

HAS NIGERIA ARRIVED AT ELECTORAL ELDORADO WITH THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS?

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Introduction

Perspectives, no doubt, exist on the just concluded elections in Nigeria. There are people who share the strong belief that with the remarkably improved cycle of elections that took place in 2015, Nigeria has joined the league of countries that have the record of credible elections. They have supported their position with the introduction of technologies into the conduct of the elections. Specific mention has been made of the use of the Smart Card Readers and the biometric capturing of data of voters and the subsequent printing of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and their use as a licence to vote in the elections. Other enthusiastic supporters of the elections have added the public show that enabled each State Returning Officer to fly to Abuja and proceeded to the collation centre to again announce the results of elections that took place in their respective states.

The attributes of credibility and transparency have been enhanced with the drama that took place at the collation centre as the election management body, the Independent National Electoral commission (INEC) watched and collated the results as they were announced by the returning officers who were senior academics. So impressed were some Nigerians that the melodrama of result announcement especially coming from the Returning Officer for Presidential Election for Rivers State did not diminish their appreciation for the comic drama that characterized the entire process of collating the election results.

Analysts cannot forget in a hurry the outburst of Godsdan Orubebe, who, at a point in the collation of results for the presidential election seized the microphone and made some statements to the effect that Professor A.M. Jega, INEC Chairman, was biased and aided the yet-to-be declared victory of now President Muhammadu Buhari. The Chairman however showed calmness and allowed Orubebe to make all the allegations before he responded in a manner that put him down in a few well calculated and carefully chosen words ending with an advice for the former minister whom he counselled ought to have better.

Notwithstanding the Orubebe shenanigan, the elections went on smoothly and Nigerians except for minor and isolated fracas, peacefully accepted the results and for the first time in Nigeria's electoral history, no litigation accompanied the announcement of the presidential election results as both the winner and the loser exchanged phone calls signifying a new beginning in the country's electoral politics (Buhari, 2015^a).

We hasten to say that no impression should be formed that the elections have united Nigerians. A number of critical commentaries have been run on the elections,

leading some observers to wonder whether anything has substantially changed in the country's electoral behaviour. Verdicts of election tribunals in States such as Rivers, Delta, Akwa Ibom and others have really shown the negative impact that human beings can make on technologies including those deployed for the elections (Cole, 2015, Rivers Elections tribunal, 2015)

The use of the Card Readers was wilfully discarded and that has created the mystery of the number of actual voters to be more than the number captured by the Card Readers. There were also untoward happenings in some parts of the North where under-age voting was observed to have taken place. Violence of varying degrees also took place before, during and after the two-tier elections with the National Human Rights Commission intervening intermittently to raise alarms (National Human Rights Commission, 2015). At the end of the elections, more than 100 persons were killed (National Human Rights Commission, 2015). Many more issues have been raised to puncture the feelings of some enthusiastic Nigerians on the 2015 general elections (EU Report, 2015).

This is not surprising. Elections and all issues connected with it have been sources of cleavages across the globe. The advanced democracies are not even immune from the stigma of less-transparent elections. At one level, the deployment of election monitors and observers has been presented as one major step that can enhance the conduct of elections across nation-states. In a qualified sense, this has been the case on some occasions but in most of the cases especially in the Third World, the reverse has been the case (Nwolise, 2012). Both the Ivorian electoral quagmire of 2010 and that of Kenya that took place in 2007 were all informed by the reports of the election monitors and observers which Presidents Gbagbo and Kpaki failed to respect because of their jaundiced views (Saliu, 2012). Other rounds of elections have since taken place in these countries though still disputed by the opposition. The scale of violence witnessed cannot however be compared with what was witnessed in the previous elections.

This paper attempts to x-ray the 2015 elections, noting the perspectives that exist side by side with the main perspective shared by most Nigerians (INEC, 2015). In this paper, we will attempt to review some pre- and post-election issues before the verdict of this author is given. Even at this point, it should be noted that, while the elections were comparatively better than all the elections that have been so far conducted under the current Fourth Republic, there is still more to learn with the conduct of the 1993 presidential election and from the critical comments of observers and monitors who monitored the 2015 elections (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2015). Our objective in writing the paper is to contribute to shaping the electoral map of Nigeria especially with the appointment of Professor Mahmoud Yakubu as the new Chairman of INEC. Meanwhile, he has given the assurance of deepening electoral conduct through continuous reforms of machinery for elections in Nigeria (Yakubu, 2015).

Elections and Democratic Consolidation

Going by the theme chosen for this conference, election is the heart of democratic consolidation. All other properties of democratic consolidation such as virile opposition, high level of people's participation in democracy, assumption of democracy as the only game in town and others, cannot stand and endure unless the electoral process is firmed up to the extent that only the votes of the people can install and remove governments at regular intervals (Jinadu, 2008, Ademola, 2004, Saliu, 2010).

