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From Pessimism to Optimism: An Assessment of Elections Conducted in Nigeria from 1999 – 2015

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Abstract:

Since 1960 when Nigeria became independent of British colonial administration up to 2015 when the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC conducted an epoch-making election, Nigerians have contended with the pains and consequences of mismanaged elections which are often violent. This paper aims at an assessment of the trajectory of election administration in Nigeria from 1999 to 2015 during which period Nigerians' perception of election administration plummeted from hopelessness to hopefulness. The era of pessimism is represented by the 2003 and 2007 general elections when Nigerians lost hope in INEC and the electoral process. The era of optimism is represented by the 2011 and 2015 general elections when INEC conducted credible elections in Nigeria's sixteen years of uninterrupted democracy. Using structural functionalism as a theoretical framework for analysis, the paper relied heavily on secondary source of data collection (documentary sources), and adopted content analysis approach for data analysis. Recommendations are made for sustaining the tempo of credible election delivery as witnessed in the 2015 general elections.

Keywords: *Election, INEC, Nigeria, Optimism and Pessimism.*

1. Introduction

Elections are very central to the principle and practice of democracy anywhere in the world and the management of elections by the electoral umpire in any country occupies a strategic and significant place in the electoral process and by implication, the consolidation of electoral democracy, (Odoziobodo, 2015). An election management body is always created for the management of a nation's elections into political offices and the goal of such a body is to ensure the realization of the will of the people in terms of making their votes count; in ensuring that the outcome of election results reflects the wishes and aspirations of the electorate. In the case of Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the nation's electoral umpire created in 1998. Since coming into existence, it has conducted series of elections including the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and the 2015 general elections, in addition to many supplementary and bye-elections to complete inconclusive elections; fill vacancies caused by the death of the position occupant and election results nullified by election tribunals or the court. Arguably, the periods 1999 to 2007 were characterized by unwholesome electoral practices that created doubts about the resolve of Nigerian leadership to entrench the culture of democratic elections in Nigeria. The rampancy of electoral violence, ballot snatching; falsification of results and emasculation of the electoral body by the party in power ridiculed the process. For instance, the Human Rights Watch reports that:

- In April and May 2003, at least one hundred people were killed and many more injured during federal and state elections in Nigeria. The majority of serious abuses were perpetrated by members or supporters of the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In a number of locations, elections simply did not take place as groups of armed thugs linked to political parties and candidates intimidated and threatened voters in order to falsify results. The violence and climate of intimidation facilitated widespread fraud, invalidating the results of the elections in many areas (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

The magnitude of these acts of infamy and indifference of the nation's leadership dovetailed to hopelessness and loss of faith in elections by many concerned Nigerians. Taking cognizance of the bizarre situation, Ken Nnamani, Nigeria's former Senate President posits that "the problem in Nigeria is that every succeeding election is worse than the previous one". According to him, "that does not show growth, it does not show that our democracy is being deepened, talk less of thriving" (Ibrahim and Garuba, 2010). There has been raging arguments that the 2007 elections were worse than those of 2003. Analyzing the peculiarities, the Human Rights Watch notes that during the elections, elected officials alongside the very government agencies charged with ensuring the credibility of the

polls reduced the elections to a violent and fraud-riddled farce. Across much of the country, several other forms of malpractice occurred in various degrees and devastating impacts. It was widely reported that,

- Armed gangs in the employ of politicians raided polling stations and carried off ballot boxes; and that electoral officials reported massive turnout figures in areas where no voting took place at all while in many areas ballot boxes were openly stuffed or results fabricated out of thin air such that the final results bore little resemblance to the realities reported by all credible election observers, domestic and foreign, but the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reported a landslide victory for the ruling PDP, (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

However, the conduct of the 2011 general elections changed the election management mechanism, both in content and character. The results of the elections to some extent reflected the wishes of the people, despite the fact that the aftermath violence tainted the credibility of the elections. The post-election analysis gave impetus to additional precautions to be applied in future election management. In 2015 therefore, the general elections witnessed tremendous improvements and was a significant departure from the earlier debacles. Most fundamentally, the election recorded the defeat of a sitting president by opposition candidate for the first time in Nigeria's history. Besides being adjudged free and fair; the President (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) conceded defeat and congratulated his rival, General Muhammadu Buhari, even before the results of the election was officially declared by INEC. It fundamentally sets the tone for a change in our democratic values and electoral process.

