

**Electoral Process and Gender Discrimination in Nigeria:
A Case Study of 2003 And 2007 General Elections**

By

Iloh Emeka Charles and Mike Alumona Ikenna

ABSTRACT

The marginalization of women in the political equation of the country remains the central challenge of democracy in Nigeria. The problem has become a recurring decimal in the political landscape of the country. Efforts have been made, both at the local and international levels, to redress this problem and achieve parity between the two sexes. Yet, not much seems to have been achieved. This paper examines the different forms of discrimination against women in the traditional society. It interrogates the prevailing conviction that former President Obasanjo's administration was gender sensitive. Emphasis shall be on women in politics in Nigeria within the period 2003 to 2007. The paper also considers the factors militating against active women participation in politics. It looks at the efforts made so far to redress the imbalance from a global perspective, and finally takes a position that, despite the fact that the number of women in electoral politics seemed to be on the increase within the study period, they are still grossly underrepresented. Though the concept of politics is broadly used here, the work is, however, limited to electoral politics only. The paper finally made suggestions on the way forward.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation, according to Igwe (2002:335), is the degree and forms of involvement of the people in governance and related institutions of society, such as the economy and culture. In its active sense, it involves participation in political campaigns and debates, attending caucus or strategy meetings of political parties, voting during elections, standing as candidates for elections, and holding of government and party posts. Okolie's (2004:53) definition goes beyond this to include freedom of expression, association, right to free flow of communication, influence decision process, and right to social justice. According to him, it also expresses such rights to demand for better social and health services, better working conditions, and increase in wages, amongst others. However, we shall use it here in a very restricted sense to mean involvement in electoral politics only, that is, standing as candidates for elections.

From antiquity, the history of man has been characterized by discrimination: racial, class, and of course, gender or sex discrimination. When it is racial, the discrimination is against someone or a group of people who is/are of a different race or colour. The race being discriminated against is normally regarded as an inferior one. When it has to do with class, the social status the person or group is occupying in the society comes into play. It is between the haves and the have-nots. Finally, if it is gender or sex discrimination, it has to do with the two sexes, that is, male or female discrimination. However, whenever there is the mention of gender discrimination, what is normally meant is discrimination against women.

Throughout the ages, there has always been bias and prejudice against women in all societies and in all epochs. Discrimination against women is manifested in all spheres of human relations. It has always come in different forms: socio-cultural, economic, religious, and most importantly, political. Socio-culturally, there have always been several norms and traditions in different societies which prevent women from realizing their full potentials. These are cultures that make them second class citizens and inferior to men. In the traditional society, it was the belief that women's original position was in the kitchen. Education was not considered important for them. Their training was directed towards their natural destiny in marriage, housekeeping, and motherhood. There was practically little opportunity for freedom of expression and choice. The husband's or father's opinion was supreme on every issue, including when it was time for the girl-child to get married.

In the economic realm, the same applies. Women in the traditional society were also marginalized. They were supposed to stay back at home to take care of the house while men went out to work in order to provide for the family. When women contributed, it was in minor areas. This exists to an extent today. According to Adeyemi and Adeyemi (2003:367), from statistics released few years ago by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Youth Development, Abuja, out of every 100 Nigerian men in paid labour, there are 25 women. This means that the ratio of women to men in paid labour is one to four. Meanwhile, by the census of 2006, women are almost of equal number with men.

In religious matters, where we are meant to believe that God created everybody (man and woman) in His own image and likeness, women are also discriminated against. In fact, gender discrimination in the house of God was institutionalized right from the early days of Christianity. In St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1Corinthians 14:34-35), it is stated in the Bible (version is necessary) that:

As in all the churches of God's people, the women should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak...they must not be in charge. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is a disgraceful thing for a woman to speak in church.

In other words, a particular sex is created more in the image and likeness of God than the other sex. If not for the religious revolution that occurred in the 20th century, which led to the springing up of the new generation Pentecostal churches, women would still have continued to occupy the back seat in all churches. Even though the orthodox churches have refused to give women prominence in their affairs, so many women today hold sway in some Pentecostal churches as Pastors and Evangelists.