If this is taken to be the case which is really the case, no country can stand the chance of deepening her democratic system without paying much attention to the process that empowers politicians to acquire political power. Not surprisingly, countries spend a lot of money in fine-tuning and organising their elections to meet both continental and global standards of free, fair and credible elections (INEC, 2011). Despite the economic argument that has been advanced against regular and periodic elections especially in less-endowed countries, none has been able to come up with an alternative mode of choosing leaders that will be as democratic as the mode of elections (Jonathan, 2011)

One can also argue that the apparent failure of governance to translate electioneering promises into reality can be linked to the quality of elections that ushered the political players into office in the first instance. Where a proper election has been held, the much time spent in managing post-election violence would not be a reality and the usual litigations that have come to define electoral contests in some countries would not be witnessed as the results of elections would follow the expected pattern. It is only in cases where people's expectations of elections contradict what the electoral bodies have announced that one sees the unimaginable scale of violence as was witnessed in Kenya after the 2007 elections and Nigeria in 2011 (Paden, 2011)

There is no way violence and litigations that trail elections in Nigeria can lead to democratic consolidation. The two are likely to sustain the partisanship that usually characterises the period of campaigns. In a fundamental sense, an election that is neither free nor fair and credible does not stand any chance of increasing the level of participation of the people in the governance process. Careful and progressive selection of projects and programmes will also be impeded as the unearned electoral victory may serve to discourage people from investing their time and resources on a government that is considered illegitimate.

While the domestic environment can be jolted by the air of fouling elections, the dimension of the external environment can be made more frightening. A ring of condemnation can easily be formed at the global level to reduce the influence level of the country and her chances of being warmly welcomed in critical global fora. Mobilizing the scarce globally available resources can be a nightmare as information about a negative occurrence such as less-transparent elections can be shared and a position taken against the country in centres where resources are being dished out. Sanctions and their biting effects can follow, all working to create a bad image for the country and ultimately, taking her farther away from the path of democratic

consolidation. A long journey with the possibility of having to mobilise huge resources would have to be made before such a country to be received back into the club of democratic countries.

From experience, the tendency by some countries not to be able to organise credible elections often provokes and promotes meddlesomeness, leading at times to the violation of their countries' sovereignties (Jega, 2011a, Sonaya, 2015). Suggestions can sometimes be offered that may be harmful to the health of a country that is having difficulties in conducting a free and fair election. She may have no choice than to swallow the bitter pill, to avoid descending into being a bad guy of the international system (Alli, 2007).

Undoubtedly, elections, especially good ones, are the bedrocks of democratic consolidation (Osaghae, 2012). There must be a free environment, strict adherence to the rules, equal chance of both the ruling and opposition parties to realise their political aspirations, the electoral body should not be in bondage; its needs to conduct free and fair elections must not be denied, there should be no violence on account of the mismatch between expectations and the electoral outcomes and other crucial requirements of free, fair and credible elections.

There is no doubt that where most of these properties are present, democracy will have a chance of being consolidated and bring all the accompanied dividends to the people. It will be absurd to therefore, discuss democratic consolidation outside the context of elections that are adjudged free, fair, transparent and credible not on one-off-kind of occasion but at all times that will make people to take it for granted that democracy has become a national culture with all the features that distinguish it from non-democratic form of government being manifest.

A Short Review of Past Elections in Nigeria

Nigeria has had a series of elections since the attainment of independence in 1960. If all the colonial elections are reckoned with, the history of elections predates the country's independence. However, it must be pointed out that since there was no adult suffrage as a rule in all the elections conducted under the colonial rule coupled with other unjust restrictions, those elections could be considered as mere selections. The first Federal elections took place in 1959 and a series of others followed before the advent of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. There have also been regional, state and local government elections in the country (Jega and Ibeanu, 2007). Bye-elections and renewal elections have also been held. But for our purpose in this paper, we are going to limit our intervention to the elections that have just been conducted under the Fourth Republic in 2015.

In all, five rounds of general elections have been held beginning with 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and the last that took place in March and April, 2015. Based on the reports of international monitors and observers and the desire of Nigerians to ease the military out of governance, the inaugural round of elections held under the military took place in 1999. Five staggered elections were held among the three registered political parties namely the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All Peoples Party (APP).

Generally, the elections were peaceful and devoid of the sophisticated electoral fraud as the anxiety to return the military to the barracks pervaded the air. Apart from presidential and governorship elections, there were legislative elections at the state and federal levels. INEC that organised the elections under the leadership of Chief Akpata was not as overwhelmed as subsequent boards were though it was very clear that the departing military government had a presidential candidate and its favoured political party, the Peoples Democratic Party, (PDP).

Everything was done from the perspective of the opposition/minority parties to tilt the electoral contest in favour of the military-backed PDP. Indeed, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was released from prison and granted a controversial state pardon to enable him become a presidential candidate from prison. This decision angered the founding fathers of the party and its presidential hopeful because Chief Obasanjo who was not a founding member was dragged into the race from prison as a presidential flag bearer of the party (Ogbeh, 2004, Saliu, 2006). At the end of the elections, the military-backed candidates and their party won most States and the presidency.

