

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS AND LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Women are effective change agents, and diversity and gender parity in leadership and decision-making are increasingly acknowledged in all walks of life. Women still make up a very small percentage of those who make decisions in politics, business, and society. Laws, judgements and determinations tend to become more inclusive and representative, incorporating a diverse range of perspectives when women play a meaningful and active role in leadership positions within institutions like the legislature, judiciary and executive boards. When women take on leadership positions in their households, including decisions regarding land and household money, it improves their families' access to education and health-care. Income inequality is lower in countries where a higher proportion of women hold significant legislative positions. When women are actively involved in the formation and implementation of peace agreements, they have a 35 % greater chance of lasting at least 15 years. It has been shown that when women hold more executive positions, companies see higher profitability. Enterprises in the top quartile for gender diversity on their executive teams outperform the national average by 21 %. Nigerian companies scored better than the global average in the participation of women in the workforce. The average percentage of women at the executive level is 20 per cent which is higher than the global average of 17 per cent. Furthermore, the average percentage of women at the board level is 23 per cent, which is close to the average of 25 per cent globally. Participation of women in politics and leadership positions in Nigeria will be examined in comparison with other African countries, showing the challenges limiting such participation and recommend steps that could be taken to ensure better representation.

A. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria gained independence in 1960 from Britain¹ and this event marked the beginning of its democratic journey. Nigeria's democratic journey has been punctuated by several military coups and a brutal civil war from 1967 to 1970 which has had its impact generally on democratic trends in the West African nation.

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1 *France24*, From self rule to civil war: Nigeria's independence 60 years on, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/20201001-from-self-rule-to-civil-war-nigeria-s-independence-60-years-on>, Last Accessed on 7/4/2023.

In recent years, the issue of women's representation in politics and leadership positions has gained significant attention in Nigeria. For a long time, Nigeria has recorded low participation of women in both elective and appointive positions and this is a growing concern to many Nigerians. However, concerted efforts have been made by government and non-governmental organizations to increase the level of participation of women in politics, in line with the declaration made at the fourth World Conference on women in Beijing, which advocated 30 % affirmative action. However, in Nigeria, the extant National Gender Policy (NGP) recommended 35 % affirmative action instead sought for a more inclusive representation of women with at least 35 % of both elective political and appointive public service positions respectively.²

The National Gender Policy represents a set of minimum standards expected of the Nigerian government to meet its mandate for gender equality, good governance, accountability, and being socially responsive to the needs of its vulnerable group.³

In March 2022, the Nigerian Federal Executive Council (FEC) approved a revised National Gender Policy for 2021 to 2026.⁴

The leadership spectrum has generally fared better in terms of women representation, especially when juxtaposed with global trends and statistics as will be discussed further below. This dictates that more focus will be on women representation in the political sphere in Nigeria.

B. WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN AFRICA'S PARLIAMENT: THE NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE

To have an informed understanding of women's representation in Nigerian politics, it is important to also place the conversation within the context of the larger African continent, using other nations as a yardstick to determine to some extent how progressive women's participation in Nigeria's politics have become.

Women's political representation has increased dramatically over the past 20 years, with all regions in Africa making significant strides toward the target of 30 % women's representation in decision-making. During that time, the average percentage of women in national parliaments has doubled globally. The rate of increase in political representation is unprecedented worldwide. In the past, no African nation had elected more than 30 % women to its single or lower legislative chambers in 1995, but by 2015, twelve nations had done so, five nations had done crossed the 40 % threshold of women elected, and one nation, Rwanda, had done so with more than 60 %. Rwanda has held the title of nation with the highest per-

2 *Oloyede Oluymi*, National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, Abuja, Nigeria) Monitoring Participation Of Women In Politics In Nigeria, available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Finland_Oct2016/Documents/Nigeria_paper.pdf, page 2, Last accessed on 7/4/2023.

3 *The Guardian*, FEC approves revised national gender policy, available at <https://guardian.ng/news/fec-approves-revised-national-gender-policy/>, Last accessed on 6/22/2023.