Perhaps, the greatest manifestation of women marginalization is in politics. Despite constitutional declaration of the equal status of both sexes in most countries of the world, gender discrimination remains fully entrenched in the power configuration of the society, with consequences of limiting women's participation in the political process. In Section 42 of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria, for instance, it is expressly stated that Nigerian citizens have the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of, among other things, sex. In as much as there is no legal document or government policy that runs contrary to this constitutional provision or puts official stamp on the marginalization of women in politics in the present-day Nigeria, the fact remains that it is fully entrenched in the system, even if unofficially. Otherwise, there would not have been talks on the part of government to redress the imbalance. The point being made here is that it is in recognition of this imbalance that all

countries were mandated to allot at least 30% of their elective and appointive positions to women. It is in recognition of this marginalization that Nigeria formulated the National Policy on Women and other such polices. It is also in recognition of this fact that almost all the political parties in Nigeria, during the election into the fourth republic, gave women aspirants nomination forms free of charge.

Despite the constitutional provisions, local and international declarations of gender equality, and the attempts by government and the political structures to solve the problem of gender imbalance in politics, series of injustices are still always meted out to the womenfolk (sadly by the people, agencies, and structures that claim to have interest in redressing it). These injustices are perfected by the government and the political structures mostly occupied by men. It is all these issues that we intend to examine in the subsequent sections of this paper.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study is based on the liberal feminist framework. The framework itself advocates that the female gender, like their male counterparts, should be entitled to full human rights, and therefore, should be free to choose their role in life and explore their full potential in equal competition with men. In other words, there should not be any man-made obstacle or barrier preventing women from engaging in any legitimate enterprise they deem necessary. The theory goes further to postulate that there should not be any undue favouritism for any sex on the basis of gender: men and women should enjoy the same rights and have equal opportunities.

According to Ako-Nai (2005:489), Feminism is characterized with looking at the man-woman relationship, in which women are usually at a disadvantage in relation to societal cultural norms, religion, and political beliefs. The inequality created is the bedrock of the feminist ideology which attempts to liberate women from the institutions that have kept them down.

In line with this theory, and in consonance with the ideals of the feminist movement which has been thrown up to champion the cause of the female gender, this study advocates active women participation in electoral politics at the gladiatorial level, and the removal of all obstacles that stand on the way of women towards achieving parity with men in politics.

WOMEN AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Since the introduction of electoral politics in Nigeria by the Hugh Clifford's constitution of 1922, women have not made much impact on the Nigerian political scene. According to Nda (2003:33), women's participation in decision making at all levels has been very low, warranting the conclusion that women are at the periphery of Nigerian politics, despite that they have been constituting a larger proportion of active voters. For instance, out of the 47 million Nigerians registered as eligible voters in the 1999 elections, 27 million were women, representing 57.4% of registered voters. Even the population of Nigerian women has always almost been at par with that of the men in the entire census so far conducted in the country; yet, the percentage of women in elective positions, when compared with men, is very abysmal.

Since independence in 1960, the presence of women in electoral politics started showing in the second Republic. In the Republic before it, no woman was able to win election into the federal legislature, though three women were elected into the Eastern House of Assembly in the 1961 regional elections. In the second Republic, the high point of female achievement was the election of the only female senator, Franca Afegbua, into the Senate in 1983 (Oleru, 1999:47). Unfortunately, she served for only three months before that Republic collapsed.

In 1992, during the transition programme of Ibrahim Babangida, out of the 300 gubernatorial aspirants, only 8 were women, representing a paltry 2.6%. Even then, none of them was able to make it to any of the government houses. Also, of the party executive positions of the parties that operated in that era, women held only 4%. In fact, in studies conducted by Ako-Nai (2005:491); Mohammed (2006:51); and Okoosi-Simbine (2006:153), the inability of women to occupy party executive positions has been seen as a major cause of women marginalization in politics, especially during party nominations. Bruce (2005:506) noted that even during the 2003 elections, the experiences of women at party primaries were not by any standard better than what it had been in previous elections, that evidence abounds as to deliberate maneuvering and proclivity for preferences for male aspirants over their female counterparts by party loyalists and stalwarts.