With a noticeable decline in standards, the 2003 elections were held. Unlike the 1999 elections, the PDP won more votes, legislative seats and the Presidency. Gradually, the opinion began to be formed about the capacity of the military to organise relatively better elections than their civilian counterparts. Vote buying, stuffing and snatching of ballot papers, among other electoral offences, were displayed. The State Police under Tafa Balogun was a factor in the elections. Promoted from his initial rank of Assistant Inspector General of Police to the rank of Inspector-General of Police, Balogun saw the whole elections in the perception of President Obasanjo who was contesting as the second-term President of Nigeria. Progressively, the elections were worse than those conducted in 1999 (Jega and Ibeanu, 2007, Amuwo, 2007).

In terms of the scale of travesty of justice, the 2007 elections remain the worse in Nigeria's political history. All the ugly incidents observed with the 1983 elections considered as a landslide electoral robbery where those who never contested had results of elections surfaced. The phenomenon of hijacking of election results and announcement of fake results by the INEC headquarters and other negative occurrences represented other contours of the 2007 elections (Ibrahim and Ibeanu, 2009). The world and Nigerians did not therefore, have any difficulty in considering the round of the elections as the worst electoral curve in Nigeria (EU report, 2007).

However, the then Chairman of INEC, Professor Maurice Iwu, has taken exception to this perspective (Iwu, 2011). In his view, based on the charged political environment, his Commission ought to have been commended for allowing the elections to hold in the first instance (Iwu, 2011). He further believed that the forces that had approached him to postpone the elections which he rebuffed later orchestrated the campaigns that have rubbished the efforts made by INEC in having the elections (INEC, 2007). While noting the intervention of Maurice Iwu, this author maintains that nothing can distract from the fact that the 2007 elections were poorly organised and conducted. The world is therefore correct in condemning the conduct of the elections (Ibrahim, Hassan and Gondyi, 2014). Nigerians and their foreign

friends thus waited eagerly for another round of elections in order to put the memory of the poorly conducted elections behind them.

Two things had rekindled hope in the 2011 general elections. These were the appointment of Professor Attahiru Jega as the Chairman of INEC to replace Professor Iwu and the determination of President Goodluck Jonathan to conduct more globally-acceptable elections under his watch (Jonathan, 2012, Saliu, 2012). True to expectations, the round of elections was well-received as the role of INEC was more well-defined and the conclusion of the biometric capturing of the data of voters started under Professor Iwu was done and this led to the issuance of the Temporary Voter Cards (TVCs).

Although the world accepted the results of the elections won largely by the PDP, there were still challenges with regard to the elections (Hamalai, 2012, NILS, 2014, Jega, 2013a). Under-age voting and miracle or toxic votes were still witnessed. The two main presidential candidates in the elections made good showing in their strongholds. There were allegations of tampering with the INEC computers with the intent of lowering the votes of the candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (PCP) at the expense of the candidate of PDP and denial of fair contest for the other candidates of the CPC across the country especially in the Southeast geopolitical zone (Buhari, 2015^b).

One wants to share the belief of the USA in her consideration of the 2011 elections as a good beginning for the country (USA release, 2011). The marked improvement in the elections at one level raised the expectations on the future of elections in Nigeria and the general competence level of the election management body to pursue its deserved electoral reforms to their logical conclusions in future elections. Were the expectations met with the 2015 general elections in the country? We will surely find an answer to this question in the paper.

The Environmental Context of the 2015 Elections

The planning for the elections began on a shaky note with the growing apprehension by INEC on some fundamental issues. The first of the issues was the delay in releasing funds for the elections to enable INEC catch up with its schedules and timelines (Jega, 2013^b). At a point, the Chairman exhibited the activism in him to the discomfort of some observers, including this author, when he resorted to the public court to raise alarm on the injury the delay of releasing funds was causing the Commission in planning for the elections. Another leg of this was that when money was eventually released, the music changed to that of insufficiency of funds to discharge its electoral duties (Jega, 2014^a).

Second, the electoral body was visibly worried about the attitude of the politicians who are fond of making inflammatory statements at times bordering on national security (Jega, 2014^b). It was either they were involved in intra and inter-party squabbles or they were doubting the integrity of INEC; fearing that it was going to support one party or the other. On several occasions, the Chairman of INEC had to admonish the politicians on the need to show rectitude and be ready to play the electoral games with the already-established rules. Third, is the tendency by

politicians to jump the gun without waiting for the blowing of whistle by the INEC to commence campaigns (Jega, 2015^a).

Despite several warnings and interventions by INEC, the Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria (TAN) through the open support of some government functionaries such as Pius Anyim who was the then Secretary to the Federal Government were everywhere campaigning and getting signatures for the then President Jonathan. Technically, therefore, the group had violated the Electoral Act but the Electoral Commission was flat-footed in applying the law. Fourth, not only on this issue was INEC incapacitated. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) organised a fund-raising dinner in a clear violation of the Electoral Act again with the law too heavy to apprehend the offenders. Fifth, the parties' processes of selecting their candidates which INEC was expected to observe were a charade in most instances with imposition of candidates or manipulation of the processes too rife to be ignored.

