announce him the winner. Such person it is obvious that his aim of occupying the office is basically for his personal interest and not for the interest of the poor masses, and as a matter of fact he will work for the masses if and only if he recovers the money he spent during the election.

Elections are said to be a central feature of democracy and for them to express the will of the electorate it must be free and fair. The proponents of democracy has it that if an election is "free" it means that all those entitled to vote are rightly registered and are totally free to make their choice of candidate without imposition. Perhaps this cannot be said of elections in the country, where the inducement of voters by parties, and politicians has somewhat become the order of the day. In the past, there were more cases of snatching of ballot boxes and other forms of violence by politicians wanting to win elections by all means, but recently, the country has seen a wave of vote buying during elections.

### **Factors that Contribute to the Rise of Vote buying in Nigeria**

**Unemployment:** there are many unemployed youths in Nigeria today. This is as a result of the inability of these leaders to create incentives and a level playing field for the masses. As a result of this problem, many unemployed youths in Nigeria are been used by these desperate leaders to carry out their activities, this is because they knew that these graduates are desperate and are in need of money. Some of these unemployed youths have sold their conscience in a bid to make quick money and at the end they will be the chief sufferers, because these politicians after the election will strife to recover the money they spent during the election.

**Poverty:** Nigeria has the largest extreme poverty population in the world as at June 2018 says Onuohajide, with over 87 million or nearly 50% of its estimated 180 million populations living below the poverty line.<sup>26</sup> With this high rate of poverty in the country, the hungry masses are willing to be going after the politicians begging for money because there is a lot of market failure; most teenagers are not in school, crime is high, there is no hope that these politicians will change tomorrow, so they decided to engage in vote

buying since government do not care for them.

**Existence of security votes:** These are monthly allowances that are allocated to the 36 states within the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the sole purpose of funding security services within such states. However, the failure or inability to subject the funding to legislative oversight or independent audit allowed successive presidents and state governors to treat it as slush fund and direct it to political activities, such as buying votes during elections.

**Weak institutions:** In the words of Sule, nations fail because of weak institutions.<sup>27</sup> As far as the rule of law is weak, and those elites that organize the society for their own benefits are still at the corridor of power, they will never be arrested and prosecuted; this will give room for others to adopt the strategy. Importantly, when the political institutions are weak, the elections will not be free and fair, the leaders will be above the law, the constitution will not be effective and when the constitution is not effective the leaders will always do their wish and not the wish of the masses.

### **Dangers of Vote buying in Nigeria**

There are a lot of dangers involved in vote buying, it raises the cost of elections thereby shutting out contestants with little finances and promoting political corruption. For instance when victory is purchased rather than won fairly, it obviously leads to state capture. It equally compromises the credibility, legitimacy and integrity of elections. Importantly, vote buying undermines the integrity of elections as the winners are often the highest bidders and not necessarily the most popular or credible constants. It equally discourages many Nigerians from coming out in mass to vote for their rightful candidates as witnessed in the 2019 general elections; this is because it is obvious that their votes will not count.

Furthermore, vote buying has the tendency to perpetuate bad governance. For instance, when these politicians gave out their resources to the voters in a bid to vote for them, when they win and get to their offices they will prefer to recover back those money they wasted during the election before they could begin to think about what they will do for the country. That is why in Nigeria today, there are so many abandoned road projects serving as death trap, high rate of poverty and hunger, political infighting, high death rate due to hardship and insurgency, high rate of unemployment which has given rise to kidnapping, internet fraud, illegal migration and women trafficking. All these social unrests witnessed today in Nigeria are as a result of infighting generated by the desire to benefit from extracting the resources.

### **How Vote buying Affects Political and Economic Development**

In their book *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty*, Acemoglu and Robinson, (2012) argues thus:

The rich nations like Great Britain and the United States became what they are today because their citizens overthrew the elites who controlled power and created a society where political rights were much

more broadly distributed, where the government was accountable and responsive to citizens, and where the great mass of people could take advantage of economic opportunities.<sup>28</sup>

Whereas,

The poor nations remain poor because it has been ruled by narrow elite that have organized society for their own benefit at the expense of the vast mass of people.<sup>29</sup>

On this note, if this issue of vote buying in Nigeria is not curtailed its implication is that those elite at the corridor of power will remain there making laws that will favour only themselves and not the masses. Corruption and embezzlement of public funds will become the order of the day. Crime will be so high as we are experiencing now, there will be no security. In fact life will become solitary, nasty, poor brutish and short as it was in the state of nature according to Thomas Hobbes.

