



IT IS NOT OK TO RIG LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

[Protocol]

Nelson Mandela once said, “Young people are capable, when aroused, of bringing down the towers of oppression and raising the banners of freedom.”

Today’s gathering is a testament to the capability of young people, particularly Nigerian youth, to critically engage institutions of government, speak truth to power, oppose oppression, promote democracy, and uphold virtues that align with political freedom.

- 1) Following our Democracy Day briefing on June 12, 2024, where we demanded total administrative and financial autonomy for the 774 local governments as a crucial step to deepen democracy in Nigeria, we wish to appreciate everyone who played a role in ensuring that local government autonomy is now a reality—particularly the members of the legislative arm of government and the judiciary.
- 2) To harmonize recent developments and maximize the gains from this event, we call on the Federal House of Representatives Committee on Constitution Amendment, led by Rt. Hon. Benjamin Kalu, to amend Section 162 of the 1999 Constitution. We propose quashing the concept of the "State Joint Local Government Account" established in Section 162 (6-7) and providing for independent accounts for the states and local governments. We also advocate for the House Committee on Constitution Amendment to delegate more powers to the local government legislative councils (made up of ward councilors) to carry out oversight functions for effective grassroots representation.

3) Despite the recent success of local government autonomy, state governors have devised strategies to control local government funds and administration entirely. The notion that state governors can influence the leadership of the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) and determine the electoral procedures for LGA elections has made it difficult for the SIECs to function as they should and conduct elections in the interest of the people.

4) The activities of local governments, supposedly the third tier of government, have been stifled by state governors who appoint their cronies as chairmen of the SIECs, with a mandate to ensure that only their political affiliates are selected and pronounced as LGA chairmen and councilors. Local government elections have been reduced to a local dancing ceremony, where state governors actively manifest as chief celebrants, deciding who dances with them and who doesn't.

We have reached a retrogressive point where Nigerian citizens have come to believe, accept, and normalize an unfortunate reality: that it is okay to rig local government elections; that state governors can influence local government results to favor their political parties and loyalists; that a state governor can choose a weak political party—one without the capacity to win even a student union government election—and use it as a special-purpose vehicle to keep the local governments in their pocket; that local government elections present an avenue to settle the state governor's kinsmen, praise singers, and chief propagandists.

We are here to make an emphatic statement: It is not okay to rig local government area elections!

It is not okay to have a one-party system in our states, where state governors rule like lords and emperors. The true essence and potential gains of the local government autonomy celebrated by millions of Nigerians will be lost if the state governors continue to dictate the pace and direction of local government elections.

It is against our democratic interests as a nation for local government elections to be limited to state governors' selections.

The Way Forward

5) Having witnessed the nature and outcomes of local government elections conducted in this dispensation, we see an urgent need to amend the system of local government administration and elections in Nigeria.

With the current structure, the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) depend on INEC for almost everything, including voter registers and electoral guidelines. They do not have the requisite technological expertise and equipment available to INEC, and they have not conducted better elections.

In the first half of 2024, a total of **₦135,776,130.05** was spent on the administration of the Abia State Independent Electoral Commission (ABSIEC), despite the fact that the institution has not carried out any tangible public functions in recent times.

In light of the foregoing, we call on the National Assembly to amend the 1999 Constitution to abolish Part 2B of the Third Schedule and transfer all responsibilities of the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Furthermore, we recommend amending Section 6 (2-4) of the Electoral Act and any relevant provisions to recognize the head of the Independent National Electoral Commission in a state as the State Electoral Commissioner (SEC) rather than the Resident Electoral Commissioner (REC).

6) We strongly condemn the move by certain state governors to use local legislation as a means to indirectly control local government allocations. We call upon the National Assembly to reject this move and work with stakeholders to enact relevant laws that will enable our local governments to manage their resources efficiently and without any interference.

7) The Abia State Independent Electoral Commission (ABSIEC) has not performed its duties creditably. The system of information dissemination and publicity from the agency is poor and reflects great incompetence. Two days ago, they conducted a one-day training exercise for the ad-hoc staff that will organize ward and LGA elections, but this is barely sufficient.

They do not seem to understand the significance of their role and have not approached their duties with the highest level of diligence and commitment. As we speak, most Abians do not know what model will be adopted in the election. Those at the grassroots are left in the dark regarding the electoral procedure, unaware of the methods the state electoral commission will adopt in discharging its public duties. This situation accounts for a high level of unpreparedness.

We, therefore, call on the leadership of the Abia State Independent Electoral Commission (especially the chairman, Professor George Chima) to take responsibility and use the few days left to engage grassroots voters through available media and provide a rundown of how the local government elections will be conducted.

Though many Abians seem disinterested in the exercise, feeling that the results have already been determined and that Saturday's process is merely a formality, PAY, as a body, is giving ABSIEC the benefit of the doubt to allow others to enjoy the democratic principles from which our governor and other elected public servants in Abia have benefited.

8) Through our advocacy for free, fair, inclusive, violence-free, and credible elections in 2023, Abians voted Gov. Alex Chioma Otti as the governor of Abia State through a free, fair, and credible electoral process—one of the best in the 2023 election cycle.

As the biggest beneficiary of free and fair elections in this dispensation, it behooves Governor Alex Otti to be on the right side of history by overseeing a free, fair, and credible local government election on November 2, 2024. Governor Otti must understand that whatever happens on Saturday will be to his credit or discredit. The upcoming local government election in Abia State will be a test of the democratic credentials of Governor Alex Otti. It will be an opportunity for the governor to demonstrate his commitment to electoral democracy, having emerged from a free, fair, and credible electoral process.

9) The Nigerian youth are desirous of an egalitarian society where meritocracy reigns supreme and opportunities are created for citizens to determine their political destiny. We believe that for our democracy to flourish, our local councils must not be an appendage of the state executive; they must be a tier of government closest to the people.

It is more important than ever that local government elections truly reflect the yearnings of the people at the grassroots.

Whatever the outcome, we make it emphatically clear that Abia youth will only accept a local government election that is free, fair, inclusive, violence-free, and credible—a local government election that will deepen our commitment to electoral democracy.

AGAIN, WE SAY THAT IT IS NOT OK TO RIG LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

This is our resolve, our great commitment to a democratic nation where citizens vote and their votes count.

May God bless the Progressive Abia Youths,

May God bless Abia State,

May God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Ekejiuba', with a large, stylized initial 'D' and 'E'.

Daberechi Kingsley Ekejiuba

President, Progressive Abia Youths