4 *Ibid*.

centage of female legislators since 2003, overtaking the Nordic nations. In terms of the proportion of women in single or lower houses of parliament, four of the top ten nations in the world—Rwanda, Seychelles, Senegal, and South Africa—are in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁵

While several African countries are marking remarkable rise in women’s participation in politics, some countries like Nigeria have achieved little to no progress in that regard when statistics are presented or taken into context.

In Africa’s 54 countries, Nigeria ranks the lowest in Africa’s parliament with only 5.45 % of women representatives.⁶ The top 5 African countries with women representatives in the parliament are Rwanda (47.95 %), Senegal (44.20 %), Mozambique (42.40 %), South Africa (41.60 %), and Burundi (39.60 %). The five worst performing countries are Liberia (11.00 %), Gambia (8.60 %), Benin (7.40 %), Algeria (6.20 %), and Nigeria (5.45 %).⁷

According to a report by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), the national average of women’s political participation in Nigeria has remained 6.7 percent in elective and appointive positions, which is far below the Global Average of 22.5 percent, Africa Regional Average of 23.4 percent and West African Sub Regional Average of 15 percent.⁸ This ranks Nigeria 184 out of 193 countries on the equality index for countries with low women representation in governance.

At a one-day meeting organised by the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD) in November 2022, Beatrice Eyong, the UN women representative to Nigeria and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), had the following observation; “The women’s participation in politics in Nigeria is very appalling and very unsatisfactory, and very, very unacceptable. Because if you look at the African region, Nigeria is one of the lowest countries as far as representation in the parliament is concerned. Nigeria is just 4.1 per cent in the parliament as we speak to the national parliament, while in other countries like Rwanda it is 67 per cent, Senegal is about 57 per cent. These are all countries with a very high-level representation of women in parliament, but for Nigeria, it is something that is very unacceptable.”⁹

5 *Oloyede Oluayemi*, *ibid*.

6 *Nwachukwu Orji*, *Improving Women’s Political Representation in Nigeria*, PLAC, Policy Brief, 2019, available at <https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Policy-Brief-on-Women-Representation-in-Elections.pdf> page 4.

7 *Ibid*.

8 *Oloyede Oluayemi*, *ibid*.

9 *Thisday*, UN scores Nigeria low in women participation in politics, available at <https://thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/11/29/un-scores-nigeria-low-in-women-participation-in-politics>, Last accessed on 7/4/2023.

Women representation in African parliaments (premiumtimesng.com)



C. WOMEN REPRESENTATION TREND IN NIGERIAN POLITICS OVER THE YEARS

In the House of Representatives from 1999 to 2003, there were 12 female members, or 3.3 % of the 360 total members, while there were 348 male members, or 96.7 % of the total.¹⁰ Only 21 women were in the House of Representatives from 2003 to 2007, bringing the ratio to 5.8 while men held 339 seats, accounting for 94.2 percent of the total. In the 7,160 candidates who ran in the elections in April 2007, there were only 628 women, or 8.8 % of all candidates. There were 3,141 candidates running for seats in the National Assembly, but only 209 (6.7 %) of them were women.¹¹

There were 25 elected female senators in 2007 and 19 in 2011, however there were nine more female senators in 2007 than there were in 2011. Out of the 1904 candidates who stood for Senate seats in 2019, 235 were female while out of the 4,680 candidates who contested for House of Representatives seats, 533 were female. There were only 21 women serving in the National Assembly, 8 in the Senate, and 13 in the House of Representatives before the 2023 elections, making up 4.47 % of the assembly's membership. From 1999 till date, only 157 women have been elected to the 469-member National Assembly (38 senators and 119 members of the House of Representatives), compared to 2,657 men (616 senators, 2,041 reps) during the same period.¹²

On 8th June 2022, the presidential primaries of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) was conducted in anticipation of the 2023 presidential election, and there was only one female aspirant amongst the 23 aspirants in total. Uju Ken Ohanenye, the only woman among the 23 aspirants, suddenly withdrew from the contest in favour of the eventual winner and national leader of the party, Bola Tinubu.¹³ In her words, "I have decided to step aside for the lifesaver who is Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu," this was rather disappointing as the lawyer and entrepreneur had previously told journalists on national television that "the touch of a woman is lacking in the governance of this country".¹⁴

