



## **A Call for Reflection and Commitment to Strengthening Democracy**

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“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

**Barack Obama**

June 12th is now **Democracy Day** in Nigeria. On June 6, 2018, the Federal Government of Nigeria under former President Muhammadu Buhari officially recognized June 12th as democracy day, to commemorate the democratic election of MKO Abiola and the fight for democracy in the country. Previously, Democracy Day was celebrated on May 29, the return of Nigeria from Military rule to Democracy in 1999.

June 12th holds a much greater significance in Nigeria. It commemorates the June 12 1993 election which was widely adjudged to be extensively free and fair. MKO Abiola, a businessman, was believed to be the winner of the election. However, the military government led by General Ibrahim Babangida annulled the election. A year after, Abiola declared himself President, which led to his arrest and detention on the basis of treason.

President Buhari awarded posthumously the highest honour of the land, the Grand Commander of the Federal Republic (GCFR) to the late MKO Abiola, the presumed winner of the June 12th, 1993 elections. He also awarded a human rights and democracy activist, and a tireless fighter for the actualization of the June 12th elections, the late Chief Gani Fawehinmi SAN, a Grand Commander of the Order of the Niger (GCON) award, and declared June 12th as Democracy Day, signifying the symbolism of June 12th to our democracy.

### **Here are some important lessons for Nigerians to reflect on today:**

- **Importance of Free, Fair, and Credible Elections:** The 1993 election, widely considered free and fair, was annulled. The June 12 Democracy Day commemoration highlights the need for transparent and credible electoral processes representing the people's will and choice. After 7 elections and 25 years post-civilian rule, we are still struggling with setting up the right framework and infrastructure to deliver credible elections. When the people do not trust the process by which their leaders emerge, building consensus to drive the nation forward becomes herculean. Nigeria must

prioritize credible elections, as this is the start to building a formidable democracy for the advancement of the nation.

- **Accountability and Transparency in Governance:** The lack of transparency surrounding the annulment of the June 12th elections eroded public trust. Even though that can be attributed to Military rule, Nigerians even in this democratic dispensation do not trust the integrity of the electoral process. Leaders must be accountable to the populace, and decision-making processes should be open for scrutiny. Promoting ethical leadership and integrity in public office is crucial for building trust in democratic governance. Leaders should view their roles as public servants, prioritizing the welfare and interests of the people over personal gain, and allowing press freedom and media integrity.
- **National Unity:** The June 12 1993 elections transcended ethnic and religious divides, and was a collective pursuit of a better nation. It serves as a reminder that Nigerians must keep working together to build a desirable nation, putting aside differences and affiliations for the common good.
- **Citizenship and Participation:** The struggle for democracy after the annulment involved many Nigerians. Active citizenship and participation in democratic processes are crucial for a functioning democracy. The office of the citizen has to be upheld, and the contribution of every citizen to nation-building has to be amplified. Fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and association must be protected, promoting Inclusivity, and ensuring that all voices, especially those of marginalized groups, are heard and considered in the democratic process.
- **Democratic Values:** June 12th embodies principles like justice, fairness, and respect for the will of the people. Nigerians must strive to uphold these values in all aspects of society. Our leaders must learn not to thwart the will of the people, but accept democratic choices as supreme, and uphold the growth of the nation as paramount, and the ultimate.
- **Strengthening Institutions and Rule of Law:** For democracy to thrive, institutions such as the judiciary, electoral bodies, and anti-corruption agencies must operate independently and be free from political interference, upholding the rule of law, with continuous reforms integrated to ensure sustainability.
- **Inclusive Policies and Equity:** Government policies should aim to reduce inequality and ensure that the benefits of democracy including access to healthcare, quality education, and economic opportunities are felt by all citizens, not just a privileged few.
- **Resilience and Adaptability:** Reflecting on past mistakes and successes helps build a more resilient democracy. Learning from the events surrounding June 12, and picking lessons can guide current and future democratic practices. In the wake of global innovation, our democracy must be adaptable to changing circumstances and challenges.

**June 12th serves as a constant reminder that democracy requires constant vigilance and effort. It's a day to reflect on the fight for democracy, the progress made, the challenges that have emerged, and recommit to building a better future for the nation and the #TheNigeriaWeWant.**