The paper therefore assesses the trajectory of election administration in Nigeria's sixteen years of uninterrupted democracy, from 1999 to 2015. The various elections are classified into two discrete perspectives. The first comprises of 2003 and 2007 elections that fall within the period we refer to as era of "**pessimism**". This is basically because the elections were adjudged by both local and international election observers and monitoring groups as the worst elections ever conducted in Nigeria's political history. The second category is the likes of the 2011 and 2015 general elections that we label the era of "**optimism**". In the most part, both elections were adjudged as relatively free and fair elections conducted in Nigeria. The paper examines the prerequisites for efficient election management that delivers credible and widely accepted election results and guarantee peaceful succession process and the legitimacy of political leadership in a diverse country like Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Clarifications

2.1. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is the body created by section 153 (F) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to take care of conducting elections into various political offices in Nigeria and other related activities, (FGN 1999). It was inaugurated on August 11, 1998 by the then Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar to manage the transition process expected to lead the nation to its fourth republic after several years of military dictatorship. The Third Schedule, Section 14 of the 1999 Constitution streamlined the composition of the Commission, to include a Chairman, who shall be the Chief Electoral officer of the Commission and twelve (12) other members who are known as National Electoral Commissioners. They shall be persons of unquestionable integrity and not less than fifty (50) years and forty (40) years of age respectively. There shall also be for each State and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, a Resident Electoral Commissioner, who shall be appointed by the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Chairman and the twelve National Electoral Commissioners of the commission are appointed by the President after due consultation with the Council of State but subject to Senate confirmation.

The statutory functions of the commission as contained in the Constitution (1999) include:

- (a) To organize, undertake and supervise all elections to the office of the President and Vice President, the Governor and Deputy Governor of a State, and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and the House of Assembly of each State of the federation.
- (b) Register political parties in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution and Act of the National Assembly.
- (c) Monitor the organization and operation of the political parties including their finances.
- (d) Arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts of political parties and publish a report on such examination and audit for public information.
- (e) Arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election under this constitution.
- (f) Monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties;
- (g) Ensure that all Electoral Commissioners, Electoral and Returning Officers take and subscribe to the oath of office prescribed by law.
- (h) Delegate any of its powers to any Resident Electoral Commissioner and
- (i) Carry out such other functions as may be conferred upon it by an Act of the National Assembly.

2.2. Election

Election is generally the process by which people are elected by qualified members of an organization through votes to pilot the affairs of the organization for a defined period of time. From the political point of view, election is the process by which qualified members of the public elect from candidates presented by different political parties, those to pilot the affairs of the state for a defined period of time. Elections are conceived as a formal expression of preferences by the governed, which are then aggregated and transformed into a collective decision about who will govern, who should stay in office, who should be thrown out, and who should replace those who have been thrown out. It is simply the process of elite selection system (Ojo, 2008). In other words, election is the process of reaching

consensus on the representative of the citizens of a particular state in public offices (Okibe, 2015). As Diamond (2002) asserted, elections are the litmus test of a democratic political system. For Huntington, a political system is democratic 'to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes, and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote' (Huntington, 1991).

Nohlen, (1996) believes that the conceptualization of election in the political realm rests squarely on the concept of liberal democracy. Lindbergh (2004) corroborates the assertion, noting therefore that every modern vision of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selecting political decision markers. For Chiroro, (2005), election is at "the heart of democratic order". In that vein, Bratton (1998) feels that "elections do not, in and of themselves, constitute a consolidated democracy, but they remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation. In his own view Ojo (2007) amplified the perspective by describing elections as "institutional mechanisms that implement democracy by allowing citizens to choose among candidates or issues". Elections, no doubts, are therefore crucial instrument for electoral mobilization and recruitment of leaders by the electorate in a democratic system. Krause (1982) while affirming the postulation argued that voting remains the principal form of political activity in representative democracy. By implication, elections can thus, be seen as the most important mechanism by which elected officials are held accountable to the electorate (Obi & Musa 1999; Momoh & Adejumbi, 1999).

2.3. Pessimism

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines pessimism as "the tendency to be sad and anxious and to believe that the worst will happen". As far as this paper is concerned, pessimism signifies the state of mind occasioned by mismanaged election delivery in Nigeria which made many of the people to lose hope in the entire electoral process. The era of pessimism in Nigeria's electoral history was between 2003 and 2007 when the worst happened during elections; it was the era of do-or-die politics, the period when many people lost their lives as a result of election related violence; a period when most election results were manufactured and people whom the authorities wanted to win, had their ways without necessarily deriving such victory from the popular votes of the people. It was a very sad period for Nigerians as far as election into political offices are concerned.

