

EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF ELECTORAL CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA'S 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Like most elections in Nigeria, the 2023 general election was conducted under a deeply contentious, and disputed atmosphere, including widespread insecurity and uncertain government policies introduced ahead of the election. This is despite INEC's introduction of new technology which include the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), to improve administration of the 2023 polls, as well as the reforms contained in the Electoral Act 2022. Against this backdrop, the paper examined the challenges of election credibility in the 2023 general election, specifically focusing on a broader range of variables like insecurity, institutional weaknesses, corruption and vote-buying that influenced both the process and the result of the election. The data for the research were collected from secondary sources. Discourse analysis was employed in analyzing the data. The study established that while INEC has played a fundamental role in coordinating the security architecture of the elections, the credibility of the 2023 election was greatly marred by numerous pitfalls in election administration which include instances of vote manipulation, political violence, lack of transparent results collation and declaration process. Moreover, the pressing issues that face Nigeria, which include widespread poverty, corruption, and insecurity, as well as an inadequate electoral infrastructure also affected the credibility of the election. The paper recommends, among others, that a multifaceted approach is required to strengthen Nigeria's democracy by implementing layered reforms like electoral and institutional reforms that increase transparency, accountability, and security in all aspects of the electoral process as well as a clear demonstration of political will by the government to achieve free and fair elections in the country.

Keywords: Credible Elections, Democracy, Election, Election Security, Nigeria

Introduction

Election is the most foundational element of modern-day representative democracy. It is a means through which the electorates periodically choose their representatives into different positions of governance; it refers to institutionalized procedures for recruiting political office holders by the electorates of a country or group (Igini, 2013). Thus, how a state arranges and conducts its elections is emblematic of the level of democratic development of that particular state. The institutional medium provided by elections also allows different interest groups within a state to stake and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. It, therefore, determines the manner and methods by which changes in the social order may be brought about in a democratic society.

Elections in Nigeria have continued to elicit more than casual interest by Nigerian scholars. This is mostly, due to the fact that despite the appreciation that only credible elections can consolidate

and sustain the country's democracy, Nigeria has continued to witness with growing disappointment and apprehension its inability to conduct peaceful, free, fair, and open elections whose results are widely accepted and respected across the country.

General elections in Nigeria are constantly contentious and are envisaged in political rigmarole that threatens the polity of the nation. The 2023 General Election is an interesting phenomenon in the country owing to the fears, anxieties, speculations, uncertainties and the nature of the politics which has been heat with a strong opposition and a campaign of calumny, accusations and counter-accusations. The 2023 General Election is vital in Nigeria's political history because it has a colossal political and socioeconomic impact on the future of the country. Indeed, the general election represent another attempt at full democratization in Nigeria irrespective of the problems that are usually encountered which are seen as evidences of the strive towards perfection in future. While the 2023 General Election was expected to be an improvement upon that of the 2019, it was not expected to be of much difference from what has accrued in the previous elections in many aspects. This is because the terrain and the political landscape in the build-up towards the 2023 General Election reflect and replicate past occurrences.

Understanding the integrity of electoral process is a vital precursor for understanding any other aspect of electoral politics (Norris, 2014). It is a fact that most developing countries have been at one time or the other confronted with various political, socio and economic challenges partly because the results of their elections were questionable and unacceptable due to manipulations. For a country to be seen as being above board in her process of conducting election, every bit of the processes must be taken into consideration. Hence, all aspects of electoral process should be evaluated before concluding as to the credibility or otherwise of such election.

The core of elections does not consist only of the formal structures and procedures associated with free and fair elections, such as the impartiality of the electoral commission and technological efficiency in the accreditation of voters, card readers and collation of results, which no doubt are important factors in elections. There are, in addition, the hard and arguably more fundamental variables that relate elections to social structure and state politics. These belong to the less obvious and non-formal terrains of participation that go beyond elections and encompass the desperate and surreptitious behind-the-scene activities that involve tradeoffs, manipulation of electoral institutions and processes, rigging, intimidation, in short, activities that mostly undermine formal structures and processes. As IDEA (2016:7) has rightly observed, Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) have largely been inserted into political contexts that have not really changed and often have to fulfill mandates in contentious democratic situations. There is reason to consider the social structure including the non-formal terrain more critical in explaining electoral outcomes especially the bewildering and fiercely contested results that are nevertheless 'credible' because they comply substantially with certain unwritten rules of elections in Nigeria, most notably the expectations that incumbents will win and that powerful politicians, godfathers and incumbents should win in – or 'deliver' in local parlance – their constituencies, whether they are popular, acceptable or not.

Conducting an election especially in a transitional democracy is a huge challenge which among others involves the complex management of 3ms, namely: men, materials and resources. It has been established that while many elections around the globe are conducted with a high standard, there remains evidence of poorly conducted elections in developing countries most especially in African countries (James, 2014). The integrity of elections around the world has been a major concern of national and international organizations to the extent that a colossal amount of money has been spent on the improvement of electoral integrity. For example, the European instrument

for democracy and Human Rights spent approximately EUR 307 million on over 700 projects relating to democracy between 2007 and 2010. Nigeria as a country benefited immensely in the funding.

To improve the electoral process, Nigeria's INEC introduced new technologies in the administration of the 2023 polls, including Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV). The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IReV online portal. Publishing polling unit-level results through IReV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. It was a new innovation to ascertain a credible election, but the question is how neutral, objective, and innovative the operators are?

