Nigeria, history and the present danger

THESE are perturbing times. On the eve of what promises to be Nigeria's fiercest election, one that has set the country on edge, it is important that we sound the alarm bells.

Even though we have seen it all before — whether we are talking about the 1964/65 elections (postponed for several weeks due to disagreements over the voter list) that precipitated the first military coup in January 1966 and the civil war the year after, or the June 12, 1993 debacle and the Interim National Government contraption that followed — Nigeria today is in uncharted waters. We haven't had an election this close with war raging in a part of the country.

The angst that followed the postponement, by the Independent National Electoral Commission, of the presidential election scheduled for this weekend is therefore understandable.

The speech by Prof. Attahiru Jega, chairman of INEC, announcing the postponement has been debated widely by Nigerians. Clearly, there are many questions begging for answers. But if we focus on Jega, his pronouncements and the "politics" surrounding the postponement, we miss the forest for the trees. And here, I am not addressing the party faithful who can't see the big picture even if it is as large as the 400-metre monolith called Aso Rock.

Even though I have strong reservations about elections holding on the new dates announced by INEC, I am inclined to give Jega and INEC the benefit of the doubt. I sincerely hope all eligible Nigerians get the opportunity to collect their Permanent Voter Cards and that the war on terror would have been won appreciably in the next six weeks to justify the postponement.

So, while we continue to prepare for the elections,

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patriots and active civil society — or what is left of it — should necessarily begin to interrogate why every election (and census, I must add) in Nigeria is a referendum on the continued existence of the country and why elections have literally become wars that the military would have to "supervise".

It is for this reason that we must do a deep and sincere reflection on the current situation. If we do, we will, undoubtedly, arrive at the conclusion that more than anything else, we need a genuine national conversation about whether this country is sustainable the way it exists today.

President Jonathan was elected in 2011 in a bloody election (postponed from January to April) that witnessed the death of hundreds of Nigerians, including patriotic youths who were serving their fatherland. He became President by default the year before following the death of his principal, Umaru Yar'Adua, who came to power in 2007 in one of the most farcical elections the country has witnessed.

President Yar'Adua, alongside then Vice-President Jonathan, was anointed by his predecessor, Olusegun Obasanjo, who was handpicked by the military, on the eve of their "departure" in 1999, to return the country to "civilian" rule. It was the same Obasanjo, as an army general in 1979, who ushered in the country's Second Republic which was led by President Shehu Shagari who was overthrown in 1983 by Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) — who is currently running for president — in a coup that saw the country go through four military regimes in 16 years, the annulment by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, of the June 12, 1993 election won by Moshood Abiola — who was murdered by the military

regime of Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar while in detention – and ultimately, the return of a retired general as president in 1999.

Clearly, our democracy so-called is nothing but "Army Arrangement", apologies to Afrobeat maestro, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Then again, the question is, can we really blame our military? Looking at our history, is it out of place to say, as someone has noted, that Nigeria was rigged to fail?

Nigeria's rapacious ruling class is salivating about the prospects of retaining power or coming to power. They have a right, going by our current constitution, to do so. What the ruling class – those in power now, those who have been in power and those who are seeking power, whether civilian or military – don't have the right to do is to imperil the mass of our people.

Of course, I don't expect the protagonists in this tragicomedy that Nigeria has become to appreciate much less work to mitigate the clear and present danger. How then do we as a people break this vicious circle? It's simple. Let genuine patriots, humanists, active civil society, if there is still anything so-called, stop worrying about which section of the ruling class will lose or benefit from the action, inaction, greed and idiocy of Nigeria's power blocs or what, for example, the current postponement has done or would do to our image in the comity of nations.

We have to forge a nation before we can compete or meet the standards set by the "international community". The current crisis will fester and it is hard to predict the outcome. There is no other option but to confront this dilemma frontally.

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