By 1999, at the dawn of the fourth Republic, the story was still the same. Out of a total of 11, 117 electable positions available during the 1999 elections, only 631 women contested, which is a mere 5.6%, not of the total number of contestants, but of the number of positions available for contest. Of

the 631 female contestants, only 180 (143 of whom were elected as ward councilors) managed to win, representing 1.6% of the electable positions. In other words, of all electable positions available during the 1999 elections, only 1.6% was occupied by women.

Our focus of study in this paper, however, is on the 2003 and 2007 general elections. The choice of these two periods has a reason. Apart from the fact that those two general elections are the most recent, both years are also significant in Nigeria's political history. 2003 was the year a civilian administration was to conduct elections without the outcome leading to a military take-over. Those of 1964 and 1983 were trailed by crises that eventually led to the collapse of those two Republics in January 1966 and December 1983 respectively. 2007 also was/is the first and only period there would be a transition from one civilian administration to the other in Nigeria's political history. In other words, since Nigeria's independence, it was only in 2007 that there was a handover from one civilian administration to another. The implication of these is that Nigeria's democracy seems to have come to stay, given the outcome of the 2003 and 2007 general elections.

The point being made here is that if the low participation of women in the electoral process in Nigeria could be excused during the military era because of the undemocratic nature of military regimes, and during the previous civilian administrations when the assumption was that Nigeria's democracy was still in the embryo, such excuses cannot be made now that Nigeria's democracy seems to have taken root. This is in the light of Adereti's (2005:512) assertion that political participation is the sine qua non of democracy, and democracy itself involves a commitment to give both men and women equal opportunity to develop their individual capacities.

Given the fact that Nigeria was in a more relaxed atmosphere during these two periods to accommodate women in electoral politics (following this interconnectedness between political participation and democracy), and also given the fact that during these two general elections, there was no remarkable commitment on the part of the government to relax some of the obstacles that impede women participation in politics, the general notion that former President Obasanjo was gender sensitive becomes questionable. During the 2003 general elections, the percentage of women who got involved in the contest was far below that of men, also still a far cry from the 30% international benchmark. The tables below indicate this.

Table 1: 2003 Governorship Election: Distribution of Contestants on Gender Basis

No of seats available	Total no of contestants	Total no of male contestants	Total no of female contestants	% of female contestants	No of women elected	% of women elected
36	320	313	7	2.19	Nil	-

Source: INEC (2003, Vol. II: 2)

Table 2: List of Female Contestants in the 2003 Governorship Election.

S/N	State	Name	Party
1	Akwa-Ibom	Maria Nyong Ikpe	AD
2	Delta	Agbajo, O.T.	NNPP
3	Ekiti	Remi Okebunmi	APGA
4	Enugu	Lorreta Aniagolu	NCP
5	Kogi	Love L. Emma	AD
6	Lagos	Kofoworola Bucknor-Akerele	UNPP
7	Osun	Aluko Folashade	NNPP

Source: INEC (2003, Vol. II: 16)

From table 2, one could easily deduce the fact that none of the women contested under the platform of a major party. The few that contested under major parties did so where those parties were not strong enough to see them through. For instance, the AD was active in 2003 only in the south-western part of the country and not in Akwa-Ibom and Kogi States. The APGA too was only active in the south-eastern part and not in Ekiti. The UNPP, NNPP and NCP did not command any strong followership in any part of the country in 2003. However, Ogun, Osun, Ekiti, and later Anambra States, produced female Deputy-Governors.

Table 3: 2003 State Assembly Elections: Distribution of Contestants on Gender Basis

No of seats available	No of All contestants	No of male contestants	No of female contestants	% of female contestants	No of women elected	% of Women elected
990	4,591	4,438	153	3.33	35	3.54

Source: Adapted from INEC (2003, Vol. II: 22 & 205)

Table 4: 2003 National Assembly Election: Distribution of Contestants on Gender Basis

	No of seats available	No of all contestants	No of male contestants	No of female contestants	% of female contestants	No of women elected	% of women elected
Senate	109	624	589	35	5.61	4	3.67
House of Reps	360	1,736	1,647	89	5.13	22	6.11

Source: Adapted from INEC (2003, Vol. I: 7,32,36,43,109, and 115)

As has been stated earlier, the international benchmark for women participation in politics is 30% in the minimum. In Nigeria in 2003, however, no woman occupied the Government House of any of the 36 states as the Chief Executive. For the State Houses of Assembly, only 3.54% of the seats were occupied by women. For the House of Representatives, only 6.11% of the seats were occupied by women and in the Senate, they had only 3.67% of the seats. These facts are not in consonance with a government that claims to be gender sensitive.

