

ABSTRACT

JUDICIAL REFORMS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA: 1999-2009

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For many scholars and observers of Nigerian politics, the return to democratic rule in 1999 has brought little or no real political change. Ethno-religious violence, political corruption and endemic poverty have continued to define political life despite transition to civil rule and massive inflow of oil revenues. Yet, as this paper will argue, there is compelling evidence to argue that a few important developments have occurred since Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999 that is changing the character of democratic politics in the country. One of these developments is the gradual emergence of the judiciary as a courageous and impartial arbiter in political and intra-elite disputes in this chronically unstable federation. The increasing number of judicial pronouncements that have upturned the results of several disputed elections, attracting wide applause from a cross section of the elite and population alike, demonstrates the transformation of the judiciary. While these decisions, and the activist role of the Nigeria judiciary which produced them, have so far failed to translate into a more transparent and credible electoral process, they have helped to reinforce the sanctity of judiciary not only as vital instrument of political control, but also as a tool for democratic consolidation. This has in turn helped to dampen the national inclination to resort to violence and other extra-constitutional acts as a means of resolving political disputes or punishing irresponsible governments, resulting in the gradual construction of what is now Nigeria's longest period of uninterrupted democratic rule.