It is against this backdrop, that this paper examined the challenges of election credibility in the 2023 general elections, specifically the presidential and national assembly elections, with a view to establishing the extent to which these innovations and the conduct of the elections assured of the security and credibility of the process, and towards deepening democracy in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

Election

Heywood (1997:211) noted that; election is a device for filling an office or post through choices made by a designated body of people "the electorate". This definition is in accord with the opinion advanced by the Nigeria Court of Appeal as "the process of choosing by popular votes a candidate for political office in a democratic system of government". Heywood (1997) submits that election aims to perform specific functions in any democratic setting. These include political recruitment, representation, making government, influencing policy, building legitimacy, shaping public opinion and helping to strengthen the elite. Given these essential functions of election in contemporary democratic states, it is logical to argue that election is not just an Election Day activity, though a crucial component. Rather, election encompasses political activities before, during and after the election days. This explains why the phenomenon of election in modern democracy is an institution rather than a mere terminal composition of an electoral committee (Ojo&Ademowo, 2015).

Election is the most foundational element of modern day representative democracy. It is a means through which the electorates at periodic times choose their representatives into different positions of governance; it refers to institutionalized procedures for recruiting political office holders by the electorates of a country or groups. Thus, how a state arranges and conducts its elections is emblematic of the level of political development of that particular state. The institutional medium provided by elections also allows different interest groups within a state to stake and resolve their claims to power through peaceful means. It, therefore, determines the manner and methods by which changes in the social order may be brought about in a democratic society. Consequently, the procedures adopted must be recognized by law in order to give it legitimacy, thus, it is necessary that in conducting such procedures it must be acceptable to those who participate, by being seen as fair and credible (Igini, 2013).

These processes must take place under conditions that are peaceful and non- intimidating such that participation is without let or hindrance (Igini, 2013). Kambudzi (2008 cited in Ugbudian, 2015) postulated that through the mechanism of election citizens seek to improve their lives by listening to views and options offered by political candidates on vital issues of national life and making weighted choices among them. Citizens use elections to keep government up to task of

providing for basic societal needs and pursuing unrelenting improvement of the country. This is how properly conducted elections play a role as a development asset in any given country (Ugbudian, 2015).

Security

In its broad sense, security has been defined as an atmosphere of guaranteed protection, and the condition of feeling happy and safe from danger and harm. Security gives meaning to human existence in time perspective. Hence, Nwolise (2009) cited in (Ojo&Ademowo, 2015, p.6) submits that the security of a person, identity group, nation, or the world is not only a sacred and strategic value, it is the utmost value. This is because unless one can be assured of his physical security or safety, everything else will be meaningless. Security is critical to the conduct of free and fair elections and it involves the provision of safety for voters and election management bodies (INEC) personnel, and extends to the management of logistics and coordination during elections. Security is critical for the protection of the electoral staff, voters, candidates, agents, parties, civil society organisations, domestic and international observers as well as personnel of security agencies. Security is critical in the protection of electoral personnel, and processes, in ensuring that voters exercise their civic duties without fear or hindrance, in creating a level playing field for all political parties and candidates to canvass for support of the electorate and in maintaining overall integrity of the democratic and electoral process (Jega, 2012).

Election Security

Election security implies protection or safety from any form of impediment that can distort the conduct of credible election within the context of acceptable democratic tradition and culture (Ojo&Ademowo, 2015). Fisher (2002) defines election security as “the process of protecting electoral stakeholders such as voters, candidates, pool workers, media, and observers; electoral information such as vote results, registration data, and campaign material; electoral facilities such as polling stations and counting centres; and electoral events such as camping rallies against death, damage, or destruction”. As Albert (2007) also cited in (Ojo&Ademowo, 2015:7), has aptly noted, the bodies expected to perform this task include security agencies, political parties, INEC, judicial officials, the media, electoral observers and the academia, among others. This implies that election security has both coercive and non-coercive dimensions, spanning across the three stages of election process, namely; pre-election period, Election Day and post-election period.

Thus, election security is all about securing the holistic integrity of the electoral process, especially now that elections are increasingly seen as a key component of peace-building process and a cornerstone of dynamic social interaction. Hence, election security must address protection from the physical, psychological and structural threats against the electorate and the citizenry at large, without undue consideration for party affiliation, ethnic sentiment, historical antecedent, religious divide, or any other form of social differences. The bottom line is that a political environment that is free from threat to electoral security is determined by ensuring that political parties and their candidates win in the scheme of power without jeopardizing the safety of rivals and the citizenry, and without distorting the sanctity of the electoral process (Ojo&Ademowo, 2015).

Election security has to do with the transparency of the whole of the electoral process; the independence of the electoral management body; the proper and adequate funding of the whole electoral process from an independent source; the electoral management body being free from unnecessary interference from both the government and other stakeholders within the polity; the level of confidence the electorates have toward the whole electoral process; the observation

and implementation of all the electoral laws that are guiding the whole process; the protection of lives and properties throughout the electoral process; and the high level of professional conduct displayed by the personnel of security agencies.

Three kinds of election security are very crucial; first is the physical security which concerns securing facilities and materials. These include the electoral commission offices, registration and polling stations, political party offices, election observer offices, media organizations, ballot boxes, ballot papers (voted and un-voted), voters' register, computers and communication systems employed in voter registration and vote tabulation among others. The second is personal security. This concerns the protection of all electoral stakeholders, including candidates, voters, public officials, election workers, security forces, party agents, election observers and media representatives (Fischer, 2008). Personal security is very important because people can be victims of assassination, torture, sexual assault, strategic displacement, physical injury, blackmail or intimidation in attempts to influence their involvement and choices in an election. The third is electoral events. Events can be official in nature, such as voter registration programs or Election Day activities, but also associated events such as campaign rallies, debates, and political party and coalition meetings (Fischer, 2008).

