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Elections (2/2) – Time to Get It Right

Voting has come a long way in Nigeria, especially in the 15 years of our democracy. The number of voters has increased and the voting process has improved. In 1999, almost 58 million people registered to vote, with a 53% turn-out at the polls. The 2011 elections saw an increase in the number of registered voters to 73 million with a 54% turn-out and was considered relatively free and fair by observers. This was in stark contrast to both the 2003 and 2007 elections, which were said to have been plagued by a systematic manipulation of results. Towards the 2015 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has so far registered an estimated 70 million voters and counting. Commendably, it has deployed a biometric data system to reduce electoral fraud, and has already released a timetable for the 2015 general elections. However, past experiences becloud these achievements and many remain sceptical about the resolve of INEC to deliver a hitch-free and credible set of elections in 2015.

INEC has been marred by allegations of corruption and partiality in its conduct of past elections. Its 2012 – 2016 strategic plan identifies some of the commission's challenges to include late preparation for elections, poor record management, inadequate communication between its headquarters and state offices and poor quality of adhoc staff amongst others. In the context of the improvements already made, challenges identified and closeness to the general elections, I posit that there may be a few things that we can learn from various places to further improve the election's process. I do not advocate copying and pasting solutions, but encourage us to learn from those that have implemented solutions that work. After all, according to a Nigerian proverb "he who cannot learn from the experiences of his neighbour should be pitied."

Learning from India

From April to May 2014, India conducted the largest general election in the world. 815 million people registered to vote and 66% turned up at the polls. The process was considered free and fair with almost no post electoral violence recorded. The Electoral Commission of India adopted a Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT), an automatically generated receipt given to each voter after casting



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a vote to show who and what party was voted. This process reduced ambiguity over the candidate and party voted for by each individual. In essence, India leveraged technology to increase the credibility of voting during the country's general elections. Likewise, INEC can look to adapting technology to improve the voting experience and reduce electoral fraud.

Learning from Brazil

In October 2014, Brazil conducted its general elections with eleven candidates challenging the incumbent

President Dilma Rousseff. Of the 142 million possible voters, 81% turned out to cast their votes and the results were released within 48 hours. Electoral laws in Brazil indicate that a candidate must obtain over 50% of the valid votes in order to win. The incumbent president obtained only 41.6% of the votes and as such is subject to a run-off on October 26, 2014 with Aécio Neves, who obtained the second highest votes with 33.5%. In Brazil voting is compulsory for those aged between 18 and 70 years and the electoral voting system has been admired for its accuracy, efficiency and speed. INEC should ensure that as many Nigerians that seek to register to vote are able to do so with minimal hardship. It should also ensure that results are counted and released in good time and without manipulation.

Learning from Ghana

Ahead of the 2012 elections held in Ghana, the government invested heavily in certain infrastructure that was important to effectively carry out the electoral process. Electricity was supplied to difficult regions to ensure that the relevant instruments could be powered and roads were constructed to ensure that materials could reach some remote areas. In communities where election materials arrived late, polling stations were opened on the second day to ensure that the people had the opportunity to cast their vote. The electoral committee remains autonomous from the government and has thus far remained neutral in its dealings with political parties and other stakeholders. The Nigerian government should continue to strive to make the process for elections conducive in our quest for greater inclusion and participation of all in the process of governance.

Lessons from Nigerian States

Recent elections that have been conducted in isolation across states, such as Ekiti and Osun have been adjudged free and fair. The polling units were well organized, security presence ensured safety of lives and property and voter turn-outs were commendable. One is inclined to believe that the staggered nature of these elections played a part in their overall success. In other words, the fact that each of these elections was the focus of its time, resulted in a good process.

Although the timetable for the 2015 general election has been set, it may be worth revising this to stagger elections across the country over a few weeks, in order for INEC to focus on a region or geo-political zone at a time and ensure that processes are inclusive and successful.

Learning from Other Best Practices

According to electoral best practices, electoral commissions are mandated to have organizational and financial autonomy over their affairs and in the conduct of elections. Autonomy would enable them to perform their duties without unnecessary pressure from different political interest groups. In the United States of America, the Federal Elections Campaign Act stipulates clear guidelines for party and campaign funding. The area of finance is one that INEC must consider in detail. Campaigns and elections cannot continue to be excessive, otherwise elected officials will be inclined to first recuperate their funds and create a buffer for subsequent elections before aiming to do any work. INEC should therefore strive to put forward guidelines for the curtailment of excessive spending and ban on some types of expensive campaigning.

In addition to the foregoing lessons for government and INEC, there are higher expectations for civil society groups in the electoral process. We often hear about international observers, but little about our own civil society groups. Civil society organizations are supposed to help educate the people prior to elections, on their rights to vote and how this can be exercised. They are required to help ensure that disadvantaged groups such as disabled and in some cases, women are included in the electoral process. Furthermore, civil society organizations should deploy their representative to observe various polling units in order to ensure that there is no manipulation in the casting, counting or recording process. Lastly, they can interact with the media to provide independent views of the elections based on what they witnessed in the various polling units. The democratic process depends on civil society organizations to contribute to good governance and integrity.

When people turn up at the polling booths to face the hardships that come with voting, they do not want to be told that polling units are not ready or that the ballot boxes have been stolen. They want to exercise their sacred right to vote for the leaders whom they want in power. When the leaders emerge, they want them to be focused on getting the business of governance done and not enriching themselves beforehand. Let us therefore work to conduct elections that reflect the selection of leaders freely and fairly.

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