Sen. Buhari: Why I’m advocating compulsory debate for presidential, governorship candidates

[March 22, 2020](https://www.newtelegraphng.com/sen-buhari-why-im-advocating-compulsory-debate-for-presidential-governorship-candidates/) [with CHUKWU DAVID,](https://www.newtelegraphng.com/author/newtelegraphonlinegmail-com/)



Senator Abdulfatai Buhari represents Oyo North on the platform of the All Progressives Congress (APC). In this interview with CHUKWU DAVID, he explains why he proposes a bill to amend the Electoral Act to empower the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to conduct public debates for candidates of political parties gunning for the offices of president, vice president, governors and the deputy governors.

**Your bill, proposing mandatory public debates for presidential, vice presidential, governorship and deputy governorship candidates in elections in Nigeria scaled second reading on Thursday. Would you throw more light on the bill?**

The bill is a bill for an Act to amend the Electoral Act to empower the Independent Electoral Commission to conduct and organise public debates for candidates of political parties gunning for the offices of President, Vice President, Governors and the Deputy Governors.  The Bill was read the first time in the Senate on Tuesday, November 19, 2019. This Bill, if considered and passed by the Senate will strengthen our democracy and bring it in conformity with the practice of other renowned democracies of the world.

The Bill was just a bill I sponsored in the Eight Assembly. During that time, there was something attached to the bill, and that was that a commission should be set up. It passed through the stages including the concurrence but unfortunately, it was not signed into law. During the public hearing, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) raised objection. They said that they have a department that can handle it, and they believe that they can handle it since we can’t have Public/Private/Partnership for the commission.

My argument then was that it would have been better done the way it is done in the United States, where there is an independent commission; unfortunately, we have not reached that stage. But let’s kick-start it first. When we kick-start it, along the line, if it is built up, other organisations, civil rights societies, labour and others will join it, and at that time they might have had a very solid foundation. Unfortunately for us, it was not signed into law. So, I now decided to make an amendment to the Electoral Act, and let me do it very early because we still have at least three years to go before the next general elections in 2023. If by the time we are doing the public hearing and INEC still believes that there is a room, and they are not going to complain about the burden of job like some of my colleagues said that there is too much for them, it can create a department to handle it.

Somebody raised a fundamental issue on INEC, I think, that was Senator Goje that the moment INEC says this is the person that wins the debate, there are already biased. And that was a very fundamental point. I however, disagree because in Ghana, it is their electoral commission that is doing it. They don’t assign it to another independent body. It’s just a department and the people they will call are from outside: known journalists, editors, civil rights society. In fact, they even invite some of these international journalists to come.

Even in political debates in America, if you follow American policies very well, they don’t assign marks. When they organise debate, they only ask you questions to test your knowledge on the spot to know if you are versatile. They are some candidates you will see and people will say, ‘this one is good only for immigration; this one is good in economy; this one is good with security.’ The answer you give will see how you will sell yourself. Then the electorate will be able to access you to know whether you are really worth it for them to vote for you.

**Would you trace the origin of this proposed debate in countries that practice it, and how far it has gone in shaping their governance?**

Yes, in the United States for example, it has become customary for the main candidates of the two largest political parties; the Republican and Democrat to engage in debates. The first United States Presidential debate was held as far back as September 26, 1960. It was broadcast live on televisions and radio stations with 66 million viewers out of the population of 179 million. It was between Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic nominee and Richard Nixon, the Republican nominee.

An analogous experience of this crucial indispensability of electoral debate is the last presidential debate between Hillary Clinton of the Democratic Party and Donald Trump of Republican Party. The regular debate has enabled the electorate not only to know about the personality of the candidates but also about their lifestyle, belief, reaction to national issues and foreign policy. All this information will inform the electorate on the position to take during election. In fact, the exposure made possible by mandatory political debate will definitely save the country from electing a tyrant.

This Election Debates Bill, if passed into law shall be used to sample the candidates’ knowledge on a wide range of issues, like a detailed analysis of how they intend to drive the economy, foreign, health and education policies among others. One noteworthy area of potential impact of the debate is their capacity for what political scientist call agenda setting. Research has shown that voters learn from debates, they are more accurately able to describe the platforms of the candidates and this will prompt them to seek out additional information about the candidates. It provides one of the indicators as to how the candidate might respond under pressure as it requires them to be able to think on their feet and be able to respond to unanticipated events.

