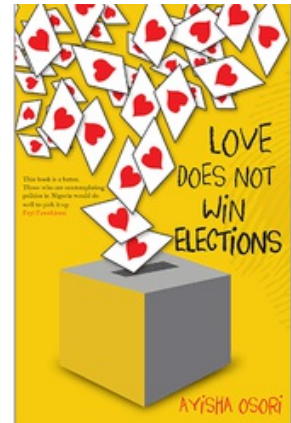


# Book Review – Love Does Not Win Elections by Ayisha Osori

*Bronwen Manby says this humorous book gives a unique insight into Nigerian politics.*

This unique book should be required reading for those interested in the promotion and consolidation of democracy, whether as scholar or activist. It offers a candidate's-eye view of what it takes to contest a primary election to run for office as a member of Nigeria's House of Representatives.

Focused on just one constituency in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory, Ayisha Osori narrates in occasionally hilarious detail exactly what it takes to get the endorsement of all those who need to back her (extreme grovelling), to "settle" those who need to receive some compensation for their endorsement (almost everyone), and to ensure that the final vote is at least vaguely clean (impossible, it seems). You can't help thinking that, genuine as the effort was, in the end the author is secretly glad that the attempt was unsuccessful. If selected as a candidate, after all, the same rigmarole would have begun all over again for the public vote.



The first challenge is deciding which party to stand for. In Nigeria, this choice is somewhat random, given that "there is not much to distinguish Nigeria's two main political parties". In the end, Osori chooses the People's Democratic Party largely on the basis of a chance meeting that secured her the necessary membership card (albeit still needing various signatures to backdate it and show the two years' membership to be eligible to run). Submitting the forms to become a candidate is another torturous task, as officials show an obsession for primary and secondary school certificates and other documents required by the rules, rather than more substantive matters (including later degrees). Other demands leave the rules behind, as the author has to fend off people offering different services, including to secure prayers for her candidacy. Most importantly, Osori has to navigate Nigeria's ethnic politics, wooing the "indigenes" of her constituency and constantly justifying her choice to run in the FCT, where she has lived since 1996, rather than Kogi State, where she is "from".

Some of these difficulties would be the same for any candidate, others powerfully illustrate the additional challenges for women. From the outset Osori feels the need to include trading sex for access on her "will not do" list. The holder of three degrees (two of them from Harvard), a legal practitioner, well-known media commentator, and head of an organisation promoting women's political participation, she nonetheless repeatedly finds herself kneeling on the floor, seeking the blessing of those with different types of power. She is constantly told to seek the blessing of "first ladies" at different levels from the president's wife down. She has to laugh at heavy-handed male jokes about loving women. Late night meetings make both security and child care a concern. Yet, occasionally, she also finds real solidarity from established female politicians who understand what she faces and give her their advice and support — including the introductions that are needed for any chance of party backing.



Photo credit: U.S. Embassy / Idika Onyukwu

Above all, there is the question of money. This being Nigeria, it is front and central; though perhaps just more visible rather than more dominant than in other jurisdictions. Among Osori's recommendations for future candidates are that "mint banknotes are a must"; colour-coded envelopes with different amounts will help the aspirant to "dole out money elegantly and efficiently – rather than prying notes out of rubber band restraints while navigating a crowd and pretending to hold a conversation". She is touched by the donations of friends, humiliated by the need to beg, and yet understanding of the ordinary party delegates whose own economic circumstances are so poor that who can blame them for seeking some payment for turning up and (possibly) supporting her in the ballot.

The style is brisk and engaging, and the author coins some excellent metaphors along the way, some of them universal ("humble pie tasted like wet newspaper"); others familiar to all women (as niggling as a twisted bra strap); and some unique to Nigeria (the narrative that only women of easy virtue contest politics "is as pervasive as empty water sachets at a motor park"). The book is written for a Nigerian audience, as it should be. It treats questions and uses turns of phrase that will likely not be immediately understood by a person without at least some familiarity with Nigeria. Yet even with these occasional possible hurdles, it gives an insight into Nigerian politics that will have immediate resonance across the African continent and likely far beyond.

[Love Does Not Win Elections](#), by Ayisha Osori published by Narrative Landscape Press, Nigeria, 2017

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