It was a timely reminder of the numerous obstacles women face in this large West African nation and, for some Nigerians, a step back for gender equality in the country's politics. "Ohanenye might have believed she was not going to win because of the financial and political limitations she would have to surpass," said Antoinette Lecky, Lagos-based media personality and former project lead at ElectHER, a non-profit focused on getting

10 *Chiamaka Okafor, Mariam Ileyemi*, Premium Times, IWD 2023: Nigeria falling in women's political participation, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/gender/587049-iwd-2023-nigeria-falling-in-womens-political-participation.html>, Last Accessed on 7/4/2023.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 *Aljazeera*, Nigeria election: Women denounce poor political representation, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/2/16/nigerian-women-decry-poor-representation-in-nigerian-politics>, Last accessed on 6/29/2023.

14 Ibid.

more women into political leadership. "But it gave her a chance to publicise herself as a lot of people did not know who she was at the time."¹⁵

In the recently concluded Nigerian presidential election, there was only one female candidate out of the total number of 18 candidates; Ojei Chichi of the Allied People's Movement (APM), the rest of which were men.¹⁶ In the governorship race, there was only one woman across the 36 states; the APC's Aisha Binani in Adamawa state.¹⁷

Half of Nigeria's estimated 210 million population are women, however, only one woman has ever occupied any of the top four positions in Nigerian governance since the country's independence from Britain in 1960; a five-month stint as speaker in 2007. Only five percent of Nigeria's federal lawmakers are women, one of the lowest representation rates globally. And no woman has ever been elected governor.¹⁸

Nigeria has had a female governor once, but she was not elected. In November 2006, Virginia Etiaba became governor of Anambra when the incumbent Mr. Peter Obi was impeached. She relinquished the seat in February 2007 when a court order nullified his removal.¹⁹

15 Ibid.

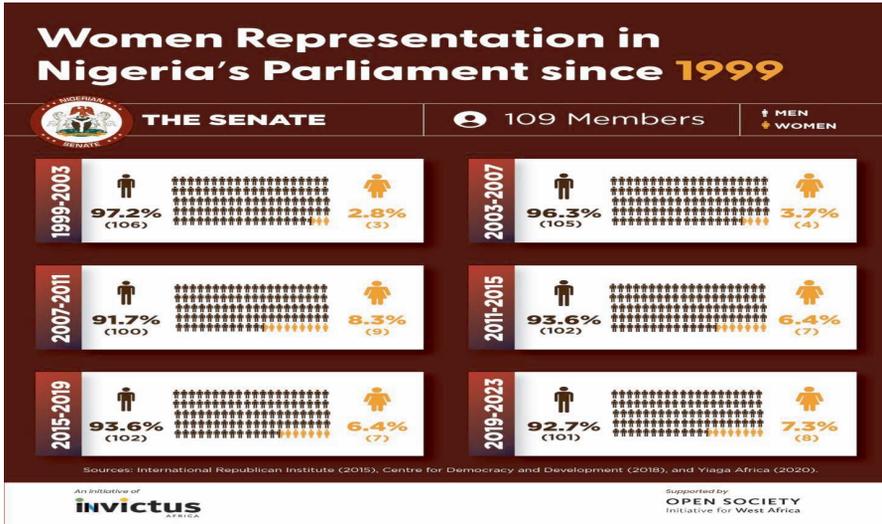
16 *Business Day*, An amazon in the midst of 17 men: The story of APM's presidential candidate, Chichi Ojei, available at <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/an-amazon-in-the-midst-of-17-men-the-story-of-apms-presidential-candidate-chichi-ojei/>, Last accessed on 6/22/2023.

17 *Aljazeera*, Nigeria election: Women denounce poor political representation, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/2/16/nigerian-women-decry-poor-representation-in-nigerian-politics>, Last accessed on 6/29/2023.