The significance of election security is crucial for creating the proper environment for electoral staff to carry out their duties; for voters to freely and safely go to their polling units to vote and for candidates and political parties to organize rallies and campaigns, and for other numerous stakeholders to discharge their responsibilities under the constitution and the Electoral Act of Nigeria. Security is indispensable to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections. From the provision of basic security to voters at political party rallies and campaign grounds, to ensuring that result forms are protected, the whole electoral process is circumscribed by security considerations (Jega, 2012).

Electoral Credibility

Electoral credibility is a term which implies that the conduct of elections must be characterised by a high level of transparency, fairness, accountability, probity and inclusiveness (Efebeh, 2015). Accordingly, the outcome of such elections should invariably be a reflection of all the virtues and principles of a fairly conducted elections. This shows that electoral credibility is supposed to be a reflection of the exhibition of a high level of moral righteousness and chastity by all stakeholders in any electoral context. Similarly, Ihunwo (2022) informs that electoral credibility is supposed to be a proof that the aftermath of elections signifies the absence of electoral malpractices by stakeholders in an election. By implication, to say that an election is credible is to establish that its outcome is a direct representation of the actual result that must be devoid of manipulations or distortion of the deserving ethics of electioneering. Such absence of brazen irregularities in an election goes a long way to bestow on the exercise, the status of integrity, when subjected to post-elections appraisal (Okebukola, 2016).

Therefore, a credible election is described as one that is free from fraud, allows for equal participation, maintains transparency, holds stakeholders accountable, and promotes fair political competition. Credible elections are characterized by some fundamental attributes. Firstly, credible elections require universal suffrage, granting all eligible citizens the right to vote without discrimination based on race, gender, religion, or any other arbitrary factors (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2020). Secondly, credible elections demand the freedom of expression, enabling individuals to voice their opinions without fear of repression or intimidation (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2012). Lindberg (2001) supports the aforementioned perspectives by defining a credible election as a democratic

one. In this context, credible elections are those that strictly follow the provisions outlined in the electoral law and constitution. They should be characterized by transparency, fairness, justice, and equity, with minimal interference from the incumbent leadership. Essentially, a democratic election should be free from electoral violence.

The concept of electoral credibility revolves around the perceived fairness, transparency, and legitimacy of electoral processes. Scholars have examined factors influencing electoral credibility, such as electoral management, voter registration, media coverage, and observer missions (Norris, 2014). Furthermore, research indicates that public trust in electoral institutions and political actors plays a vital role in determining electoral credibility (Brancati, 2018). However, challenges persist, including electoral fraud, irregularities, and partisan manipulation, which undermine the credibility of electoral outcomes (Hyde, 2011).

Scholars have extensively studied the role of institutional reforms in shaping electoral credibility. Afolabi (2021) underscores the importance of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and its reforms in improving the electoral process. The deployment of technology, such as biometric voter registration, has been identified as a key factor in minimizing fraud and enhancing the overall credibility of elections (Afolabi, 2021).

Okeke (2022) highlights the instrumental role of CSOs in voter education, emphasizing how these organizations contribute to informed and empowered citizens. Their efforts play a significant role in reducing electoral violence by addressing misinformation and enhancing civic awareness among voters (Okeke, 2022).

According to Idris (2013), electoral credibility is realised in a condition where the declared winner in any electoral contest actually secured the highest number of votes. However, this position has been criticised for being rather narrow, limited and restrictive in scope. For instance, Efebeh (2015) argued that an appreciable level of elimination of rigging or manipulation of election results is just an aspect of electoral credibility. Thus, Efebeh (2015) went further to argue that an election that has the eventual winner as the candidate who secured the true majority of votes cast can still not be referred to as credible if the other processes that preceded the actual voting exercise were marred with irregularities and flaws.

Therefore, an election can only be said to have attained the status of credibility when the entire processes are observed in the environment of fairness; when seekers of elective positions comply strictly with electoral laws relating to political campaigns, especially with regards to laws prohibiting indiscriminate financial inducement of prospective voters; when eligible prospective voters are duly registered; when the total number of votes cast in the election correspond with the number of accredited voters; when ballot papers and boxes are not tampered with; when collation, sorting, counting, posting and announcement of election results are transparently done; when the election results declared by the electoral body, reflect the true votes cast in that election. It is only when the above criteria are strictly observed that an election can be deemed credible. It is therefore in the light of the foregoing that this study conveniently sees electoral credibility as a situation where the electoral process meets the standards of transparency, fairness and inclusiveness.

The Context of the 2023 Nigeria general elections

The 2023 general election is the seventh consecutive general election since Nigeria re-established its democracy in 1999. The elections mark 24 years of uninterrupted democracy—the longest

span in Nigeria's history. The 2023 general election was the first nationwide elections conducted within the framework of the new Electoral Act, which President Buhari signed into law in February 2022. Continuing Nigeria's reputation for using advanced technology in elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) utilized two technological innovations to improve the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. The Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) verifies and authenticates voters, and the INEC Results Viewing Portal is a public-facing voter tabulation system that the INEC deployed nationwide.

The build-up to the 2023 general election in Nigeria was fraught with uncertainty. This was largely a result of the past experiences of the Nigerian electorate, many of whom have a long-held belief that their votes do not count. This belief stems from a feeling of powerlessness to determine their elected leaders at various levels. These notwithstanding, majority of Nigerians still believe that democracy remains the best form of government for their country.

