

Nigeria: Election Proved Us Wrong, Says Akinyemi

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Former Minister of External Affairs and member of the Justice Muhammadu Uwais-led Electoral Reform Committee, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, has said events during the rerun governorship election in Ekiti State have shown the need for armed security operatives at polling centres in the country. He blamed the country's leaders for negative manipulation of the ignorant and malleable sections of society, saying, "No Nigerian leader can stand justified before God."

Akinyemi said, in an interview with THISDAY, that the orderliness that pervaded the latter part of the Ekiti election in areas where voting had been postponed was due to the stricter policing of the process by armed police personnel and soldiers.

The Ekiti rerun poll that held on April 25 in 63 wards spread across 10 local government areas in the 16-council state was marred by violence, tension, and allegations of ballot stuffing. The election, which followed a February 17 ruling of the Court of Appeal in Ilorin, was put off for about 10 days at two wards in Oye Local Government Area because of violence.

Describing the Ekiti experience as the first major test of the recommendations of the Uwais panel, the former minister said there are critical lessons in that experience for the country.

"First, I just hope our criminalisation of electoral offences would be upheld. Second, I also hope the banning for 10 years of people found guilty of electoral offences would be upheld. "One of the recommendations of the Uwais committee was that there should be no armed police or armed soldiers at the polling booths. I hope that recommendation would be rejected because, as you can see from the Ekiti State example, if those soldiers had not been in Oye, that town would have been burnt down. And if those armed soldiers had been there in the first place, they wouldn't have needed to postpone the election there because the violence was so much that elections could not be held. Once they put the soldiers there, people behaved themselves," Akinyemi said.

He maintained that rather than scare away voters, evidence gathered during the sittings of the Uwais committee proved that the presence of armed security personnel actually boosts voter confidence. According to him, "It has always been my point of view that it is not the presence of armed soldiers or armed police that frightens voters away, it is the fear of violence.

"During our public hearings, three groups of people - this is very critical - all told us that it is because of the fear of violence that they don't turn out to vote. Who are these three groups? Women, professional and middle class people, and the physically disadvantaged. These three people are your thinking classes in society. They told us that it is the fear of violence that drives them away. In other words, fear of violence has led to your electoral process being surrendered to I don't know what language to use.

"We should put those armed soldiers and armed police there, whose job is to protect the voter, the ballot box, journalists, and electoral monitors. Those are the four operational directives. It is not the job of the armed operatives to ask people how they are going to vote or how to vote."

Akinyemi placed the rampant incidence of electoral violence and vote rigging in the country at the doorstep of elite, saying none of the leaders can be justified before God on account of their uncharitable ways at the wheel of power.

He said, "Our leaders - whether military or civilian - have not been fair to us. They have not been men of impeccable integrity.

"No single Nigerian that you could call a leader within the country can face his Maker and say that in every critical decision that he took, where he knew what was right and what was wrong, that he opted for what was right. No single leader can do that. And, we say, fish rots from the head.

"It is not the Area Boys who organise rigging of elections, that's done by the leadership of the party. It is not the ordinary voter who organises violence in an electoral setting, it is done by the leadership. The ordinary voter is just a foot soldier used and dumped at the end of the day.

"How are we going to get the kind of leadership that would embrace the ethos of free, fair, and transparent election? I don't know. But, believe me, no Nigerian leader can stand justified before God. None. If he didn't plan it directly himself, it was done with his connivance."