Yet, the Commission could not do much as the Electoral Act has disinvested it of powers to reject candidates submitted by parties on the grounds of poorly-conducted primaries of political parties. Sixth, the INEC had counted on the support of the National Assembly to amend the 2010 Electoral Act based on the submissions it had made for a review of the Act. After a long wait with nothing coming from the National Assembly, it thus dawned on the Commission that the legislative houses were not in the mood to change what appeared to be favourable to the members in realising their political aspirations. To go ahead with the amendment of the Electoral Act would have amounted to reversing the gains of their respective parties. For instance, the power that was initially given to the Commission to make a pronouncement on the status of parties' primaries granted by the 2006 Electoral Act has been taken away by the 2010 version of the Act. A reversal of this was obviously central to the review sought by INEC but the National Assembly was not ready to countenance this, among other new provisions.

Notwithstanding these and other concerns, INEC still paddled along to introduce some innovations in connection with the 2015 general elections. Among such innovations was the printing of (PVCs) and their use as a license for participation in the elections. The Commission also came up with the Smart Card Readers (SCRs) to authenticate the voters during accreditation with the arrangement of storing information of bona-fide voters at the Commission's server in Abuja. Electoral guides were appointed for polling booths to minimise the number of invalid votes. It is instructive to note that invalid votes can come about on account of several factors. Prominent among these is the failure to carry out proper political education before the elections and the disinterest of people about the entire electoral process. Little wonder, the appointment of electoral guides by INEC only made a marginal impact on the number of invalid votes recorded after the 2015 elections (INEC, 2015).

There were also clear efforts to promote a more cordial relationship between the Electoral Commission and some other critical stakeholders such as the political parties, civil society groups, security agencies and others (Momoh, 2015^b). This, however, did not erase the suspicions of PDP and APC about the impartiality of

INEC in conducting free, fair and credible elections (Buhari, 2015^b, Jonathan, 2015^b).

In terms of training of electoral officers both permanent and ad-hoc staff, there were some efforts to use the Electoral Institute, an arm of INEC to handle it (Momoh, 2015^a). Some training did take place but the reported performances of the electoral officers on the field especially in the use of the SCRs would suggest that more intense training will be required in the future.

Furthermore, allowances for the staff were worked both for PVCs' distribution and actual elections, but there were reports of demonstrations of staff recruited for the jobs especially in Lagos State on INEC's default of N2000 per corps member participating in the PVCs distribution. INEC, in firming up its logistics for the elections, engaged the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) to assist in transporting electoral materials to all parts of the country where road transportation is the main mode, while the understanding of the Nigerian Navy was secured in transporting materials to the riverine areas (Saliu, 2015^a). Nevertheless, challenges were still faced by INEC especially during the presidential election when voting in some centres could not commence until late in the afternoon due to failure of NURTW to fulfil the contractual agreement reached with INEC.

Mention should also be made of the less successful efforts of INEC to distribute PVCs to all the registered voters. At the end, about 12 million voter cards were not distributed and 400,000 voter cards were not printed before the elections. This failure to fulfil its pledge of distributing the voter cards overwhelmed the electoral body to the extent that the assurances made about continuous registration and the printing of cards for the new registration had to be abandoned at a point to try all kinds of strategies in distributing the PVCs including the resort to the use of traditional rulers and the sacking of the initial arrangements of setting some days aside for voters in the states to collect their voter cards. If anything had raised the concern on the level of preparedness of INEC for the elections, it was the issue of the low level of distributing voter cards. Non-functional Card Readers only came to confirm the suspect level of INEC's preparations for the elections.

On account of poor preparations of INEC, contrary to public image of ever-ready created and sustained by the Commission and most significantly the high-wire politics of security for the elections and the knocking defeat of the ruling party, PDP, the first round of elections scheduled for 14th February, 2015 had to be shifted for six weeks to enable the security agencies be ready for electoral duties (Jega, 2015^b). The promise, which could not be fulfilled was that by the 28th of March, new date for the Presidential and National Assembly elections, the menace of *boko haram* would have been subdued. Nigeria is, however, still battling with the *boko haram* insurgency almost six months after the conclusion of the elections in March and April, 2015.

Meanwhile, the shift in election dates, which did not come about as a big surprise represented a window of opportunity for the election management body to shape up and resolve the wide gaps in its level of preparations for the elections (Saliu, 2015^a). With the slightly above eighty per cent distribution of PVCs and a budget of N108,851,683,313.93 (US\$546,993,383), INEC invited Nigerians to file out on 28th of March to cast their votes in Presidential and Legislative elections in 119,000

voting centres across the country (Eyinla, 2015).

The Conduct of the Elections

Elections were held on two separate dates. The presidential and legislative elections were held on 28th March, 2015, while the second round of elections took place on 11th April, 2015 and they covered the Governorship and House of Assemblies at the state level. On the day of the first elections, there was peace everywhere despite the apprehension about the disintegration of the country and the violence threatened by some politicians and their cohort militants (Buhari, 2015^c). Being the first day of the elections, logistics was an issue. Malfunctioning of Card Readers was another. The order of INEC given to voters to stay back after accreditation to cast their votes at 1.30pm was a nightmare for them. With the restrictions on movement from morning till evening of the Election Day, hunger and scorching sun especially with inadequate provision of tents were the challenges voters faced on the day of the first election. Security presence was tolerable in most of the polling booths and materials and electoral officials arrived promptly in most of the centres.