After over three decades of military rule following its independence in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed a series of general elections in recent times (Aina, 2023). Since the return of democracy which heralded the start of its Fourth Republic in 1999, the country has now held 10 general elections. While some of these elections have been characterized by irregularities, others have been outright abysmal. Such was the case with the 2007 general election that brought the late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua into office. Yar'Adua would eventually acknowledge that the election was nothing close to being free and fair. This led to his decision to priorities electoral reforms.

Nigeria's 2023 general election was one of the most keenly contested elections in the country's history. In 2015, the election of President Muhammadu Buhari was seen by many Nigerians as an opportunity to reset the country's affairs after a steep slide into backwardness, due to what was perceived as the gross incompetence of the previous administration. The Buhari administration promised to tackle security issues, particularly the persistent threat posed by Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the northeast (Aina, 2023). Other promises which won over the hearts and minds of Nigerians at the time included fighting corruption and prioritizing the economy.

Eight years on, while Nigeria has made some significant progress in degrading Boko Haram and ISWAP, President Buhari's claim that the insurgency has been 'technically defeated' has been disputed in several quarters, including among policy analysts and commentators (Aina, 2023). Similarly, the fight against corruption has mostly been perceived as 'selective' and politically motivated. In addition, the country has not made much progress on the economic front in the past eight years, with a high debt profile and a consistent rise in inflation. This has brought significant economic hardship on Nigerians. A recently published report from the National Bureau of Statistics contends that over half the population lives in multidimensional poverty.

Beyond its apparent failure to deliver on some of its promises, other challenges have emerged under the Buhari administration. In the North-West, for instance, the nefarious activities of armed bandits have claimed the lives of thousands and led to the forced displacement of many others. Recent years have seen increased secessionist agitations from the Indigenous People of Biafra and atrocities perpetrated by its paramilitary wing, the Easter Security Network, as well as Yoruba Nation agitators. Concerns over the administration's handling of the #EndSARS movement also increased friction in state- society relations, particularly between the government and young people, who were protesting police brutality that they claimed was mostly targeted at them. Another vital factor that affected the 2023 general elections was the timing of the ill-informed cashless policy of the Central Bank of Nigeria, which has not only created a cash crunch across the

country, but has also partly damaged Nigeria's informal economy, impacting small businesses and subsistence households. The general election therefore offered Nigerians an opportunity to elect a fresh set of political leaders. Assurances given by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) prior to the elections through the introduction of technologically driven interventions such as the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal were intended to guarantee the credibility of the voting process. These initial assurances contributed to the enthusiasm of first-time voters, with over 9.5 million registering to vote.

INEC's operational capacity was hampered by fuel and Naira shortage. Insecurity prevented it from accessing some Local Government Areas (LGAs), notably in the South. Attacks on INEC premises, including just days before polling, hindered preparations in affected areas while instilling fear in voters. Overall, stakeholders had expressed confidence in INEC's independence, professionalism, and voter information efforts, but this decreased ahead of the elections. INEC lacked efficient planning and transparency during critical stages of the electoral process, while on Election Day trust in INEC was seen to further reduce due to delayed polling processes and information gaps related to much-anticipated access to results on its Results Viewing Portal (IReV).

Conduct of Nigeria's 2023 general election

Despite the prevailing context of insecurity and other economic related problems, Nigerians were enthusiastic to go out and cast their votes. The great public interest in the elections was also related to the emergence of other party contenders challenging for the first time the two-way electoral contest between the incumbent All Progressives Congress (APC) and the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which lost power in 2015, after 16 years in office. There is a constitutional requirement for political parties to reflect a federal character. Parties have become devoid of distinct ideology, with leading candidates at federal and state level often changing loyalties to increase their chances in elections. The backdrop of the 2023 elections was marked by a shifting political landscape due to increased factionalism, especially within the major opposition PDP.

The APC fielded Bola Ahmed Tinubu, former governor of Lagos state for the presidential race. The flagbearer of PDP was former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar. The dominance of both main parties was contested by Peter Obi, former Governor of Anambra, who defected from PDP in May 2022 to run under the banner of the Labour Party (LP) and enjoyed strong popularity, especially among the youth, in some southern and Middle Belt states. A fourth contender, particularly strong in the northern Kano State, was Rabiu Kwankwaso, a former governor, who ran with the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). In all, there were 18 parties participating in the elections; all of them fielded a presidential candidate, only one of them was a woman.

By convention there is a rotation between zones in key elected and appointed positions in Nigeria, to promote national balance of religious representation between the predominantly Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south. At the end of the constitutional two terms limit of President Buhari (Muslim from the north), the presidential elections ensued wide-reaching controversies about zonal representation triggering intra-party disputes as neither the APC Muslim/Muslim ticket nor the PDP Muslim/Christian ticket were seen to adhere to it.

Nigeria's Electoral Management Body (EMB) introduced new technologies to improve administration of the 2023 polls, including BVAS and IReV. The BVAS was used to biometrically verify voters as part of the accreditation process and to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results at the end of the Election Day to the IReV online portal. Bimodal Voter

Accreditation System (BVAS) is an electronic device designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters – using the voters’ fingerprints – in order to prove that they are eligible to vote at a particular polling unit. The BVAS is a technological device used to identify and accredit voters’ fingerprints and facial recognition before voting. BVAS usage entails either scanning the barcode/QR code on the PVC/Voter’s register or entering the last six digits of the Voter Identity Number or typing in the last name of the voter by the Assistant Presiding Officer (APO 1) to verify and authenticate the voter. “Secondly, to replace the Z-pad for uploading the polling unit results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) in real-time on election day”. BVAS also acts as the INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) during voter registration. Its usage has also eliminated the use of incident forms during accreditation on an election day.