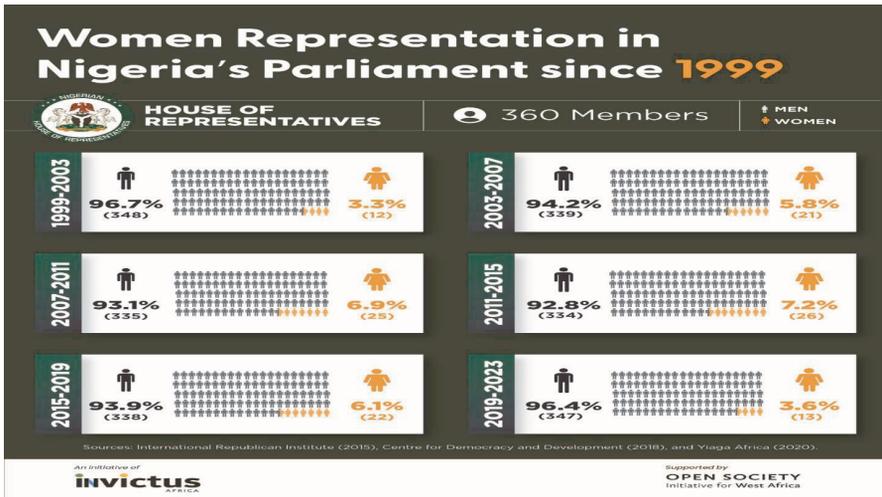
18 Ibid.

19 *Aljazeera*, The woman who could be Nigeria's first elected female governor, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/3/18/the-woman-who-could-be-nigerias-first-elected-female-governor>, Last accessed on 21/6/2023.

The senate (premiumtimes.ng)



House of representatives (premiumtimesng.com)



D. LEGISLATIVE ENDEAVORS

In recent times, various bills have been sponsored by legislators in the Nigerian National Assembly to facilitate women's political participation, as tracked by Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), some of the bills include the following:

1. Gender Equal Opportunities, Abuse and Administration Bill 2010
2. Gender Equal Opportunities Abuse and Administration Bill 2012 (SB. 150)
3. Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Bill, 2012 (HB 350)
4. Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Bill, 2012 (HB 350)
5. Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Act, 2015 (SB 37)
6. Electoral Act (Amendment) Bill, 2015 to Ensure that all Political Parties are Gender Sensitive and to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination in all Political Parties (HB 174)
7. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Alteration) Bill, 2016 (HB 538).
8. Women Participation in Election Support Bill, 2018 (HB 1594)²⁰

In 2022, Nigeria's national assembly rejected five gender bills seeking equality for women, including affirmative action quotas for women in legislature, with members of the male-dominated parliament citing religious and cultural reasons.²¹

E. EFFORT MADE TOWARDS FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Not much can be said to have been done in terms of tangible efforts to increase women participation in the Nigerian political scene, but one crucial step towards achieving gender equality in Nigerian politics was the adoption of the National Gender Policy in 2006. The policy aimed to promote women's empowerment, eliminate gender-based discrimination, and increase women's participation in decision-making processes, including politics. This policy has set the stage for subsequent advancements. However, it stands the risk of being a mere policy if legislation sought to be enacted repeatedly fail at the legislative houses.

Other efforts are the establishment of Women Political empowerment office and Nigeria Women Trust Funds, Women Lobby Group. Other efforts include the institution of an INEC gender policy, the national multi stakeholder dialogue; the initiation of several interventions to actualize affirmative action and the convening of the Nigeria Women Strategy Conference.²² These have led to increased advocacy for the increased representation of women of women in the political sphere. This has led to some increased awareness.

20 *Nwachukwu Orji*, Improving Women's Political Representation in Nigeria, PLAC, Policy Brief, 2019, available at <https://placng.org/i/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Policy-Brief-on-Women-Representation-in-Elections.pdf>, page 4, Last accessed on 21/6/2023.

