

African lesson in democracy

Tuesday, 10 May 2011

Last Updated Tuesday, 10 May 2011

Sometimes, an electoral observer can observe more than he bargained for. Such was my recent experience in Nigeria. Its April presidential election made the news and so has its aftermath. The election had a huge participation rate and was widely considered to be the fairest Nigerian election of recent years. Yet in the wake of the result, violence has threatened to pit the Muslims against the Christians in Africa's most populous nation. That brief, dry report is factual but is nonetheless misleading. It does not convey the experience of that election, of ordinary people's sense of the opportunity offered by that election. I was there as a member of the European Parliament's observation team. I could see the difference that being there, soaking up the atmosphere, makes. I am naturally aware that my experience of the ambience is not to be confused with a Nigerian's. It is not simply that the dinner offered on my first night, a typical dish (I was told) of rice with coconut sauce, struck me more as being coconut with rice, and for which I blame my sleepless night. From the very first drive, from the airport to the capital, Abuja, I could sense that I was not evaluating things in the same way. The road was just one big construction site with a special emphasis on roads. I was surprised since when I was chief observer there, in 2007, I was impressed by the good roads. Yet, here they were again being widened, straightened and embellished. The construction works impressed me yet again when I was being transferred to Minna, in Niger state, where I was to be deployed. The drive through Abuja proved to be a site-seeing trip past new constructions, a number of Chinese projects, I gathered, including a "Congress Palace". A European's perception of Chinese activity in Africa is bound to be different from a Nigerian's. The one asks why Europe is not as present; the other sees construction as a kind of electoral promise, perhaps. As we progressed, we began to penetrate traditional Nigeria. The shanty dwellings turned to huts, cattle roamed the countryside. This is a savannah-type of landscape, intermittent with trees. At the sides of the road the fields were planted with vegetables. We had driven for about one hour when we passed large rock mounts: more a small mountain surrounded by smaller ones. It was fascinating because it just sprouted out of flat land and much like an enormous camel hump. This built-up and natural environment proved to be a good introduction to the political one. Nigeria is a huge country with a population whose number revolves round 180 million (though the precise number is unknown). Basically, the country is divided into two. The Muslim north and the Christian south. The incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan, is a man from the south. He is a non-military man in a country where military rule came to an end in 1999. He had ascended to the presidency only eight months before, following the death of the incumbent. However, his tenure had already left a remarkable change, of which perhaps the construction works were one of the vital signs. Of course, there was a destabilising current but he was expected to win handsomely. Niger state had been selected by the observation mission because, just a week before, the office in charge of the elections, INEC, had been targeted and a bomb left nearly a dozen dead. It was hoped that our presence would defer further violent action or that, at least, we could by our presence show empathy with the electorate. (We did meet the head of INEC in charge of Niger state and he was quite a personality. Maybe one needs to be, in such circumstances.) The following day, during observation of the polling station, I had one of those strange experiences where the tedium that people are prepared to undergo to make use of a precious vote becomes a moving experience for the observer. The election commission had embarked on a time-consuming method. All voters had to go to the polling station by midday, to be "accredited". After being found on the list, they were marked. Then they had to return once again after 1 p.m. to vote. It was a needless delay since voting could have taken place immediately after accreditation. Yet, on the whole, this cumbersome method did not deter the electorate. Indeed, the voting was generally calm, even though a bomb went off in one of the northern states. Later we met observers from other missions; the importance given to the election by the African Union was evident from the fact that the mission was led by three former Presidents or Prime Ministers. On the whole, we agreed that the process was fair and free, even though news of the turmoil in the north was already coming in. The international media focused on the comfortable victory of Mr Jonathan, who won twice as many votes, nationwide, than his nearest rival. This focus was understandable. However, for me, the enduring image of this election is one that only being there can convey. It is the image of three women who had walked 25 kilometres to get accredited. Although they were in the polling area at noon, they were still prevented from voting immediately. They waited till after 1 p.m. Sometimes, an electoral observer can be given a lesson in democracy by the very people he has been sent to observe.