

LEAD DEBATE ON ELECTORAL ACT AMENDMENT BILL, 2020 (SB. 176).

Sponsor: Sen. Buhari, Abdulfatai (*Oyo North*)

Mr. President, Distinguished Colleagues, I feel honoured and privileged to lead the debate on the general principles of the Bill for an Act to amend the Electoral Act to empower the Independent Electoral Commission to conduct and organize public debates for candidates of political parties gunning for the offices of President, Vice President, Governors and the Deputy Governors.

This Bill was read the First Time in this Chamber on Tuesday, 19th November, 2019.

Mr. President, Distinguished Colleagues, the Bill is a proposal to give legislative backing for Independent National Electoral Commission to organize and conduct debates for all candidates into the offices of the President and Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and of Governor and Deputy Governor of a state.

This Bill, if considered and passed by this Hallowed Chamber, will strengthen our democracy and bring it in conformity with the practice of other renowned democracies of the world.

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 debates held as far back as 1960 (September 26). 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 electorates 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 electorates 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, Commander-in-Chief. 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.

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 electorates 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.

Mr. President, Distinguished Colleagues, the idea of public debates has 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 (Democratic Parties and the Republican Party).

Other African countries that have imbibed the culture of elections debates include Ghana, Sierra-Leone among others. If these African countries can successfully organize 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 electorates to assess their to-be Representatives through informed process.

Unlike in the USA where their Election Debates Commission is set up by Convention, it is generally agreed that Nigeria Democracy is still in 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 nascent democracy cannot develop by this attitude.

Although, it will require more than on-air spurring to help the country bridge the divide, it will create a sea change in the way Nigeria view power. It will offer Nigerians a chance to evaluate candidates so they can vote along policy or ideological lines instead of ethnic allegiance and this will equally lead to the development of strong democratic institutions that would neutralize the patronage system that makes ascending to power so turbulent.

Thank you all.