Aiyede (2006:172) had noted that the number of women in political offices has improved over the years, and is still likely to increase in future, but that the fact remains that the degree of improvement remains marginal. This is exactly what happened in the 2007 elections. Though, there was a little improvement, not much was achieved in redressing the imbalance. The tables below depict this.

Table 5: 2007 State Assembly Elections: Distribution of Winners on Gender Basis

No of Seats available	No of men elected	No of women elected	% of women elected
990	937	53	5.4%

Source: Adapted from INEC (2007)

Table 6: 2007 National Assembly Elections: Distribution of Winners on Gender Basis

	No of Seats available	No of men elected	No of women elected	% of women elected
Senate	109	100	9	8.3%
House of Reps	360	334	26	7.2%

Source: Adapted from INEC (2007)

Table 7: 2007 Governorship Election: Distribution of Winners on Gender Basis

	No of Seats available	No of men elected	No of women elected	% of women elected
Governor	36	36	Nil	-
Dep. Governor	36	30	6	16.7

Source: Adapted from INEC (2007)

Table 8: List of Female Deputy Governors Elected after the 2007 Elections

S/N	State	Name	Party
1	Anambra	Mrs. Stella Odife *	PDP
2	Imo	Lady Dr. Ada Okwuonu	PPA
3	Lagos	Mrs. Sarah Bisi Sosan	AC
4	Ogun	Alhaja Salmot M. Badru	PDP
5	Plateau	Mrs. Pauline K. Tallen	PDP
6	Osun	Erelu Olushola Obada	PDP

Source: Adapted from INEC (2007)

***NB:** Following the Supreme Court judgement on 14th June, 2007 that Peter Obi (elected on the platform of APGA) has not finished serving his tenure, Andy Uba (whose deputy was Stella Odife) left office as Governor of Anambra State. However, the equation did not change as Peter Obi's deputy, Virgie Etiaba, is female.

Though the percentage of women elected into the State House of Assembly rose from 3.54% in 2003 to 5.4% in 2007; 6.11% to 7.2% (for House of Representatives); and 3.67% to 8.3% (for senate), it is still far behind that of men as well as the 30% international benchmark. Moreover, the increase was as a result of the growing political consciousness of women and the activities of women organizations and civil society organizations. It was not in any way due to any deliberate government policy geared towards enhancing women participation in electoral politics, under former President Obasanjo.

In January 2003, women groups under the auspices of Women Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative, (WRAPA), went to Aso Rock Villa to protest the elimination of women in the primaries of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) through undemocratic means. Former President Obasanjo, in his response to them, expressed his knowledge of the predicament of the women but however emphasized that the socio-cultural context of Nigeria was not supportive of women's participation in governance. He advised that women should work towards a constitutional amendment to facilitate 15% representation for women as, according to him, the 30% international benchmark is too ambitious for the moment. (WRAPA Newsletter, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003:9). The statement is not in tandem with one who is gender sensitive. This probably explains why there was little or no effort on the part of that government to implement the international agreements and instruments, concerning women empowerment Nigeria signed and ratified in the past (Ako-Nai, 2003:493).

The response the former president gave the women in Abuja would have shocked them because it was a total contradiction to an earlier statement he made to a group of women in an address. He told them that in the pursuance of gender mainstreaming and affirmative action from the Beijing Declaration, 30% of the offices would be reserved for women, a position that was upheld in the National Policy on Women (Best, 2006:137). Subsequent results, however, did not support this.

