I feel that I should weigh in on the Nigerian electoral crisis early so as to hope that my own thoughts on the issue may have at least some slight influence on the unfolding events.

I was disappointed though intellectually intrigued to wake up this morning to a Reuter’s analysis of two internationally important elections- one successful and analyzed with intellectual vigor (France) and the other analyzed as plagued with violence and misbehavior (Africa)! Yes, Africa- not Nigeria. I would have left Africa out of it myself, after all this year alone countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, Ghana have successfully held successful democratic elections with little of the fanfare that Nigeria’s is undergoing.

Of course, each country regardless of region offers distinctive historical-cultural contexts that influence democratic politics. After all, in Europe “broadly defined”, the Ukrainies once again undergoing an electoral crisis- something that is almost chronic these days. In Asia, the Philippines and Bangladesh are also currently rocked by electoral crises and violence over democracy. Finally, let’s not forget the fact that Thailand addressed its impending electoral/democratic crisis with a military coup.

But let’s deal with the Nigerian case. Where did we go wrong? In my mind, the fault lies at the helm of the Obasanjo Presidency for fostering a hostile electoral environment in dealing with his VP Atiku. By doing so, Obasanjo set up an extremely divisive electoral campaign period that nurtured an “all-stakes” aggressive party competition which had reverberations at all levels of the country’s multi-layered (federal, national, gubernatorial, local) political process. As well, as I have written in a chapter contribution of a new book by Santosh Saha (Saha eds., 2007), the PDP’s desire to consolidate and dominate national and regional democratic power is not a sustainable strategy in a global age of aggressive pluralist democracy.

Notwithstanding, the so-called “opposition” are also part of the problem. Back two years ago, I am reminded of an oppositional coalition promise by an organization called the CNPP. The goal was to forge a counter-nationalist opposition to oust a dominant PDP incumbency in the then forthcoming 2007 elections! What happened to them? Instead, as late as last Thursday, neither Buhari’s nor Atiku’s parties could agree to stand down their presidential candidates to make way for a compromise coalition candidate to achieve what is clearly every Nigerian’s objective- to oust the PDP democratically at the polls. Unfortunately, like democratic politics everywhere, for them, it’s about personal power too!
So now what? Cancel/annul the elections? Regardless of the EU monitoring groups and the Nigerian monitoring groups’ assertions that these elections will be representative of an “illegitimate” democratic government, I exercise caution and ask Nigerians to move forward using their longstanding culture of “pragmatism” and “balance-of-power”. I agree with the outgoing government that in order to move Nigeria’s “tenuous” democratic experiment along, we should accept the results as they stand, bring accusations of electoral fraud to the judicial process (this has worked pretty well thus far-see Atiku), but especially the incoming government’s first strategy should be to foster a consensus with all aggrieved electoral parties and attempt a coalition government in ways that the country has always done- this is indeed the Nigerian way!