

ADDRESS OF SIR ABEL GUOBADIA, KSA, CHAIRMAN, INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC), AT THE POLITICAL SUMMIT ON ELECTION VIOLENCE, 19TH MARCH, 2003

I must begin by expressing the Commission's deep appreciation for this initiative to bring all major players and stakeholders to this meeting to discuss the single biggest threat to the forthcoming general elections, which is the widening and deepening presence of violence in the conduct of politics.

Certainly, the timing of this meeting could not have been more appropriate because the electoral process is on the verge of being completely swallowed and irretrievably corrupted by fear, intimidation and the absence of freedoms of expression, movement and association. It is difficult to organize free and fair elections in that type of atmosphere, no matter how, as a Commission, we endeavour to provide a level playing field. Only last week, I alerted the nation to the looming danger, which the current levels of violence pose to the creation of an enabling environment that will allow Nigerians the opportunity to exercise choices freely.

I share with you all the hope that we can conclude this summit by committing ourselves to some firm and binding principles of appropriate conduct, as well as send signals to supporters and the public that violent conduct is not only unacceptable, but that it must be completely eliminated from our lives before, during and after the elections.

We have come here with the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, a document, which the Commission has laboured with the Parties to produce and commit ourselves to. I hope it can contribute to the establishment of this framework of understanding.

It might be instructive to remind ourselves that free and fair elections involve fundamentally, that citizens, leaders and political parties commit themselves firmly to the essential principles and ideals of democracy.

Free elections involve freedom of the citizens from fear, intimidation and the absence of restrictions to their rights to associate, express and move freely. It involves the freedom of institutions that will organize elections, or police the environment from external and partisan influences and manipulation. It involves the freedom of election officials being isolated and insulated from fear and harassment during elections. It involves the freedom of the media from restrictions and other limiting influences.

Fair elections mean elections conducted strictly in an atmosphere in which rules are equally known and respected before, during and after elections by all. There must be transparent fairness in the manner in which organized political interests allow each other access to the voters to sell their candidature and programmes. There must be transparent fairness in the manner in which the electoral body and security agencies relate to all political parties and candidates. There must be fairness and balance in the application of all laws, rules and regulations, such that it makes accepting victories or losses a predictable end of political Competition.

For the Commission, the journey so far towards organizing free and fair elections has been both challenging and rewarding. We have just revolutionarised the voter registration system, through the introduction of an electronic voter register, which will substantially eliminate the old weaknesses, which allowed rampant cheating through multiple registration and ballot fraud. This register will be released to all political parties and State Electoral Commissions at the end of March or in early April. Voter cards will replace the present tear-off papers, which currently serve as voter I.D. just before the elections. Many Nigerians have been identified as multiple registrants, and these persons have criminalized themselves and will not be on the voters register. We have asked the security forces to make a hot pursuit of them with a view of putting them on trial.

The political climate has been substantially liberalized by the registration of 27 political parties since the last elections. Nigerians have wider choices to make from the political spectrum, and many tendencies and interests now have established channels for expression. Our judiciary has been challenged to provide landmark interpretations on constitutional and other legislations on the electoral process, and the democratic system as a whole has been the better off for this. Our media and civil society organizations operate with freedom limited only by their own weaknesses.

Ordinarily, these major developments should together create an environment in which democratic ideals should flourish, rather than become circumscribed by violence. The question which this summit must ask and find answers to, lies in this seeming contradiction: on the one hand, an increasingly - democratizing society, while on the other, a nation in which violence is becoming the decisive factor in the outcome of political competition.

I would like to offer some opinion on what could possibly explain the increasing recourse to violence in the conduct of our political affairs by both leaders and followers, so that in our discussions, we may analyze them and identify solutions, which suit them.

I. **Absence of clear commitment to democratic ideals by the leadership**

Most of our leaders are politicians, not democrats. The distinction between these two is real: even despotic system, politics thrives, but it takes genuine democrats to achieve a democratic system. Our parties put up candidates for elections through processes, which create bitterness and rancour, outcomes that their own rules are meant to eliminate. Candidates in turn organize their own campaigns with the single-minded objective of obliterating the opposition entirely by all means possible. The goal of political activity, which is essentially the competition to mobilize the energies of the nation towards the achievement of key goals, becomes subverted under the singular ambition to achieve public office at all costs and create personal wealth.

II. **Destructive linkages between elective offices and wealth**

Politics is today the biggest business in Nigeria, and an elective office is pursued with such destructive vigour that only the huge investment made for it can explain. People who should otherwise be targeted and convinced by the

superiority of appeal and programmes of candidates and parties, whose poverty ought to be the prime concern of all politicians, are turned into foot soldiers of cynical politicians to wreck havoc on other poor people.