OBSTACLES TO ACTIVE WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

A number of obstacles are on the path of women who intend to play active party politics in Nigeria. Some of these obstacles are simply as a result of their natural status as women – the belief that nature has consigned them to a specific role in the society. The other obstacles are man-made – a strategic ploy by their male counterparts to ease them out of the way. Some of these obstacles are:

The Zoning Formula: The zoning formula was introduced into Nigerian politics to allay the fears of minorities. It is believed that if politics should be the 'survival of the fittest' or based on the injunction, 'might is right', the minorities who are not only disadvantaged in numerical strength but may also be educationally backward may never occupy certain elective positions. Therefore, in order to ensure that the advantaged groups do not always use their might to dominate the political scene at all times, zoning is being used at all levels to make elective positions 'go round'. Even though it has no legal or constitutional backing, it has almost become a norm since after the 1994/95 Constitutional Conference where it generated a heated debate.

While zoning is being used to ensure that no area is continuously being excluded or marginalized from a particular political office, it has equally been argued that it is undemocratic as all qualified persons are not allowed to contest. It also encourages mediocrity as the best might have been zoned out. But this is not our concern here. The issue is that it is equally being used to scheme out unwanted aspirants. How this affects women particularly is that at the lower levels (especially state and local government levels), where women's impact is much felt than at the national level, strong women aspirants are normally 'zoned out' by the political parties. When it is obvious that the woman contender will sweep the polls if the primary election is conducted, it becomes easier to ease her out of the way by simply claiming that it is not yet the time of her area to produce the holder of such positions. This, therefore, clears the way for the favoured aspirant who is normally a pliable man.

The Indigeneity Ploy: This is another hurdle women who are interested in elective positions have to cross, especially those of them that are married outside the constituency they would have contested if they were men or if they did not marry at all. In this case, women who intend to contest election in the constituencies they are married to (rather than the constituency of their birth) are normally regarded by the people of such constituencies as non-indigenes (at least by birth). They are normally seen not to be qualified to contest because they are married from another land other than where they intend to contest. The situation is even worse when the woman is married from an entirely different ethnic group. Such a woman is regarded as being too ambitious and everything is done to stop her. "How can she come here and hijack our area" is normally the sentiments aroused in people to run such candidates down.

On the other hand, it is equally extremely difficult to go back to her constituency of birth to contest because it is assumed that she has 'lost' her indigeneship by marrying outside such constituency. However, such women politicians as Daisy Danjuma, who were able to cross this hurdle, did so not because of their capabilities but because some unseen hands were involved. Others like Mrs. Mariam Ali and Josephine Aneni were not that lucky.

Nevertheless, this indigeneity problem does not affect women whose constituencies where they intend to contest cover both where they are married to as well as their birth places.

Violence, Thuggery and Intimidation: Though these are equally used against male aspirants by their fellow men, they have greater effects on women aspirants. Naturally and in most cases, women are more soft-minded than men and may not introduce violence and thuggery in their politicking.

Conversely, men deploy all arsenals within their reach to ensure success at the polls. Women who are not strong enough to absorb the devastating effects of thuggery and political violence against them have no other alternative than to withdraw from the contest; hence, the relatively general apathy of the womenfolk.

Related to the above, it is generally difficult for women to swim in the murky waters of Nigerian politics. They (especially those of them that are married) cannot attend midnight caucus meetings of the political parties where most often, major decisions are taken and offices that are supposed to be thrown open for contest are shared. The matter is made worse if the husband is apolitical or the immediate family is not supportive.

Culture: The obstacle of culture is complicated by the fact that it is men who have the exclusive right of interpreting culture – what it means, on what conditions and to whom it applies – and they will always do this to their own advantage. Some cultures still do not believe that women can be leaders while men are followers. Because of this, women who venture into politics are seen as cultural deviants. In other words, patriarchy is entrenched in the society and women are expected to subordinate themselves to men. In some societies, this problem also has religious connotation. For instance, in the predominantly Muslim North, where the Purdah system was in vogue, women were expected to stay at home and cover their faces so that they could not be seen by other men. Until 1976, these women were not even allowed to vote for candidates of their choice, let alone standing for elections themselves.