21 *Aljazeera*, The woman who could be Nigeria's first elected female governor, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/3/18/the-woman-who-could-be-nigerias-first-elected-female-governor>, Last accessed on 21/6/2023.

22 *Oloyede Oluymi*, *ibid* p.10.

F. CHALLENGES OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

There are many reasons why there are so few women in politics in Nigeria. The degree to which women can participate in politics is significantly constrained by cultural norms and entrenched patriarchal systems. Traditional gender roles, social norms, and stereotypes sometimes limit women to domestic work rather than promoting their full participation in public life.

The advancement of women in politics has also been hampered by institutional obstacles such as restricted access to education, financial resources, and party nomination procedures. In Nigeria, many political parties have been hesitant to adopt gender equality and frequently fall short in offering sufficient backing and funding for female candidates. Furthermore, for real advancement to take place, problems like violence and intimidation against women in politics, which can discourage prospective female candidates, must be addressed. Some of the key challenges Nigerian women face in politics are:

- I. Political Violence: Nigerian elections for a very long time have always been characterized by one form of violence or another since the return of democracy. It is without peradventure that female aspirants of various political parties are less likely to withstand political violence; therefore, women participation in politics is drastically reduced.²³
- II. Non implementation of the National Gender Policy 2006 document: The policy implementation plan had aimed to achieve increased representation of women in governance at the national and state levels. However, this has not been the case; the executive arm of government has not complied with the policy. In the Federal Executive Council (FEC), only 7 out of 44 ministers in the past government were women (16.3 %).²⁴ No elected state governor has ever been a woman.
- III. Patriarchy and Gender Roles: Nigeria, like many other countries, has a deeply ingrained patriarchal system that assigns different roles and responsibilities to men and women. Traditional gender roles frequently place men's participation in public life, decision-making, and leadership positions above women's household responsibilities and caregiving responsibilities. This patriarchal structure encourages people to believe that politics is exclusive for men, deterring women from entering the field. It is often reported that women constitute almost 50 % of the Nigerian population and are active participants on all stages of political processes. However, when it comes to core political participation especially with regards to the rights to be recognized as aspirants and candidates for political positions, the question of gender is often thrown up above ca-

23 *Oloyede Oluymi*, *ibid* p.12.

24 *Malcolm Durosaye*, Policy Vault, Deconstructing Nigeria's Gender Policy (2006), available at <https://www.policyvault.africa/national-gender-policy/>, Last accessed on 21/6/2023.

capacity and qualifications.²⁵ There are no doubts about the constitutional provisions of equal rights between men and women at various national levels but the fact remains that most contemporary societies including Nigeria do not reflect such provisions in their civic lives.²⁶

- IV. Norms of Modesty and Respectability: The cultural expectations of modesty and respectability may impose further barriers to women's political participation. Women who actively engage in politics may experience stigma or censure in some areas for defying gender expectations. Women may be deterred from pursuing political aspirations by feelings of rejection, social exclusion, or reputational harm.
- V. Male Domination in Decision-Making Spaces: Political decision-making spaces in Nigeria are often male dominated as obvious from statistics, with men occupying most key leadership positions. This imbalance perpetuates a system of exclusion and reinforces the perception that politics is not a suitable arena for women. The lack of diverse perspectives and voices in these spaces hinders the development of policies and legislation that adequately address the needs and concerns of all citizens, including women.
- VI. Family and Marital Obligations: Women's engagement in politics can face considerable obstacles due to societal expectations that they will serve as the primary caregivers and housewives. Women may struggle to strike a balance between their obligations to their families and the demands of a political career. Women may be discouraged from actively pursuing political ambitions or find it more difficult to fully participate in political activities due to cultural norms that place a higher priority on family than on job progress.
- VII. Gender Bias in Candidate Selection: The process of choosing candidates inside political parties may be rife with gender bias. Party members' judgments of women's eligibility for political roles may be influenced by traditional conventions and biases, resulting in unfair treatment and discrimination. The underrepresentation of women in Nigerian politics is frequently maintained by favouring male candidates over female candidates with same qualifications.
- VIII. Lack of Gender-Sensitive Policies and Mechanisms: Many political parties in Nigeria lack gender-sensitive policies and mechanisms to promote women's participation. Without specific measures to encourage and support women candidates, the party nomination process tends to perpetuate the status quo of male dominance in politics.
- IX. Limited Access to Party Structures: Accessing party structures and decision-making procedures is frequently difficult for women. Male party leaders who frequently control political parties in Nigeria may be reluctant to endorse or support female