III. Alienation of ordinary citizens from the political process

The overwhelming majority of our people are only relevant and involved for elections, not in the electoral process. The process itself is centred on very few powerful individuals who determine the direction of political affairs, and the fortune of many political office seekers.

Priorities, strategies and targets are set by this increasingly - smaller elites for followers and supporters, and the absence of mediating influences renders ordinary citizens vulnerable to the manipulations of the elite.

In practical terms, it renders majority of citizens incompetent to deal with, or indifferent, to major developments in the political process. They do not feel it is their duty to police the process or to shield it against excesses and abuses. In fact most of our citizens feel they have very little direct stakes in the process, and the vast arena of activity available is thereby surrendered to a small clique, from the sincere to the rogue.

Your Excellencies, these are broad generalizations of what I see as major weaknesses in our system. I will now raise specific areas, which for us in the Commission, represent flashpoints, or areas of relative weakness in the system as we move nearer the elections.

a. Substantial dependence on Ad-hoc Staff

Any election naturally involves the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of ad-hoc staff who, however, will perform essential election duties that will impact directly on the results. We have staff strength of about 9,000 as a Commission, and will need to recruit, train and deploy between 500,000 to 600,000 other Nigerians as ad-hoc staff. Our best efforts will be conditioned by the capacity of these ad-hoc staff to remain true to their oath, to administer towards a free and fair election, to show high levels of competence, and accept as sufficient the little financial reward, which we offer only as a token of a nation's appreciation. Historically, this category of staff has represented the weakest link in the chain of the electoral process. We have reviewed this issue extensively, and have resolved to reach out beyond the traditional sources of our ad-hoc staff, even though, of course, we will still rely heavily on this source. We have faith in the desire of most Nigerians to have an administration elected freely and fairly, and we have widened our search for them. We will, beginning this week, advertise and request many highly-placed, retired, professionals and other Nigerians who have the education, exposure and integrity to offer themselves as Presiding, Collation and Returning officers. I want to use this forum to request, particularly the organized private sector, universities and retired public officers to submit applications to participate in the conduct of the April-May elections.

c. Managing intra-party disputes

A major source of conflict is the manner in which intra-party disputes are handled, and their effects on the political system. Sadly, many parties have not allowed the basic democratic principles to which they subscribe find expression. In spite of elaborate rules, it has been as difficult to identify clear and fair winners in Congresses and Primaries, as it is to get losers to accept defeat. So much bitterness and rancour is generated in intra-party disputes, which spill over into the electoral process, heating it further. Even as I speak to you, major rifts still exist within political parties, some of which we saw manifested in conflicting lists of candidates from many sources.

d. Managing inter-party relations

Competition for voter support tends to stretch beyond the normal boundaries of the rule of law, leading to violence and other forms of intimidation tactics. Parties tend to seek to create no-go areas for other parties, and police them with armed gangs. Even the language candidates adopt is aimed at instilling fear, and followers magnify these negative signals in their actions. A major factor responsible for inter-party conflicts seems to be the practice whereby Parties retreat as soon as they nominate a candidate, and leave the candidate to freely determine his or her campaign strategy. Candidates feel they are entitled to fight for their political lives because of the huge financial investments they made, and party functionaries are often too weak to call any excesses to order. As we look into the issue of violence in our campaigning strategies, we must address the need for political parties to assert themselves in determining conduct of their candidates, and this must include, among others, the willingness to condemn unacceptable conduct,

e. Meeting the challenges of the new voter's register

As I mentioned earlier, the new register has identified persons who are ineligible to register either because they are below voting age or because they registered more than once. We hope that the security agencies, agents of political parties and the public will assist the Commission in making sure that these persons, whose names and other particulars we had displayed earlier, do not constitute a nuisance at the stage of replacement of cards or during elections.

CONCLUSIONS

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, we look forward to sitting with you in this forum to discuss some of the issues I raised in this address. I will only conclude by restating our resolve as a Commission to play our electoral role faithfully in ensuring the conduct of free and fair elections. We realize, however, that this resolve is contingent largely on the willingness of Nigerians, especially those in this hall, to help achieve this goal. One of the most important commitments we can make today will be to leave the election machinery alone to do its job, and to support it by eliminating all practices and actions which create suspicion and fear that it can and must be subverted.

I say this without prejudice to the Commission's willingness to receive suggestions on how to improve its services. We indeed welcome suggestions from all stakeholders especially the Political parties on how to improve the electoral process thus enhancing its credibility and ensuring greater freedom and fairness in the elections.

Nigerians can conduct free and fair elections, so help us in achieving this goal, as the success of the forthcoming elections is a collective responsibility.

I thank you.

Abuja

18th March, 2003