Another order of the Electoral Commission on postponing elections wherever card readers malfunctioned to another day was heeded in some voting centres, while in many other centres, the afternoon counter-directive that resort to manual accreditation could be made and the use of Incident Forms also should be made was not adhered to. Surprisingly, President Jonathan and his wife had to be attended to through the Incident Forms after unsuccessful attempts to accredit them using the Card Readers.

On the whole, elections were held all over Nigeria including the Internally-Displaced Persons centres on the 28th March, and in a few cases, the presidential and legislative elections were held on Sunday and by the 1st of April, results of the Presidential election had been released, with Muhammadu Buhari emerging the winner with above 15 million votes to beat the then sitting President Jonathan, who scored slightly above 12 million votes (Saliu, 2015^a).

On the day of elections for the Governorship and State Assembly elections held on 11th April, 2015, the patterns observed with the first round of elections prevailed with some changes and a noticeable bandwagon effect. Logistics arrangement was far better than what was witnessed during the Presidential and National Assembly elections as the contingent plans made in the direction of not relying solely on NURTW saved the Electoral Commission some embarrassments (INEC, 2015).

There was further low level of voters turn out with the Kwara State governor, elected with less than 300,000 votes out of over one million registered voters. The threat of violence might have played a role in discouraging voters from coming out to vote. From the point of view of INEC, virtually all the Card Readers worked during the elections (Momoh, 2015^b). Yet, as the reports of the proceedings of the Election Tribunals in Rivers and Akwa-Ibom States have shown, it was only the toxic votes that could have made the total number of votes cast to be more than those captured by

both the Card Readers and the INEC server at its headquarters in Abuja. At the end of the elections, the newly registered All Progressives Congress (APC) won more governorship seats than its main challenger, PDP. More State Assemblies naturally came under the control of the APC, the new ruling party in Nigeria.

Some Disturbing Signals of the Elections

There is, no doubt, that the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria were far better than all the previous elections that had been conducted under the current Fourth Republic. As earlier remarked in this paper, there were milestones and equally, there were challenges. What we will do in this section of the paper is to raise the distressing signals thrown up by the elections that have combined to reduce their overall rating.

1. The elections have shown that more work needs to be done to forge a nation out of the disparate ethnic groups we have in the country. The reality that President Buhari received more votes in the North than the South should worry us as a people. Surely, a President that is rejected in half of the country needs to do more work to win the hearts of the people in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria (Saliu, 2015^b). Related to this, religion was also a factor in the elections. Even in the States, religion characterised the patterns of voting. Unlike in 2011, candidate Jonathan was outrightly rejected in the core Northern States of Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Bauchi, but was accepted in Taraba, Benue and Plateau States ostensibly because of the factor of religion.

2. Another revelation of the elections is that all the previous elections results had been made up through some foul means. How come a President would be elected out of over 68 million registered voters with slightly above 15 million votes? If we put it against the estimated population of over 170 million people, it would be clear that there is a high level of political apathy in Nigeria. One recalls that the factor of low voters turnout had been used to discount the import of national spread that was contained in the 1993 presidential election results. One wonders what those people would say about the abysmal level of voters' turnout witnessed during the 2015 general elections.

Two factors can be mentioned for this. One, the country's political parties have failed in their mobilization role and political education. With them playing their role, more political interest would have been generated among the people. Two, on the part of INEC, a mark of failure cannot be avoided as the activism that the National Electoral Commission (NEC) under Professor Nwosu had displayed was near absent under the Jega-led INEC (Saliu, 2012).

3. Despite the efforts made to reduce the number of invalid votes, the figure for 2015 was still staggering. Although it was lower than that of 2011 elections, if it is reckoned that there was political apathy in the 2015 elections, it would be clear that over 800,000 invalid votes as a percentage of voters' turnout would still be disturbing (Mahmoud, 2015). Some may be tempted to argue that low voters' turnout is a global phenomenon. The point needs to be made that with the observed patterns of voting, we need to worry that a President has been elected by the less than ten per cent of our population. That is really the source of our concern.

4. The events in some States have proven that the issue of technology is not yet a settled matter. How can we proudly say that our elections have improved when we still depend on imported technology? As scholars have proven, secrets of imported technologies are never revealed (Akinsanya, 1986). To even print the permanent voter cards, the country had to rely on foreign printers with about 400,000 of the cards yet to be printed and arrived the shores of Nigeria.

Much more important is the apparent lack of mastering the effective functioning of the Card Readers by INEC's staff. How come, despite the use of Card Readers, we still recorded toxic votes in some States? Our view is that INEC as admitted by its new Chairman did not plan adequately for the new technologies (Yakubu, 2015). There is the need to avoid playing to the gallery. There was no absolute justification for the Electoral Commission to resort to testing the Card Readers only after the postponement of the elections.

5. Training is an important issue in election management. Unfortunately, INEC either in 2011 or 2015 did not show any level of seriousness to it. As admitted by Professor Jega, in most cases, only a day or two were devoted to training as against the longer period anticipated (Jega, 2011^b). With respect to the 2015 elections, training assumed the level of seriousness it deserved only after the postponement of the elections barely a week to its commencement.

