

# Three reflections on the next elections

By Edwin Madunagu

FROM what I have so far read on the 2011 Nigerian general elections, I pick three sets of reflections: They came from Chief Anthony Enahoro, Alhaji Maitama Sule, and Dr. Anthony Akinola respectively. The first two personages are elder statesmen, and need no introduction; the third, a much younger man, frequently makes informed contributions to political discussions in Nigeria.

Anthony Enahoro recently spoke with *The Guardian* at his "modest home in Benin City": and the short interview appeared on page 64 of the newspaper's edition of Sunday, May 9, 2010. The questions posed to the elder statesman were direct, but his responses were philosophical. He tried to be as charitable as possible, but you can see and feel his pessimism. To the opening question, "What are your expectations in 2011 general elections in Nigeria?", Enahoro went into reflection on electoral expectations in general. From this, I extract two "least philosophical" or "most concrete" statements. First: "Elections are organised by people who want the outcome to have particular candidates in power and, quite often, the elections are pointless. People just want you to vote in a particular manner and unless it ends like that they don't think that there is a result that people can be proud of".

This response is too general and not very likely to satisfy a political reporter or an activist – unless, of course, you try to "concretize" the word "people". After all, the *okada* rider does not organise elections; nor does the woman who sells vegetables in the market; nor does a student, or an unemployed person. Enahoro's second statement, though still philosophical and general, is very strong and, you may say, "extremist". Mind you, the veteran nationalist will be 87 years old in a month or so. He said: "The elections are pointless except

something urgent is done to change the tide, because even the best election in Nigeria does not deserve any accolades". In fact, this second statement was one of the only two highlighted in the entire dialogue. Independently, I underlined this particular statement, not because it is "strong", "extremist" or "pessimistic", but because it is true, sadly true.

What Chief Enahoro was saying comes out very clearly, and in fact, most concretely, as soon as you interpret the word "tide" contextually. It simply means the direction the country is moving, and has been moving. With this we may recast the elder statesman's statement as "The elections are pointless except something urgent is done to change the direction in which the country is moving, and has been moving, because even the best election in Nigeria does not deserve any accolades". This re-statement can be understood in either, or both, of two directions. One possible interpretation is that even if the 2011 elections turn out to be the fairest, freest and most credible elections we have had so far, it would still not be as free, as fair or as credible as Nigerians deserve and would wish.

Another possible interpretation is that the results of the elections are not likely to set Nigeria in a new, people-serving and truly democratic, direction. The indications are simply not there. As I said earlier one can adopt either both of the two interpretations. I adopt both. In fact, Enahoro's response to the follow-up question, "Do you mean there will be no level playing field in next year's election?", strengthens my attitude. He had, in response to that question, said: "Well, yes, I am afraid the answer is yes; I don't think that we will necessarily or hopefully get results we would all be proud of or which will produce the results which are in favour of the people". In answer to another follow-up question, Enahoro had, himself, asked a

rhetorical question: "Suppose there is an election in a given area where everybody is an illiterate, how do you deal with that?". I will return to this interview in the next issue of this column.

Alhaji Maitama Sule was interviewed by *The Nation* newspaper in Kano, and the interview was carried in the paper's edition of Sunday, May 9, 2010 (page 64-65). Maitama Sule was first questioned on the controversy triggered by General Ibrahim Babangida concerning "new breed" and "old breed", or "young" and "old", or "experienced" and "inexperienced", in Nigerian politics. He dismissed the controversy with the answer: "I believe that the best organisation is a combination of the old and the new. I hate generalisations. When Yakubu Gowon took over power he had people who were old enough to be his father in his cabinet. I always believe in this combination. I keep saying that yesterday gave birth to today and today will give birth to tomorrow. Nature does not want to vacuum".

I would, myself, also dismiss the question. I subscribe to Maitama Sule's line of thought. But, I would add that it is the type of political or governance system being operated in Nigeria that promotes this type of question. When the President is made an absolute ruler by the governance structure, the Constitution, and the political culture, why would all the focus not be on him or her? And in the absence of clear ideological orientation or guide and clear programmes – party and government programmes – why would the focus not be on such attributes as individual leaders' age and "experience"? We have seen, in our own lifetime, rulers who came to power at the age of 28, and we have seen those who achieved the feat at the age of 70. We know, and can confirm, that this disparity in age does not explain the failure or success of the

rulers. Frankly, I don't know why Babangida's comment on the Nigerian youths has generated so much debate. In fact it is the least significant of the statements the general has so far made – and have been made about him – on his electoral ambition.

Maitama Sule was asked about the "zoning" principle; in particular, the rotation of the presidency between the North and the South and the debate as to whether President Goodluck Jonathan should contest, or not contest. His response was against dismissive: "I don't care where you come from so long as you are qualified. Let anybody be the President of the country if he is qualified. Let no tribal or religious sentiments come into it".

On the "key to credible elections", Maitama Sule said that his answer was "two-fold: one short, the other long". The long answer, he said, "may never be". He gave his "short" answer as follows: "If you want to have credible leaders you have to have good elections – free and fair election. If you want free and fair elections, the incumbent government must resign six months before the elections. Do not allow the incumbent government to organise succession elections: it would succeed itself because it has the five fundamentals of rigging". The "five fundamentals of rigging" Maitama Sule listed as: the government, the financial resources, the security forces, the judiciary, as well as INEC (that is the electoral commission).

His specific suggestion here is that an interim government should be set up to organise the elections through an independent electoral commission which it would appoint. He did not elaborate on the composition and structure of such an interim government, or who would set it up, or how to ensure that the interim government and the electoral commission would be truly independent – so that, in his words,

"all parties would be at par" and "no party would have an edge over the other". But he offered the principle which is the starting point. I shall also return to Maitama Sule.

Dr. Anthony Akinola shared his reflections on the next general elections in Nigeria in the opinion article, *Parties and elections, the British example* (*The Guardian*, Monday, May 10, 2010). He urged his compatriots to emulate the British who have just gone through a similar exercise. First, according to Akinola, "the British political parties are ideological and issue-oriented parties and their approaches to the organisation of state and society have people in no doubt as to what to expect whenever one of the major ones, Labour or Conservative, is in power". Secondly, on the major issues in the election – the economy, immigration and electoral reform – each party had clear positions. These positions were publicly debated and canvassed. And when no party won enough seats to form on government alone, their leaders went into coalition negotiations on clear principles – as were offered to the voters.

Thirdly, Akinola, who resides in Britain and closely observed the process, testified: "The campaign lasted barely four weeks and not a single related death was reported. There were no fraudulent issues with ballot papers, or the outcome of the elections. Voters' registration cards came through the post ... Pensioners could be seen as volunteers, helping prospective voters at the polling stations". Furthermore, the election day was not declared a public holiday; and "there neither police officers nor armed soldiers at the polling stations, neither were there party officials to monitor voting". I shall also return to Akinola's observations.

In the next two issues of this column I shall be proceeding from the above reflections to the consideration of demands which the Nigerian people should be making as citizens, as voters, and as self-liberators.