Publishing polling unit-level results through IREV was widely anticipated to be a significant improvement to election transparency from the 2019 polls. However, the success of these technologies is dependent on their administration, functionality on a national scale, and public confidence in the systems (IRI/NDI report, 2023). While INEC successfully piloted both systems during three off-cycle elections, it never conducted a full nationwide stress test in advance of the February elections.

In January 2023, after the procurement of BVAS machines for the 2023 elections was completed, the BVAS hardware and software was field tested at INEC state offices. Citizen observers Yiaga-Africa were able to observe the field tests in some, but not all, locations, as the exercise was reportedly not intended to be open to the public (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Positively, INEC conducted a public mock accreditation exercise on February 4 during which time results and accreditation data were also transmitted to the IREV using the BVAS machines. However, the exercise involved only 436, or less than one-third of one percent, of the polling units in the country and public participation was low.

The INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) is a platform created by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria to provide real-time transmission of election results from polling units to the central collation centre. IREV enables the people to view election results real time from various polling units across the country (Businessday, Wednesday, July 19, 2023). The IREV is an online portal where polling unit level results are uploaded directly from the polling unit, transmitted and published for the public. At the front end of the online portal, members of the public can create personal accounts with which they can gain access to all uploaded results stored as PDF files.

The portal provides pictures of the election results from each polling unit, including the number of votes cast for each candidate and the percentage of total votes cast.

This accessibility of polling unit level results increases transparency and public trust in the process. Thus, IREV was designed to enhance the transparency of the electoral process and reduce the incidence of vote rigging and election manipulation. IREV was first introduced by INEC in 2020 when a by-election was conducted in Nasarawa state. The IREV was put to use in the off-season elections, including the Ekiti and Osun governorship polls with the electoral body and stakeholders in the electoral process gave credibility to the exercise.

The portal is also backed by the 2022 Electoral Act which gives INEC the power to deploy appropriate technologies for the conduct of elections in the country. Section 41(1) gives the commission the mandate to provide suitable boxes, electronic voting machines, or any other voting devices for the conduct of elections. Section 47(2) requires the presiding officer to use a smart card reader or any other technological device prescribed by the commission to verify, confirm, authenticate, and accredit voters has vast experience in election results transmission via the iReV.

Among 93.4 million registered voters, 9.5 million additional voters have registered ahead of the 2023 polls, of whom two-thirds were youth following mobilisation efforts during the registration period. Yet, the collection of permanent voter cards (PVC), a requirement to vote, was negatively affected by poor institutional planning. Two days before the elections, INEC stated that 93.3 per cent of PVCs were collected. Without an independent audit of the voter register, quality and inclusiveness could not be assured.

Nigerians were relieved that the presidential election date was respected without a last-minute postponement as happened in the past; nevertheless, many complained that polling stations opened late across the country on account of the late deployment of staff and materials. These challenges were not experienced equally across the country, and disproportionately impacted voters in the South-East and South-South geo-political zones. While this pattern had been experienced in past elections, the regional difference in delays was more glaring during the 2023 elections, and INEC's lack of transparency and communication regarding the cause and extent of these problems undermined confidence in the process, especially in those zones and among parties that considered those areas their strongholds. Because of the delayed openings, many voters had to wait for long hours and in overcrowded conditions before casting their ballots. There was no consistent, coordinated effort to extend voting hours, and long wait times exacerbated tensions at many polling units.

The introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the IReV for the 2023 elections was perceived as an important step to ensure the integrity and credibility of elections. However, delayed training of technical personnel, an inadequate mock testing exercise, and a lack of public information on the election technologies diminished expectations and left room for speculation and uncertainty. During the early stages of collation, presidential result forms from polling units was not displayed on the IReV, while Senate and House of Representative results were slowly published. Presidential election result forms started to be uploaded after 10 pm on election day, raising concerns and reaching only 20 per cent by noon on 26 February. Later the same evening, INEC explained the delay with "technical hitches."

Indeed, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) generally facilitated the accreditation process of voters, although observers noted that devices sometimes malfunctioned with regards to thumbprint recognition. In a number of cases, the BVAS could not successfully transmit the results of all three electoral contests at the polling unit, and polling staff cited network issues. Citizen observers noted significant administrative improvements in BVAS functionality during the subsequent gubernatorial and state elections.

As the election progressed targeted incidents of violence impacted the polling process and likely disenfranchised voters. According to civil society violence monitors, news reports, and statements from INEC and security forces, Election Day violence and disruption of the electoral process occurred in at least 22 states and the FCT, including an attack on a collation center in Lagos.

Election violence and insecurity significantly affected the 2023 elections, particularly in the pre-election period. The lead-up to the election was more violent than the equivalent period in 2019, and the overall 2023 election cycle saw significantly more fatalities and incidents of election violence, in significantly more LGAs, when compared to the 2019 election cycle (Ojukwu, Umeifekwu and Okeke, 2023). Reported incidents included: assassinations and attempted assassinations of political candidates and party officials, attacks on supporters and rallies of opposing parties, and attacks on INEC facilities, processes (such as voter registration events), and personnel. Insecurity on Election Day was also significantly worse than during the 2019 elections, with violent disruptions of election processes reported in 22 states and the FCT on February 25 and 21 states during gubernatorial and state elections on March 18. Much of the violence was targeted political violence seemingly organized by, or at least conducted with the support of, politicians and/or party officials. Election violence was exacerbated by intra-party disputes during some of the primaries, shifting political alliances, the rise in armed groups, the emergence of new informal security elements, and a persistent failure to hold perpetrators of such acts to account. Peace accords and other peace-building initiatives appeared to have very limited impact, and the impunity of violent offenders continues to hamper a constructive path forward as politicians continue to see political violence as a viable and low-cost electoral strategy (Ojukwu, Umeifekwu and Okeke, 2023).

