

SPEECH BY CHIDO ONUMAH AT THE LAUNCH OF MAKEYOURVOTESCOUNT.ORG ON THURSDAY, MAY 28, 2009

Ladies and gentlemen of the press, it is with the greatest sense of responsibility that we have gathered here today. Next year, our dear nation will be half a century old and would have witnessed over a decade of democracy.

This is not the time and place to catalogue our many woes and failings as a nation. But you will agree with me that things haven't gone well in Nigeria, politically, economically, socially, and morally. Some people have argued that corruption is the bane of the Nigerian nation; the root of our myriad of problems. Others have placed the blame on lack of a democratic culture. They argue that even though we have had a decade of democracy, the country has managed to undermine the basic tenet of democracy which is the right to vote and be voted for.

We believe that if we get our politics right, we will to a great extent succeed in taming corruption. But how do we get our politics right with the overbearing influence of corrupt practices before and during elections? That is the essence of this project. **MakeYourVotesCount.org** is a non-partisan grassroots-based project of the Youth Media & Communication Initiative (YMCI), Transparency & Anti-corruption Campaign in Africa (TRACA) and the African Centre for Media Literacy (ACML). The project aims to put the issue of free, fair and transparent elections on the front burner of the national political agenda.

The non-commitment of various stakeholders to making votes count during elections remains the greatest challenge of the Nigerian nation. It is responsible for the malfeasance in government, corruption, lack of accountability, etc. Once politicians know that the votes of citizens count, they will be wary of their actions. It means that corrupt and non-performing office holders will be voted out at the next election.

The essence of democracy is to ensure that votes should decide the outcomes of elections, and by extension the kinds of leaders that will come to power. Our electoral system must ensure that parties compete for votes based on laid down rules. It must give voters a stronger stake in the choice of leaders by allowing them to freely exercise their voting rights. People need to feel that their votes count and that they are being listened to.

MakeYourVotesCount.org will do the following and more:

- Campaign for the rights of voters
- Educate voters on their choices during elections
- Make politicians more accountable
- Make political parties take the electorate more seriously and compete to get their votes
- Make votes really count at elections
- Guard against electoral fraud
- Secure and strengthen our democracy.

The project will focus on the following areas:

- **Voter education and 'get-out-the-vote' campaign**

This campaign will ensure that adults and youth, particularly first-time voters are encouraged to register and vote.

- **Make Your Vote Count campaign**

This campaign will be a platform and opportunity for local community groups, faith groups, NGOs and the public to discuss how they can make their votes count both at party primaries and national elections.

- **Meet the candidates campaign**

Through town hall meetings, workshops, public presentations, the special “Democracy question time” platform, etc, voters get up close and personal with candidates to discuss how to secure votes during elections.

MakeYourVotesCount.org will partner with civil society and a variety of campaign groups and community organisations, including labour unions like the National Union of Road Transport Workers, Nigeria Union of Teachers, Nigeria Labour Congress, PENGASAN, NUPENG, TUC, ASUU, NASU, Market Women Associations, Okada riders, Nollywood, journalists, students' unions, who are interested in free and fair elections and protecting the votes of citizens during elections.

It is our belief that once people know that their votes will count during elections, credible candidates will present themselves for elective positions. And once elected officials are conscious of the fact that they could be voted out in the next election cycle, they are more likely to be accountable to the people. Even though **makeyourvotescount.org** sounds like an Internet-based project, much of the work will be done on the ground: at the grassroots, in town halls, schools, community centres, markets, and village squares.

In this pursuit, we will rely on the strength of our youth. We are counting on them to push this project through. We saw the power of youth and community mobilization in display last year during the US presidential election. We believe we can do same here. Indeed, it was done a little over a decade and half ago when Nigerians filed out in an orderly and peaceful manner to cast their votes during the June 12, 1993, election. Unfortunately, General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the results, making mincemeat of the fundamental right of Nigerians to vote.

We must not and should not allow history to repeat itself. We were lucky in 1993 to survive the aftermath of that brazen disregard of our collective will; as a nation we may not be twice lucky. There are two lessons we can learn from this historical example above. First, we have to realize that the destiny of Nigeria lies, literally, in our hands. Nigerians can and must conduct themselves in the most orderly manner during elections and ensure they do not only register, but come out to vote during elections. Second, we must not allow ourselves to be used or swayed by crooked politicians. That is the only way we can protect our votes and ensure we secure and strengthen our democracy.

Our democratic experience may not be perfect; our electoral laws certainly need refining, but it is important that stakeholders play by and adhere to the existing rules and laws governing elections. Nations that have been able to move ahead are those that have instituted a mechanism that ensures that at every election the electorate through the ballot can change leadership. Any leadership that emerges through such a credible electoral process will most likely be accountable.

Finally, we want to use this opportunity to commiserate with the families and employers of two illustrious sons of Africa, Mr. Ladi Lawal, Group Managing Director of DAAR Communications Group and Dr. Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem, Deputy Director, UN Millennium Development Goals Campaign who passed away recently. As activists, both men contributed to the development of democracy in Nigeria.

We thank you for your presence.

Onumah is project coordinator, MakeYourVotesCount.org.