STRUGGLES FOR EMANCIPATION: AN INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

Over the ages and in different societies the world over, women have taken stands contrary to the thinking of their male oppressors. Apart from involving themselves in the roles assigned to them by nature, they have ventured into areas previously dominated by men. They are no longer standing by, watching, while the ‘commonwealth’ is appropriated by a particular sex. In fact, they are encroaching upon what used to be solely a ‘man’s world’.

The struggle to achieve equal rights for women, especially in politics, is not a recent phenomenon. The strategy started in the English-speaking world as far back as 1792, with the publication in that year of a book titled *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft (Academic American Encyclopedia, Vol. 18:326). According to the Encyclopedia, as male suffrage was

gradually extended in many countries, women became increasingly active in the quest for their own suffrage. In the United States for instance, the women suffragists, under the aegis of different women suffrage associations, struggled to overcome traditional values and prejudices against them. It was not until August 1920 that the 19th Amendments granted the ballot to American women. In Great Britain too, the same approach was adopted by the women to achieve equal rights with men. Suffrage rights for men and women were equalized there in 1928.

In African countries, men and women have generally received the vote at the same time. Nigeria, for instance achieved this in 1960 after independence with the exception of the special case of Northern Nigeria where, as previously stated, women under Purdah were denied franchise/suffrage until 1976. As equally stated in the introduction, the problem is not that there is a legal or constitutional denial of this right but that other hurdles are placed on the path of women. It is these hurdles that they are struggling to overcome.

A number of conferences, local and international, have been convened to this effect. There are equally resolutions by national parliaments and international organizations all directed towards eradicating the discrimination of women in all spheres of life, but especially in politics. In 1975, the First World Conference on Women was held in Mexico. Other series of conferences followed, but the most notable seems to be the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in 1995. The Conference, popularly known as the Beijing Conference, had about 40,000 women from 189 countries in attendance (Adeyemi and Adeyemi, 2003:363). Nigeria participated actively in this Conference. The Conference gave birth to the Beijing Platform for Action comprising twelve critical issues, which among other things, included gender inequality and the need to empower women economically and increase their level of political participation.

Boutros Boutros – Ghali, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, was quoted as saying during the Conference that:

Without progress in the situation of women there can be no true social development. Human rights are not worthy of the name if they exclude the female half of humanity. The struggle for women equality is part of the struggle for a better life for all human beings and for all societies (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2003:364-365).

With this scenario, it seems the world is disposed to ensuring that women achieve reasonable parity with men. A benchmark has been given to all governments to ensure that at least 30% of their political offices are given to women. In countries like Sweden, women have attained 50% participation in decision making in the public sector.

There are other attempts by international bodies to redress the issue of gender discrimination. The United Nations General Assembly, in 1979, adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW). It came into force as an International Treaty in 1981 and Nigeria ratified it in 1985. In the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December, 1948), Article 21, among other things, stated that “everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country”. Back home in Africa, international concern for gender inequality manifested in such agreements and charters such as the African Platform for Action, taken in Dakar, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted in Maputo, Mozambique in July 2003, by the African Union. Nigeria actively participated in all these.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we have been able to highlight and discuss the different forms of discrimination against women, especially in the traditional society. We found out that the greatest marginalization of women is manifested in politics where several strategies are used by men to alienate them. Most importantly, the paper argued that the general notion that former President Obasanjo’s administration was gender sensitive is misguided. This we used empirical evidence to substantiate, using the 2003 and 2007 general elections as case studies. The paper also enumerated some of the hurdles which undermine effective women participation in the political process. Finally, we traced the origin of women struggle to achieve parity with men in the realm of politics as well as several efforts made to achieve this, especially at the international level.

In conclusion therefore, we have to reiterate that although the number of women in electoral politics seemed to have increased within the period covered by the study, it was not however, due to the ‘gender-sensitive’ nature of former President Obasanjo’s administration. Moreover, women are still grossly underrepresented. We, therefore, state that gender should not be a factor in Nigerian politics. It has to be based on one’s abilities towards contributing to national development. Equal opportunities should be seen as a matter of right and not privilege. Women equally have a stake in

the polity and it is as high as that of the male folk. Therefore, they should not be treated as second class citizens. Until gender discrimination is redressed in Nigerian politics, our democracy is still faced with a very serious challenge.

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