It also serves as national job interview for the office as it gives them opportunity to speak on a wide range of issues. This might be likened to the power conferred on the Senate of the National Assembly under Section 147(1) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) to confirm the appointment of ministers after being nominated by the President.

This gives the people an opportunity, through their representatives in the National Assembly especially the Senate, to ask the ministerial nominees varieties of questions in order to test their knowledge on a wide range of issues and for Nigerians have opportunity to assess their to-be Ministers at their Screening in the Senate. Their responses, some of the times, inform the president on their appropriate designation after confirmation. If the Ministers that will work under the President C-in-C, as well as the State Commissioners, can be adequately assessed by their respective Legislative Assembly before appointment, it is logically imperative for the President and Governors who shoulder more responsibilities to be adequately assessed through a formal National Debate.

Somebody raised one fundamental argument again when we were doing the debate. He said that in Nigeria it can’t work. I asked why, and he said that most people don’t go for debate, and that if you go for debate, you will not win. I then told him that I disagreed with him because it’s not mandatory, and that is people don’t go. But the moment it’s made mandatory and you know that it’s going to affect you, if you decide not to go, there is no any punishment but as time goes on, there will be a day, if you don’t go, it will count against you. If you don’t have anything to hide, you will be eager to go and sell your stuff; go and sell your brain. In fact, it can even serve as a screening exercise where during the pre-election debate somebody can say, look, this candidate or that candidate does not have a degree. Somebody can ask you a question that, “we were told that your certificate was forged. During the debate, it will come out, so that your party will know what is ahead instead of the Supreme Court deciding after election. That is the essence of the bill, to give the country who are competent; people who can do the job as leaders, so that we will be able to strengthen our democracy.

**Is there any punishment for those who will refuse to participate as you say that it is mandatory?**

No, we say mandatory, and I don’t want to attach any punitive measure to it because the moment you attach any punitive measure to it, you will be trampling on their fundamental human rights because the debate is not the election. The debate gives opportunity to candidates to come and sell themselves; tell the electorate what you have as your agenda for governance. If you don’t come, the punishment that is there is that, particularly with the current social media that we have, the type of the elite, the type of exposure and the vibrant press that we have, they will hammer you that you did not appear for debate. In a developed world, that is an enough punishment. It will be able to swing even some of your lovers away from you. They will say, see the person we are following; he ran away, why is he running away? The only excuse is if you are sick but deliberate dodging will be counterproductive to you. Any policy is always like this, by the time it stabilizes like an aircraft, it will go smoothly.

**Once this bill is passed, it becomes a law. Can someone deliberately violate a law without knowing that there is punishment attached?**

Let me give you an example with the last incident that happened in Bayelsa. It’s against our law. In fact, it’s against the constitutional provision of our country, that you must not present a forged certificate. If the Supreme Court is giving a judgement that somebody has presented a forged certificate, there is no any punitive measure to the person. The only time they punished them was asking for a review, that was the only time the Court said that “you guys should go for being stupid. Assuming that they did not go for any review, they didn’t punish them. So, let’s not be carried away with the intension of the bill. The intension of the bill is the electorate and the candidate. It’s called a two-way sword. Go and showcase yourself. If you want to be a president, Vice President, governor or deputy governor of the country, it will help.

Anyone who desires to be Governor or President should be confident enough to lay a detailed analysis of his or her plan before the electorates. This will offer the electorate the avenue to evaluate candidates and they will vote along ideological lines rather than on ethnic or religious allegiance as it is prevailing in our country today.

**You know that Nigeria is a growing democracy; do you think that the peculiarities of the third world countries will not militate against the success of the intendment of the bill?**

The idea of public debates had transcended the developed countries of the world; it is now a common practice here in Africa. Kenya’s political debate, for instance, is mandatory for all the presidential hopeful unlike the US Presidential debates that is restricted to the two political parties.

Other African countries that have imbibed the culture of elections debates include Ghana and Sierra-Leone. If these African countries can successfully organise election debates for political nominees thereby strengthening their democracy, it can only be an oversight on the part of Nigeria who prides itself as the giant of Africa not to provide an all-inclusive avenue for her electorate to assess their would-be representatives through informed process.

Unlike in the USA where their Election Debates Commission was set up by convention, it is generally agreed that Nigeria democracy is still at its infancy that needs popular support to survive and there is no amount of money spent to strengthen it that can be regarded as a waste. What we have presently as Nigeria Election Debate is an effort in futility as participants find pleasure in boycotting it at will. Nigeria’s nascent democracy cannot develop by this attitude.

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