2.4. Optimism

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines optimism as "the tendency to expect the best in all things; confidence in the success of a course of action". For this paper, optimism signifies the state of mind occasioned by credible election delivery when the people of Nigeria feel happy and confident that their votes are beginning to count. It is a period when the people feel that if their leaders are not doing well, they will have the opportunity to vote them out in the next election. The era of optimism in Nigeria's electoral process started in 2011 when election started to seem free and fair. It progressed up to the 2015 general election when the then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan was defeated by Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a thing many Nigerians never expected would happen in Nigeria's electoral history. It gave Nigerians cheering hope that their votes will now begin to count in elections. There is consensus that through free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria, democracy will be properly entrenched; accountability and good governance also assured.

3. Theoretical Framework

Odoziobodo (2015) in a similar study, "INEC and the Conduct of Elections in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the 2007 General Elections," used structural functionalism or the structural functionalist theory traced to Talcott Parsons (1971) and Gabriel Almond (1960) as the framework for analysis and the theory as reflected in that study is hereby adapted for the analysis of this study. According to Varma (1975), structural functional analysis revolves around certain concepts more important of which are: functions and structures. In using structural functional analysis, three basic questions are usually asked, namely: (a) What basic functions are fulfilled in any given system, (b) By what structures and (c) Under what conditions? In the words of Merton (1949), "functions are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunction, those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system". A system on its own part has been variously defined as "a set of elements standing in interaction" (Bertalanffy, 1956); "a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes" (Hall and Fagen, 1956); and "a whole which is compounded of many parts- an ensemble of attributes" Cherry (1961).

The implication of all these definitions is that a system implies the idea of a group of objects or elements standing in some characteristic structural relationship to one another and interacting on the basis of certain characteristic processes. When action takes place in a given system, functional and/or dysfunctional consequences are usually produced, and beside the concept of function, another very important concept in structural functional analysis is that of structure (Varma, 1975). While function deals with the consequences, involving objectives as well as processes of pattern of actions, structure refers to those arrangements within the system which perform the functions. A single function may be fulfilled by a complex combination of structures, just as any given structural arrangement may perform functions which might have different kinds of consequences for the structure. This theoretical framework is therefore apt for this study. In the main, scholars have observed that a political system comprises of many structures, all working or performing certain functions to make the system operative. For any political system to work it means that several activities need to be performed and certain institutions are created to perform some of these roles or functions.

Nigeria operates a political system and certain institutions also known as structures are created to perform certain roles or functions for the maintenance of the Nigerian society. Although government exists, it rarely functions without the leadership that is, elected officers of the state, such as the President, Governors and the Legislators. It is only election that confers legitimacy on the positions and

offices. The election must be credible and adjudged by both local and international election monitors and observers to be free and fair. In that vein, the statutory responsibility for the conduct of the elections falls on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Besides, other ancillary structures or institutions complement the duties of INEC. They can be broadly classified into several elements including the political parties, the electorates; the political elites, security agencies, and civil society organizations, etc. They play different roles in the political system. The structural functionalist theory offers this study the tools with which to analyze how each of these structures performed their different functions for the political leadership to emerge in elections conducted from 1999-2015. In the course of performing their different roles, some intended or unintended, recognized or unrecognized consequences manifested which enhanced or lessened the adaptation or adjustment of the system to globally approved standard, thereby bringing about dysfunction in the system. These intended and unintended consequences as well as the dysfunctions are analyzed in this research to find out what led people to become pessimistic or optimistic at different points in time within Nigeria's electoral process.

4. Overview of Elections Conducted in Nigeria Since 1999

4.1. The 1999 General Election

The Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC kick-started the experimentation of their constitutional mandates on election administration in Nigeria with the conduct of series of elections that took place in December 5 [1998] (Local Government), the 1999 transition elections, January 9, 1999 (State Assembly and Governors), February 20, 1999 (National Assembly), and February 27, 1999 (Presidential) election which provided Nigeria with civilian government. It was a transitional election in the sense that at that time, Nigeria was transiting from a 16 years' military government to a civilian government. The election was midwife by the military. Three major political parties, namely, the Alliance for Democracy, (AD), All Peoples Party, (APP) and the Peoples Democratic Party, (PDP) participated in the 1999 general election and the results indicated that the Alliance for Democracy, (AD) won in all the six states in South-West Nigeria; the All peoples party, (APP) won in 9 states while the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) won in the remaining 21 states. Also, PDP won the Presidential election contested by General Olusegun Obasanjo against Chief Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy, AD and in addition had majority in the National and State Houses of Assembly elections. Prior to the election, Nigerians were expectant, hoping to embrace democratic governance after several decades of military occupation of the political space. However, there is a general impression that the 1999 general elections were relatively peaceful as well as free and fair despite pronounced cases of apathy inflicted on the citizens by the past military's deceptive, manipulative and inconclusive or botched military to civilian transition programmes. Nevertheless, the very many who found solace in the elections were earnestly desirous of ousting the military from civil politics and governance in order to have a civilian government after 16 years of authoritarian rule. This electrified temperament filled the air, and according to Ibrahim and Garuba (2010),

- despite some obvious lapses and very strident protestations of partiality in favour of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) that emerged as one of the three parties on the stage, INEC was adjudged to have done relatively well, especially in the context of the very short time it had to plan its work and given the magnitude of the task itself. The commission thus acquitted itself rather commendably before the court of the Nigerian people who had long yearned for a break from military rule and sought to join the civilized world liberal democracy.