Yet to be appreciated is the fact that the quality of manpower recruited into INEC shortly before the election was not of required standard. Hardly can the predominantly third class and lower grade graduates be counted upon to improve on the conduct of elections in Nigeria. This profile of the low-rated staff should have compelled more attention paid to training of both permanent and ad-hoc staff.

6. No matter how people try to cover up the truth, there were ill-fighting and ill-feelings in the INEC that conducted the elections. Proper co-ordination seemed to be lacking between the national headquarters and the States offices. This showed in the decision to ask some Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) to retire or leave office before the expiration of their terms, while some National Commissioners who reported for duty before them remained in office much longer. The contradictions in the submissions of Delta INEC office and the national INEC on Card Readers and the actual number of voters should clear any doubt about insiders' abuse that is ravaging the Electoral Commission.

7. The integrity of INEC was negatively affected with the way and manner it went about attempting to re-configure the polling units. Looking at it from the points of the delay and congestion in some polling booths where voting had to be extended in 2011 till wee hours of the second day due to huge voters turn out the idea of creating more polling booths was quite in order.

However, due to the sloppiness of INEC, it failed to keep its promise of reconfiguring the polling units made after the 2011 elections until when election fever was in the air in the latter part of 2014 (Soyebi, 2011). Apart from timing which was wrong, the justifications offered for the exercise were quite insensitive of the fault lines in Nigeria. The alibi provided by the Senate committee on INEC was burgled by the Chairman of the Commission when he unexpectedly maintained that INEC could

carry out the creation of new polling units anytime (Jega, 2014^b).

Right from when Nigerians prevailed on INEC to suspend the creation of new polling units that was obviously more favourable to the North, the principle of impartiality was compromised and the politicians went to town with the view that Jega was biased against the South. He, throughout the period of elections, remained a suspect and the early concession of defeat by Goodluck Jonathan was what saved INEC from being dragged more into the murky waters of partisanship.

8. The manner of distributing PVCs showed clearly that some people in INEC did not understand the political terrain in Nigeria. The initial directive was to set a few days aside for the collection of PVCs. Nothing concrete happened as the number of days was too short for the number of voters envisaged. Due to this initial bungling, and the subsequent high number of voters who had collected the PVCs in *Boko Haram* infested areas, some people became more hardened in their belief that Professor Jega was up for some mischief (Dokubo, 2015, Fani-Kayode, 2015, Cole, 2015). Some States such as Edo, Kwara and more importantly, Ogun State had some PVCs belonging to other states sent to them. A significant number of voters in Ogun could not locate their PVCs and at the end of the day, INEC came clean on the issue by admitting that about 400,000 PVCs belonging to voters in Ogun State had not been printed.

Also, the initial position of Kayode Idowu, Chief Press Secretary to INEC's Chairman that all the PVCs had been printed and the correction made by Professor Jega that about 1 million of PVCs had not been printed some weeks to the 2015 elections kept tongue-wagging about what to make of INEC's information and its level of preparedness for the elections.

People were definitely amused when INEC came up with the position that not all those who had registered would collect PVCs as many would have died. Good talk but INEC ought to have appreciated the fact that it was incumbent on it to have printed all the PVCs of those who had registered first and make them easily available. Of course, voters are then free to either go and collect them or not just as they are also free to go and cast their votes or not.

9. Some other interventions of INEC in the discharge of its electoral duties must be noted as poisoning the political environment for the conduct of 2015. Alarms were raised on the shortage of funds for the elections some two years before they were held. The insistence of Professor Jega that only a certain party and its members were opposed to the use of card readers and PVCs was unfortunate. While that was pleasing to the ears of APC, it served to erode the required measure of confidence and impartiality in the electoral commission (Jega, 2015c).

Indeed, at a point, the impression was created as if the Chairman of INEC was the candidate that the PDP was to face in the elections (George, 2015). Earlier, the tactless involvement of INEC in the controversy that surrounded the swearing-in ceremony of the Kogi State governor in 2012 and its decision to join the Buba Marwa suit on tenure of some state governors at the appellate court were issues against undue activism on the part of INEC and thus fetching it a big question mark on its level of credibility that was carried all through the 2015 general elections.

10. Nigerians must be grateful to Dr. Goodluck Jonathan for conceding defeat earlier in the day. Although there is a tendency to dismiss the gesture as given, when one reckons with the missteps of INEC especially in the handling of Card Readers and PVCs and its combantant mood all through the elections, it would be clear that had President Jonathan failed to concede defeat, more troubles would have been generated for the country. With the benefit of hindsight, the election management body should have exercised more restraint in joining the boxing ring of politics against the ruling party or the opposition party, no matter the level of provocation.