25 *Azizatu Sani, Daniel Adejo*, Radio Nigeria: Challenges of women in politics, available at <https://radionigeria.gov.ng/2022/10/15/challenges-of-women-effective-political-participation/>, Last accessed on 7/4/2023.

26 *Nkem Fab-Ukozor*, Challenges Facing Nigerian Women In Politics, available at <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356645623> p.10, Last accessed on 21/6/2023.

candidates. Women may face obstacles when trying to join political parties, get access to party resources, and get equal treatment when choosing candidates.

G. WOMEN REPRESENTATION TREND IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS OVER THE YEARS

Business Insider Africa's 2021 assessment reported that Nigerian companies scored better than the global average in the participation of women in the workforce.²⁷ The average percentage of women at the executive level in Nigeria is 20 per cent which is higher than the global average of 17 per cent.²⁸ Furthermore, the average percentage of women at the board level is 23 per cent, which is close to the average of 25 per cent globally.²⁹ According to the report, Nigerian companies scored an average of 32 per cent across 19 gender equality metrics on the Equileap Scorecard, two percentage points behind the global average in Equileap's dataset reported in 2020.³⁰

Data from the report showed that 30 per cent of companies in Nigeria achieved gender balance in the workforce. These companies included Access Bank, Ecobank Transnational Incorporated, FCMB Group, Fidelity Bank, Guaranty Trust Bank, Stanbic IBTC Holdings, Sterling Bank, United Bank for Africa, and Zenith Bank.³¹ Over five years, from 2017 to 2022, women-led companies in Nigeria raised \$221m.³²

In the business scene, from the above statistics, women have fared way better and have even shown to be on par with their global counterparts. However, as the Business Insider Africa report concluded, improving gender equality in formal employment, capital for women and access to markets through supply chains and procurement opportunities remains necessary to promote gender balance.

H. MAKING PROGRESS: THE WAY FORWARD

In Nigeria, women have had better representations in leadership positions especially in the business sector and appear to be on par with global indices and trends. When it pertains women's representation, the political sphere is the most challenged as the statistics showing women participation is appalling and needs massive improvement.

27 *Victor Oluwole*, <https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/careers/women-hold-20-of-executive-positions-in-corporate-nigeria-but-only-33-are-in-the/5qmd261#:~:text=The%20average%20percentage%20of%20women%20at%20the%20executive,to%20the%20average%20of%2025%20per%20cent%20globally>, Last accessed 6/20/2023.

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Aljazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/7/21/photosgaps-in-financing-women-led-businesses-in-northern-nigeria>, Last accessed on 6/21/2023.

According to a renowned gender activist and women rights advocate, Ene Ede the greatest challenge to women's political participation, is what she calls the "Boys club" in Nigeria.³³ She further echoed as follows:

"There is a hatch that is not very easy for women to break through, but with the movement that we have stated, with the court case that we won against Nigeria. Let us make sure that we don't normalise the abnormalities we are seeing in governance. Women must be there not for their sake but for the survival of Nigeria"³⁴.

It could be aptly argued that the passage of a bill creating equality for women's participation in politics will be a great step forward, however its impact may be limited for elected roles. It will be beyond democratic to mandate that the positions of a governor or elected legislative member be reserved exclusively for women. However, continuous advocacy for women representation will create better awareness to the capacity and competence of women to participate and be elected to political positions in Nigeria.

Finally, increased awareness and sensitization led by civil society groups, men and women will go a long way to break gender-based stereotypes common in the minds of the typical Nigerian political participants and electorates.

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33 *Azizatu Sani, Daniel Adejo*, *ibid*.

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