Result of the elections

On 1 March, INEC declared that Bola Tinubu (APC) obtained 8,794,726 votes (36.61 percent), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) came in second with 6,984,520 votes (29.07 percent), and Peter Obi (LP) came third with 6,101,533 votes (25.40 percent). Rabi'u Kwankwaso (NNPP) was declared to have obtained 1,496,687 votes (6.23 percent). The results showed that among some 93.5 million registered PVC card holders, only some 25 million (27 percent) had cast their vote. Based on its parallel vote tabulation, YIAGA Africa (2023) averred that presidential results for Imo and Rivers states were not consistent with its findings.

Expectedly, the results process leading to the declaration of Bola Tinubu as winner was disputed by the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the Labour Party (LP) and the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP). PDP and LP headed to the Court of Appeal (CoA). Acting expeditiously, the Court of Appeal on 8 March granted the PDP and LP access to certified copies of INEC materials and technological data used in the 25 February elections. It also enabled INEC to prepare its election technology for the 18 March polls. Meanwhile, LP and PDP alleged that INEC did not comply with court orders made in their favour, raising concerns for further court interventions. PDP returned to the Court of Appeal but, on 15 March withdrew again, stating that INEC had started to provide the materials sought. However, as late as 16 March the Labour Party was still alleging non-compliance by INEC, despite getting assurances that the requested information would be provided. Labour Party also stated that the lack of information impeded their ability to conclude the preparation of their petition. The 25 February post-election environment was largely peaceful, with parties appealing to supporters for calm. However, a few days before the 18 March elections, violence abruptly increased with more than a dozen attacks and abductions of candidates by thugs and unidentified gunmen, some of which resulted in fatalities. Violence shortly before and on Election Day appeared to strategically suppress voter participation.

On 7 March, the INEC published the lists with winners of 428 out of 469 National Assembly seats on its Twitter account. Results in seven Senatorial districts and 32 House of Representatives (HoR) constituencies were declared inconclusive and supplementary elections were held after the state-level polls. Following the killing of the LP senatorial candidate in Enugu-East on 22 February, INEC

postponed the elections in this district to coincide with the state-level polls. The 2023 Nigerian House of Representatives elections were held on 25 February 2023 where voters elected members of the House of Representatives using first-past-the-post voting in all 360 federal constituencies. The last regular House elections for all districts were in 2019. The APC have held a majority in the House of Representatives since the 2015 elections and solidified that majority in 2019. Announced results showed that APC were returned with a majority 59 Senate seats and 176 House of Representatives. PDP obtained 36 and 118, respectively, LP was returned with 8 Senate and 35 House of Representatives seats, while the NNPP won two senatorial and 19 House of Representatives seats. In total, eight parties are now represented in the National Assembly. Only three senatorial and 14 House of Representatives seats were won by women, the lowest female representation in the National Assembly since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

Nigeria witnessed a surge in registration of young people in the lead up to the 2023 elections, and youth engaged actively in other aspects of the Nigerian electoral process. According to INEC, voters between the ages of 18 to 34 represented 76.6 percent of new registered voters for the 2023 general elections and 39.7 percent of all registered voters in 2023. Young people were engaged as community organizers and voter mobilisers and educators for their peers and communities (Yiaga Africa, 2023; IRI/NDI report, 2023). Despite their engagement, Youth have been poorly represented as candidates for elected office, even when they contest in large numbers. Despite the legislative advances from the #NotTooYoungtoRun campaign that lowered the age requirement for standing for elected office, there were few youth candidates, especially when considered relative to the substantial percentage of young people on the voter register.

Challenges of Electoral Credibility in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

There is nowhere in the world where absoluteness can be attained during the electioneering process, the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections in Nigeria despite being applauded, there were shortcomings observed before, during, and after the conduct of the election. These issues affected the credibility of the elections. There are conflicts and agitations everywhere, feelings of marginalization and exclusion, a rise in political and criminal violence, loss of control of borders, rising ethnic, religious, and cultural hostilities, weak institutions, food shortages, unemployment, inflation, crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating human development indicators such as infant and maternal mortality, and literacy rates. These troubling realities made the 2023 general elections a defining moment for the country. Consequently, the challenges of electoral credibility in Nigeria's 2023 general elections among others include the problem of election security, the capacity and independence of the electoral management body, corruption and vote- buying or money politics as well as the problem of technology adaptation as elaborately captured below.

The capacity and independence of the Nigerian electoral management body- INEC has long been contested. Incidents like the burning or stealing of some of the commission's materials, fake names on the electoral register and under-age registrations in some parts of the country raised questions about its possible connivance and dampens the integrity of INEC. The 2022 Electoral Act introduced innovations like the electronic transmission of results from the polling units and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System. These were intended to curb rigging. But some political forces were believed to be opposed to their use. There were allegations that the All- Progressives Congress (APC) used INEC officials to conduct widespread thumb- printing and BVAS was not used in certain locations (Hassan, 2023).