11. There are Nigerians who still praise Professor Jega for his calmness and maturity in handling Godsday Orubebe's outburst at the collation centre for the presidential election results (Thomas, 2015). We slightly differ in our own reactions. There is no doubt that Orubebe should be condemned for his misconduct at the collation centre. But the question is; would he have done what he did had the opportunity not created for him? Our answer is no. INEC and its managers should appreciate elections for what they are; emotional issues where reasonability can instantly become unreasonability. The only antidote against such an occurrence is not to create the forum for it. Only divine intervention really saved the day for the country on 31st March, 2015. The political temperature and calculations would have been different had his political song been chorused by other overzealous PDP members present or if the APC members in the hall had taken him on.

12. Some Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) who served as the field officers for the elections were out rightly partisan with the INEC headquarters constrained in apprehending them. One cites the case of the REC for Rivers State. Names of electoral officers approved by the Abuja INEC were substituted with the names of persons who were very close to some politicians. Yet, when the atrocities committed by her were reported to INEC in Abuja; Professor Jega cleared her of all wrongdoings and upheld the questionable election results as presented for the state. So far, the INEC Chairman was wrong as both the Election Tribunal sitting on the Rivers elections and the Appeal Court have dismissed the gubernatorial election held in the state for lacking in electoral integrity. There were other RECs who tried to sabotage the elections, yet the headquarters of INEC kept quiet and only trying to put such RECs and other officials through the judicial process (Zakari, 2015).

13. The country's political parties are still not political parties in the true sense of the word. Neither can one praise them for providing political education for the citizens nor running issue-based campaigns. They have also not obeyed the rules governing campaigns in the country. Mudslinging, hate speeches, incitement and inflammatory statements were the order of the day. Violence instigated by political intolerance was observed in Bauchi, Kano, Kwara and other States against the PDP, while Abia, Enugu, Ekiti, among other States, led in their hostility against the APC (EU report, 2015). While the thrust of PDP campaigns was the attack on the personality of Buhari, the APC excelled in propaganda aimed at destroying the PDP before Nigerians (Adeniyi, 2015). Our assessment of INEC must also embrace its efforts at subjecting the political parties to play by the rules. As long as the parties were unruly and behaved as serial breachers of the laws, there is no way the elections

they participated in can be positively rated (Saliu, 2011, Amucheazi, 2007, 2008, Jinadu, 2008).

Our Verdict

Based on the reports of international monitors and observers and the history of elections in Nigeria, one would be tempted to say that the conduct of the elections was superb (Transition Monitoring Group, 2015). However, when one bases his assessment on some crucial parameters such as on the low level of people's participation caused by INEC's poor outing on some of its programmes, undemocratic selection processes that produced candidates for the elections, the assumed impartiality of INEC and more importantly, INEC's lukewarm attitude towards enforcing the electoral rules, it would not be difficult to arrive at the conclusion that Nigeria is yet to arrive at electoral Eldorado with the 2015 general elections (Akinsanya, 2015).

Some may want to argue that the presidential election was the first in Nigeria's recent political history that has not witnessed any litigation. Others may be quick to add that it was also the first cycle of elections that has witnessed low level of violent reactions to their results. While one agrees with these submissions, it is important to know that the credibility of an election can also be affected by the low level of enforcement of the electoral laws and the low level of participation by the people (Kurfi, 1983, NILS, 2014).

One still insists that the level of turnover of voters as a percentage of the population of Nigeria is still very low. Even if one limits one's observation to the number of registered voters, it is still disturbing that only 15 million out of 68 million voters elected the current President in Nigeria. The reality of some voters being denied voting in most states due to non-availability of PVCs and failure to allow those of voting age to vote due to poor arrangements made for continuous registration by INEC, have prompted the conclusion that the country is still far from arriving at democratic consolidation.

One agrees with some other authors that one major issue in democratic consolidation is the chances of an opposition party winning an election to form a government which has been seen in Nigeria. This line of argument is however challenged by the reality of the fact that one or two parties were unlawfully excluded from the elections and that reduces the score of INEC on this matter. For an election to be adjudged free, fair and credible, the election management body, a creation of law, must be broader in its interpretations of the laws to avoid embarrassing judgements coming from the courts as it has suffered on the axing of political parties (Saliu, 2014).

For us, the elections could be a way forward for electoral politics in Nigeria but much more is still required for the country's elections to be qualified to be considered as capable of consolidating democracy. A critical review of former President Jonathan's reactions to the elections would show that the victory concession was made in the midst of deep reservations about the conduct of the elections and the votes garnered by the parties (Jonathan, 2015^b). In other words, the concession of

defeat was not seriously connected with the genuine acceptance of defeat in the election but for the larger interest of national security (Jonathan, 2015^b). There are still fundamental flaws in the conduct of the elections which were it not for the record of imperfect elections in Nigeria; the 2015 would have passed as marginally better conducted elections which truly they were.