Importantly, political institutions of any country determine what the economic institutions will be. If the political institutions are inclusive obviously the economic institutions will be inclusive, this is because economic institutions are forged on the foundation laid by political institutions. In the words of Acemoglu and Robinson, nations became failed state when they have extractive political institutions as we can see in Nigeria today. Unemployment rate is high, there is high death rate, opening a business is risky, there are potholes in almost all the roads in Nigeria and there is no steady power supply. Hikes in oil price and tariff are other current issues at hand. All these challenges affects the economic activities in the country, because the money that supposed to be used in building roads, creating jobs, providing steady power supply and infrastructures have been diverted to their private accounts in rich countries. Nigeria is what they are because our leaders have failed to rise above their responsibilities. Achebe laments that trouble with Nigeria is squarely the failure of leadership. Nigeria can never have sustained development if their leaders do not have the mind set to focus on the common good of the people. Democracy entails government of the people, in other words the people has the power to decide who will become their leader but it's unfortunate that since 1999 till date, Nigeria government have not organized any free and fair election.

### **Recommendations**

In order to drastically curb the dangers vote buying poses to democracy in Nigeria, the following recommendations are given;

First, the Independent National Electoral Commission INEC should adhere strictly to their role to provide an adequate mode of election and make sure that all forms of gerrymandering should be avoided. They should also develop a strategy in ensuring that an effective monitoring of political parties' campaign funds in order to effectively curb electoral fraud, including vote buying.

Secondly, to enhance the secrecy of the ballot INEC should construct a collapsible voting



cubicle that will make it difficult for party agents to see a voter thumbprint on the ballot paper while voting. And also actions that reveal the vote cast by voters should be criminalized.

Thirdly, the federal government should reduce the high prices of tickets for presidential, governorship and House of Representatives posts so that citizens who are willing to contest can afford the prices.

Finally, the Electoral Act should be amended to; empower citizens to have access to social media tools so as to facilitate the exposure of electoral fraud. The government should provide incentives to empower the youths in order to create employment opportunities and reduce the level of poverty that makes the electorates to sell their conscience during elections. On a serious note, the media and civil society organizations should ensure that they give adequate attention in educating and enlightening the electorates on the negative implications of vote trading, particularly for it raises the cost of elections, promotes political corruption and undermines good governance.

### **Conclusion**

In concluding this paper on the dangers of vote buying in building a true democracy in Nigeria, our emphasis is on the need to have a true democracy devoid of all forms of corruption. This can be attained when we adhere strictly on the principles of democracy which do not involve vote buying and other related electoral frauds in Nigeria. Nigerians are what they are simply because their leaders are not what they should be. Most political elites at the corridor of power are there not basically for the common good of the people, but purposely there to enrich their pockets at the expense of vast mass of people; and for them to remain in that seat they adopt different strategies even violence provided that they remain in control. Now the country is facing a lot of challenges as a result of the inability of the leaders to rise to their responsibilities. For these needs to be met, the citizens must be educated properly on the need to elect leaders who are willing to move the nation forward, leaders who are willing to adhere on the principles of democracy which includes equality, justice and transparency. On the other hand, there must be a training school basically for the those running for political positions, here they will be enlightened and educated more on qualities they needed to have as leaders and importantly the aim of becoming a leader, these will go a long way to help them know the implications or failure to attend to the needs of the people and at the same time know if they are qualified to be leaders. When all these measures are put in place the issue of vote buying and other fraudulent acts will be reduced drastically and a true democratic system will emerge. Ones there is a true democracy, people's right to vote and be voted for, social justice and equality will be restored.

### **CHIDIMMA NKEMDILIM EZEADOR PhD**

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Tel.: 08135097772 E-mail: [cn.ezeador@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cn.ezeador@unizik.edu.ng)

**&**

### **KELECHI ONYEKA EZEANI PhD**

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
Tel.:08034276391 E-mail: ko.ezeani@unizik.edu.ng

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