Secondly, the issue of election security is a front burner as the general insecurity in Nigeria made

it difficult, if not impossible, to conduct credible elections in some parts of the country. The level of insecurity in Nigeria is multifaceted as such one cannot accurately categorize the patterns of insecurity. The 2023 elections took place in an environment of widespread insecurity. With growing banditry in the North West, persistent violence driven by the Boko Haram insurgency in the North East, the expansion of ISIS into Nigeria's North Central region, the expansion of farmer-herder violence into Southern Nigeria, and the emergence of the IPOB insurgency in the South East, insecurity had reached historic highs in 2022. While insecurity has consistently been a feature of elections in Nigeria, stakeholders agreed that for prior elections it had been more localized (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

Nigeria's national security has been compromised through incessant corruption, the activities of boko haram terrorists, the daily killings by bandits and other criminal gangs, menacing poverty, dearth of infrastructure, institutions with weak performance capacities, a governance elite that is far away from the aspirations of the governed and too removed that it has become irresponsible and insensitive to the plight of its subjects. Insecurity paranoia is continuing to haunt all inhabitants of Nigeria as it is already fast dawning on them that government cannot effectively guarantee the security of lives and properties. The state security agents who are saddled with the responsibility for the security of life and property which include- the police, state security agencies, the military, immigration, and prison service have mostly performed abysmally in the discharge of their duties.

Importantly, there was presence of security personnel in most of the polling units during the elections. However, their impact was not felt in the places where there were violent incidents. It is the duty of security personnel deployed for election duties to protect voters, election officials and materials, which they failed to do in these instances, a reflection of what was witnessed during the 2023 Presidential and Governorship Elections in February and March. This phenomenon is appearing to be the new normal.

Thirdly corruption is a clog in the wheel of any nation struggling for the enthronement and consolidation of democracy and good governance (Punch Newspaper, July 7th, 2005). This shows that democracy cannot be predicated on a fragile and unstable political base. Corruption as a devastator has greatly eroded the fundamental values of democracy and its essential principles. Corruption in its popular conception is defined as the exploitation of public position, resources and power for private/'selfish gain. For instance, Dobel (1978) defined corruption as "the betrayal of public trust for individual or group gain". In a similar vein, Obayelu (2007) identifies it as "efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private gain at public expense, or a misuse of public power for private benefits". According to Ogundiya (2010), events in Nigeria since 1999 have shown that the tidal waves of reversal have been contending with Nigeria's democratic project. Consequently, democracy remains grossly unstable and the future seems to be very bleak because of rampant bureaucratic and political corruption. Corruption has reached a high crescendo such that an average Nigerian now possibly associates democracy with it. The consequences of political corruption are potently manifest: cyclical crisis of legitimacy, fragile party structure, institutional decay, chronic economic problem and unemployment, and above all general democratic volatility. Corruption in this country is generally characterized by Looting of funds and wealth kept secretly, i.e. capital flight; misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds; money laundering (acquiring money through fraudulent ways); drug and child trafficking; illegal arms deal; gratification which involves monetary, material or physical favour as a condition or reward for performing official duty, official abuse of office in which an official suppresses and violates an oath of office and nepotism which is granting underserved favors to

one's relations. Corruption scandal in the oil sector totaling N1.7 trillion from 1999-2011, Police Pension Fund of ₦18 billion as well as the James Ibori N450 billion corruption case of money laundering in London is just the tip of an iceberg as far as corruption is concern in Nigeria.

Closely related to the above is the fourth factor which is the problem of vote buying or money politics which has also affected the credibility of the 2023 elections. Indeed, money is crucial in any election, especially in Nigeria, where the high level of poverty means that people need financial support before they can even attend campaign rallies. Vote-trading has also become a prominent feature of elections. Election campaigns in Nigeria are characterized by lavish spending of money, denying participants a level playing field in favour of those who control governments and state resources. The influence of money in Nigerian political processes has also reduced the incentive for political parties to earn voters' confidence through issue-based campaigning and party platforms that respond to citizen priorities. Vote buying is frequently reported in the lead up to election day, despite an established regulatory framework (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Despite measures to improve the transparency of the electoral system, it was likely that money remained a big factor in the 2023 general elections.

The fifth challenge is that technology adaptation in an infrastructure-challenged environment can affect the performance of the electoral institution creating credibility issues with the elections. Since 1999, each electoral cycle has become progressively worse than its preceding one with visible signs and wonders. Results were announced while people were still on the queues. Ballot box snatching and destruction and syndicated mayhem became the order and emergency professional god-fathers. Consequently, INEC decided to deploy technology to minimize deliberate undesirable human interference in the system and that was how BVAS was created as a software that promised and still promises a seamless and sure process between accreditation, voting, result collation and announcement. Billions in hard currencies, including the Naira, were deployed to perfect and procure the software with the supporting hardware. INEC assured the citizens that BVAS and IReV was a solution to all electoral frauds and allied shortcomings, it will also shame the political buccaneers. With BVAS and IReV, snatching of ballot boxes, deliberate mis-recording and manipulation of results, missing result-sheets, and filling fake results would be of no use.

it is clear that the use of technology such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) (a facial recognition system aiding voter accreditation), and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) might have boosted confidence in the Commission, but overall trust in INEC has declined. And this is not unconnected with the fact that INEC was not consistent and open in its communication about electoral updates and procedures; it also failed to provide important election data on voter registration and Permanent Voter Card (PVC) statistics in a timely manner. This was particularly pronounced during and immediately after the February 25 elections, when INEC failed to provide timely or accessible information regarding the nature and scope of late openings, cancelled elections, and challenges with the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). Such actions and/or omissions fueled confusion and uncertainty. The management of the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) collection exercise has also led to citizen discontent, with many alleging that INEC staff in key strongholds of either ruling or opposition parties are denying citizens the ability to collect their voter cards.

