



Dr. Sam Amadi on Nigeria's Electoral Challenges and Mandatory Voting



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Well, let me start with the foundation of our democracy. The constitution guarantees Nigerian citizens, and people in Nigeria, basic political freedoms and rights—freedom of expression, freedom to hold opinions, freedom to express themselves, and freedom of political participation. Voting, you see, is a key part of this. It's a facilitation of the right to self-determination, the right citizens have to elect their leaders. So, voting is a political right, plain and simple.

But here's the thing—mandatory voting? That's not usually part of the deal. Voting implies autonomy, the ability to make a moral choice voluntarily. That's the norm. People 18 years and above have the right to register and vote, but they also have the choice to use it or not. They decide whether to show up at the polls. Now, globally, there's this issue of voter apathy. Look at the data—take the U.S., for example. Even with Trump's so-called massive win, a significant number of citizens didn't vote at all. Some never bothered to register.

Now, compare that to places like Belgium or Australia, where voting is mandatory. They've got a history behind it, tied to how citizens and the state interact—a sense of duty to vote, matched by the state's responsibility to deliver. But in Nigeria? The idea of mandatory voting feels far-fetched, contrived even. Why? Because we're not treating citizens like they matter. Forcing people to vote as an obligation doesn't sit well when the state hasn't shown it's serious about its own duties in a real democracy. Citizens need to feel the state is holding up its end, and they need to see protecting democracy as their civic responsibility.

The Real Threat to Voting in Nigeria

Let's talk about the nature of elections here. The biggest threat to voter turnout isn't laziness—it's the militarized, violent nature of our elections. Imagine you're a southerner, Igbo, Yoruba, or anyone in a place like Lagos. Last election, you came out to vote, but you were scared off with guns. And what did the state do? Nothing. No one was held accountable for stopping you from voting because of your ethnic background or presumed political preference. Now, if you're that person and the state says, "You must vote," it sounds hollow. It doesn't ring true. The same state that allowed thugs—state-backed or not—to block you from voting is now demanding you show up? That's contradictory.

The violence, the exclusionary nature of our voting system, the fact that the state itself creates threats and hazards to civic participation—that's the bigger crisis. The National Assembly should be tackling that, not pushing mandatory voting.

Why Citizens Feel Disconnected

Then there's the question of the dividends of democracy. Citizens in Nigeria grow into adulthood and don't see the state contributing to their well-being. They don't see the National Assembly responding to their needs. Look at the END SARS protests—clear cases of victimization, persecution, oppression, even killing of young people by state actors. And what happened? Nothing. No accountability. Then you tell these demoralized, disillusioned Nigerians they have a civic duty to vote? It doesn't add up.

Even with all the excitement around the Obidient movement in the last election, we got less than 30% voter turnout. That's very problematic. But the solution isn't mandating voting or criminalizing not voting. That's tackling the wrong problem.

The Problem with Mandatory Voting

Let's get practical. How do you even enforce mandatory voting? We don't have a good database. You'd need voter data tied to national IDs to track who didn't vote. And then what? Are you going to throw people in prison? Deprive them of basic services? A state that doesn't provide social welfare benefits, like broad scholarships for students, can't exactly punish people by taking away what it doesn't offer. Implementation would be a mess. The crisis isn't people not voting—it's that elections are violent, militarized, and exclusionary.

That's what the National Assembly should focus on. And then there's the bigger issue: do votes even matter? People see INEC rigging elections wantonly, and the courts just endorse it. That creates a second level of exclusion. Why bother voting if INEC will declare what it wants, and the courts will approve it? People are asking, "Why should I risk my life to vote when my vote doesn't count?"



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Learning from Others, But Not Copying Blindly

Sure, places like Belgium and Australia have mandatory voting, but we can't just transplant their systems here. It's what I call institutional fetishism—borrowing ideas without understanding the context. In those countries, voting is simple. You don't need a public holiday. Some mail their votes, others use electronic voting, or they walk to a nearby polling station, vote in seconds, and go home. The cost of voting is minimal. But in Nigeria? The logistics are onerous, burdensome. You wait hours for accreditation, then line up to vote, then wait for counting. Yiaga Africa did an analysis showing it could take until midnight for a polling unit of 500 people to finish voting. That's discouraging.

There's also a cultural angle. In places with high turnout, campaigns are vibrant—music, dance, star power to pull in young people. It's engaging, entertaining. Here? Not so much. Young people are tuning out because they don't see the political system responding to what they care about. There's no compact between citizens and the government. The process itself—violent, slow, risky—makes people ask, “Why bother leaving my business, risking being brutalized, just to vote?”

The National Assembly's Misstep

If you look at some of the bills in the National Assembly, you're left with three emotions. First, you wonder, “Are these guys dumb?” Some are well-educated, so that's not it. Second, you ask, “Are they part of this community? Are they in tune with people's priorities?” Third, you realize the system itself is the problem. I've been a special advisor to the Senate President, and I know the National Assembly lacks the infrastructure to craft good bills. There's no serious capacity for research or analysis. In the U.S., they have congressional centers that enrich bills with data and justification. Here? A legislator might just say, “Oh, Belgium has mandatory voting, let's do it,” and some third-grade legal drafter whips up a bill. It's not thought through.

Nigerian politics doesn't reward good legislation. Legislators are judged by how much rice they share, how many JAMB forms they buy, not by the quality of their bills. The system is trapped in bad politics—unresponsive, captive to special interests. Some legislators might mean well but lack the competence to frame bills strategically. If I were in the National Assembly, I'd start with a diagnosis: why is turnout low? In some countries, politics is demonized, and people opt out. In Nigeria, it's the violence, the exclusion, the sense that votes don't matter. That's what needs fixing.

A Better Way Forward

If I were advising someone who could make change happen, I'd say forget mandatory voting. Focus on INEC and the courts. The courts are tricky—they're independent, and decisions can be individualistic. But INEC? That's where we can act. First, reform the appointment process. No president wants to lose that power, but we can put criteria in the law to ensure only qualified people become INEC chairman. Spell it out clearly, like aviation laws that detail every step—who can sit at the exit, how they're trained, how they can object. That way, even if the president picks, it's through an objective process. Second, make INEC's decision-making transparent. Right now, it's a black box. They just say, “We've decided.” How? Was there public input? Party interventions? A record of reasoning? In the U.S., county boards hold public hearings, publish vote counts, and explain their decisions so courts can see they applied their minds to evidence. INEC needs that kind of administrative reform.

Third, shift the burden in court. If someone challenges an election with credible evidence, INEC should have to justify its results. It shouldn't be on candidates to prove rigging across the country—that's impossible. INEC must show it followed the law. That's how you protect public interest and rebuild trust in elections.