Suggestions and Recommendations

As a natural follow-up to our submissions in this paper, we put forward the following suggestions and recommendations on how to further improve the electoral environment in the country:

1. INEC should engage in sober reflections on the conduct of 2015 general elections to know what the Commission can do differently in the 2019 general elections. There are too many things the last Commission could not handle properly which, if not addressed, can turn elections into a serious harbinger for crisis in Nigeria. The experiences of Democratic Congo, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, among others, should be instructive. The country may not be too lucky all the time.
2. The country's political parties are still only vehicles for assuming political office in the country. They need to be made to do more than that (Saliu and Ifejika, 2015). One of the ways is to strategise on how the masses can be made more visible through financial contributions. It is doubtful if Nigeria's elections can meet international standards when our parties are depots for corruption and their collective impact on governance is not more than presenting candidates for political positions (Chukwumerije, 2009, Saliu, and Ifejirika, 2014, Alapiki, 1998). The Uwais report on the need to have a separate agency to handle the control of political parties is quite in order (Uwais report, 2008).
3. Professor Jega as INEC's Chairman exhibited a high sense of personal integrity but the problem is that only a few staff of the Commission were infested with it. The Electoral Commission needs a cleaning up exercise to further sanitise it. The new Chairman should try to impress it on government to allow competence and integrity to be the main considerations in the appointment of persons to fill the vacancies in INEC. Also, he should fulfil his pledge of not allowing himself to be influenced by anybody (Yakubu, 2015).
4. INEC needs to know that its elections cannot meet international standards as long as Nigerians are wilfully excluded from the electoral process. One cannot understand the shoddiness that characterised the printing and distribution of PVCs four years after taken all the biometric data of voters. All issues with the Card Readers must be resolved and a system of printing PVCs two weeks after registration should be put in place. All the electoral technologies must be customised and domesticated by Nigeria.
5. The cost of the last two rounds of elections to Nigeria is staggering. We do not know for how long Nigeria would be able to spend N108, 851,683,313.93 on elections. If we add the budget for security agencies and the donations from development partners, the cost cannot but be more frightening for the nation. No democracy can consolidate when the governments formed after the elections are

unable to meet the expectations of Nigerians (Buhari, 2015^d, Utomi, 2015, Adeniyi, 2015).

6. As David Mark once admonished Professor Jega in 2010, the INEC Chairman should have a mechanism of monitoring the activities of all electoral officials including the RECs (Mark, 2010). Professor Jega trusted the RECs but some of them based on the verdicts of the Election Tribunals ought not to have been trusted to the extent of the evidences that the tribunals have used to nullify some elections.

7. We know that all was not well in INEC before and after the 2015 elections. The goal of having a separate salary for INEC's staff deserves pursuing to make them avoid the tempting carrots that usually come from the politicians. The new Chairman should be a motivator and welfarist to further motivate the staff for optimal performance.

8. We are in agreement with the new Chairman of INEC that poor preparations despite all pretensions negatively affected the 2015 general elections. The work of INEC in our view is more of a field work through the engagement of the generality of Nigerians as Professor Humphrey Nwosu did (Nwosu, 2008). Testing of new technologies cannot be done satisfactorily in INEC's office unless they are taken out to the field. Preparation of calendar of events and sticking to the time lines contained in them are necessary to save INEC of its image in the eyes of critical audience.

9. The review of the Constitution and the Electoral Act is indispensable if the country's elections are to consolidate democracy. Some powers should be given to INEC to decide on electoral matters based on the facts on the ground. The tendency of pushing everything to the courts in our judgement is to turn the Commission into a toothless bulldog that can only bark but cannot bite. The Commission should be able to make a pronouncement on the status of primaries conducted by political parties in view of their overbearing and negative influence on elections. It should also be able to sanction parties for their infractions of the laws when proven.

10. INEC needs to sustain the trust of all the critical stakeholders. The stakes were quite high on the last elections because the Electoral Commission could not resist the lure by politicians to join the political fray. Politicians would always raise issue but not all issues raised by them should be reacted to. Even at that, there is no need to make reference to any of the political parties. One way to guarantee this is to cultivate the confidence of the parties through constant dialogue. INEC can prepare a proposal on how to reform the Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC) to make it serve as a major link between the Commission and the parties and work to terminate the tendency towards sit-tightism among officials of the Council.

Conclusion

The paper has tried to answer the question posed for it at the beginning. There is no doubting the fact that the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were relatively better conducted with the aid of modern technologies. It is however fallacious to share the belief that the era of bad elections has vamoosed from Nigeria (Jega, 2015^d). A review of the conduct of INEC and the political parties has shown that the country still has a long way to travel to bring about a regime of transparent,

free, fair and credible elections.

The paper identified the low turnout of voters due to poor distributional arrangements made for the PVCs, the threat of violence, non-printing of some PVCs and more importantly, was the non-enforcement of the electoral laws by INEC even in the face of violations by political parties and their candidates, among others, were developments that have lowered the quality of the elections in the eyes of the critical minds.

On what INEC needs to do to improve on the quality of elections that it conducts in the future, a whole range of suggestions and recommendations have been made. The chief among them are; growing and sustaining the trust of critical stakeholders on elections, rejuvenating political parties to do more than being the vehicles for assuming political offices, check INEC's insider's abuse, provide more welfare for its staff on electoral duties, pursue programmes that will ensure more participation in the electoral process, creation of an agency to monitor and control the political parties, among others.

The paper concludes that there are more things the nation can do to herald the regime of more acceptable elections in Nigeria. It is when Nigeria and their foreign friends appreciate this and begin the serious process of sanitising the electoral environment that one can say that the country's elections are heading towards democratic consolidation.

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