Moreover, vote manipulation in some Southern states identified by Yiaga Africa's Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) revealed vulnerabilities in the integrity of INEC officials and oversight mechanisms, and disparities in the levels of election quality and access in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Publishing polling station-level results through IReV is one of the major

improvements to election transparency since the 2019 polls. However, the system was not tested at a national scale and floundered during crucial hours of the immediate post-election period, stoking confusion, and suspicion about the results. Furthermore, the decision of the election petition tribunal quashing the win of the PDP governor in Osun state on grounds including over-voting and non-synchronization of the BVAS has somewhat dampened citizens' confidence in the ability of technology to solve Nigeria's election challenges.

While IReV provided voters the ability to look up the results of individual polling stations, the portal was not in compliance with open election data principles and did not provide the information in a complete, bulk, or machine analyzable format, limiting the ability of citizens to verify results at the LGA, state and national level or to fact-check contradictory narratives. A significant percentage of the results uploaded to the IReV were unreadable. Furthermore, the late upload of more than 9,000 presidential polling unit results to the IReV did not help matters. The IReV system also required a login and password for several days following the election, creating barriers to access for what should be a fully public portal. Contrary to expectations and regulations, INEC used an alternate portal to house presidential results before posting them to the IReV (Section 38 (ii) of INEC's Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of Elections, 2022). INEC struggled to explain why it occurred, offering various explanations from technical glitches to cyber-attacks. Though these issues of transparency and missing results fueled speculation of deliberate malfeasance, the IReV system performed more in line with expectations for the gubernatorial and state elections on March 18 (CDD, 2023).

It was a real disappointment that the acclaimed game-changers could not change the game as they were short-changed by the unchangeable Nigerian system and political culture. The game-changers also chose whether, where and when to change the game positively, negatively or leave it unaltered because the national assembly (NASS) results fared relatively well. That was why some heavyweights became paperweights overnight. Sadly, INEC supported by former President Muhammad Buhari overpromised and under delivered. They raised and dashed peoples' hopes, failed to comply with the electoral act, the Chatham House reported that Presidential election was not conducted in line with INEC's guidelines, especially the one bordering on real-time uploading of results while the NLC condemned the deliberate subversion of the peoples will by individuals, parties, INEC and security agencies. Even the EU-EOM concluded that the 2023 general elections did not ensure a well-run transparent, and inclusive democratic process as assured by the INEC (EU-EOM, 2023).

INEC could further enhance transparency and increase public confidence in the use of these technologies by providing opportunities for observation of all aspects of the process, as well as by providing the public with comprehensive information about problems identified during these exercises and efforts to address them before subsequent elections.

Concluding Remarks

The success of any electoral process is dependent on the credibility, transparency, and efficiency of stakeholders that manage, regulate, and secure the process. Saddled with the responsibility of establishing the rules of play and conducting the 2023 elections, INEC is a central election stakeholder. Amidst widespread incidents of insecurity and severe currency and fuel shortages, the election management body, INEC, managed to administer a nationwide election according to the electoral calendar for the first time in more than a decade. INEC also undertook improvements in planning and organization and made concerted efforts to confront issues such

as overcrowding at polling units and results transparency. However, the foregoing illustrates the different levels of challenges bordering on the problems of election security, the capacity and independence of the electoral management body, corruption and vote- buying or money politics as well as the problem of technology adaptation which significantly affected the credibility of the electoral process.

Consequently, there is an important need for Nigeria to go back to the drawing board and address the problem of reform of the elections. Part of that reform will need to include accountability on the part of election officials and stakeholders. The presence of IReV has not brought the accountability expected due to its malfunction, thereby causing a credibility crisis for INEC. The Electoral Commission must be open and honest with Nigerians and provide a detailed explanation of what went wrong and why. If there was sabotage, the culprits must be brought to book. A more robust stress testing of IReV is needed to avoid its malfunction undermining future elections.

Securing the electoral process remains vital to ensuring electoral credibility. Thus, INEC, the police, and the courts should always identify and prosecute those responsible for electoral violence or manipulation to deter future occurrences.

The over-monetisation of politicking and political activities by political parties has over time, led to a situation where politicians strive to recover the huge amount of money, invested to secure political positions through engagement in acts of vote buying. Therefore, there should be an enabling law, enshrined in the electoral law that should discourage emphasis on money politics in our political system. There should be stringent laws against the activities of vote buying, as well as the political will to implement them. Specifically, section 1, subsection 21 of the 2022 Electoral Act in clear terms, forbids acts or indulgences, associated with either selling, buying or using money or other materially-inducing means to influence the outcome of elections. Therefore, it becomes incumbent on the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to recommend to the appropriate law enforcement agencies, the various penalties for vote buying like payment of fines, imprisonment or outright life ban to contest elections.

Social media companies need to expand their ability to respond promptly to falsehoods circulating on their platform, particularly on election day and immediately after. There should be improved collaboration with recognized fact-checking platforms to allow for quick response and action.

The 2023 election cycle has seen extraordinary levels of abuse of the electoral and collation process by political actors. Their sponsorship of obvious manipulations are electoral crimes that must be prosecuted if this trend is to be reversed. A failure to prosecute the sponsors and beneficiaries of electoral crimes will allow an environment of impunity to continue and escalate, putting both our democratic function and credibility at severe risk. INEC should fulfill its responsibility to prosecute violators of the Electoral Act 2022 and increase public communication about its intolerance of electoral offenses. Ahead of future elections, interpretations of the constitution as they relate to the requirements for a presidential winner to be declared or prospective run-off candidates to be selected should be clarified by the electoral management body in accordance with court injunctions to reduce the risk of post-election contestation. INEC needs to ensure that the different stakeholders and groups that the commission often draws ad-hoc personnel from, such as the Nigerian Youth Service Corp and staff of Nigerian Universities, have robust training schemes to mirror its efforts.

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