In any case, the elections were far from being perfect. There were irregularities on the side of both parties as each of them tried to win at all costs. It was such glaring that General Abdulsalam Abubakar, the outgoing Military Head of State acknowledged that there were irregularities in the elections even though the level of rigging was not sufficient to change the result of the elections nor enough to lead to a reordering of voting, (Daily Champion, 1999). Even at that, excessive malpractices and violence characterized the elections and both the local and international observers adjudged it not free and fair, but treated it as a learning phase (Okibe, 2015)

4.2. The 2003 General Elections

INEC conducted another general election in 2003 which unlike the 1999 elections supervised by the military, was the first post-military election organized and supervised by the civilians. In other words, the 2003 elections signaled the beginning of the era of pessimism in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. The elections were anything but credible and they left much to be desired. As Okibe (2015) posits, altercations, inter and intra-party conflict, deployment of state apparatus for prosecution of inter-group rivalries, litigations, unwarranted restrictions on the activities of observation groups, visible partiality of the electoral umpire (Independent National Electoral Commission), and desecration of known global democratic culture and principle, were rife. Describing the elections further, the International Republican Institute (2003) identified another shortfall, noting that,

- INEC, a constitutionally mandated federal body responsible for administering the elections, faltered in meeting its responsibilities. A flawed voter registration process, related failures to meet statutorily mandated deadlines, and controversies pertaining to the certification of candidates and the design of the voting ballot undermined confidence in the process before the two elections. INEC also faltered in its management of election-related logistical preparations. Voting stations throughout the country were unprepared to receive voters on April 12 for the National Assembly elections. Both elections had significant procedural irregularities as officials failed to use critical balloting materials and election workers were not adequately trained. Procedural laxities in certain instances facilitated deliberate electoral abuses (IRI, 2003)

Apart from the electoral umpire, the political elites equally contributed to the bungling of the elections as they perpetrated rigging and various kinds of manipulations as well as violence. According to the International Republican Institute:

- Most troubling to IRI observers were the many directly observed instances of manipulation. Observers witnessed acts of deliberate malfeasance in five of the 13 states - Cross River, Imo, Katsina, Nassarawa and Rivers. These instances included actual and attempted ballot box stuffing, the destruction or diversion of ballots and ballot boxes after their removal from voting stations, and the falsification of election result forms (IRI, 2003).

Moreover, the spate of violence witnessed in the 2003 general elections was unprecedented. The election could be described as warfare in which there was a free for all fight between the party in power, (PDP) and other opposition parties. They all used armed thugs to prosecute the violence and many voters were disenfranchised as a result of electoral violence. For instance, the Environmental Rights Action, one of the accredited election monitors in the election observed that in parts of Rivers and Bayelsa States observed by their monitors, the elections could be characterized as a low intensity armed struggle. Weapons and firearms of various types and sophistication were freely used (Environmental Rights Action, 2003).

The consequence of the massive rigging and violence that took place in the 2003 general elections was that Nigerians were scandalized and as such began to lose interest, in addition to becoming despondent about elections conducted by INEC. It made many Nigerians to loathe coming out to vote in subsequent elections since it translates to a waste of time as their votes don't count, mockery of votes cast and exposure to all manners of risk as, one could be wounded or even killed in the process of trying to cast one's votes. This was the beginning of the period described in this paper as the era of pessimism in the Nigerian electoral process.

4.3. The 2007 General Elections

The 2007 general elections took place in April 2007. State elections for the Governor and the House of Assembly held on April 14, while national elections comprising of Presidential, Senate and House of Representatives took place on 21 April. The major contenders in the election were Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua, flag bearer of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), General Muhammadu Buhari, flag bearer of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the Action Congress (AC). At the end of polls, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) garnered 70 percent of the votes in the presidential election and was declared winner. It also won 28 Governorships, 86 out of 109 Senatorial seats and 169 House of Representatives seats out of the announced 247. The ANPP won 19 percent of the Presidential election votes, 5 Governorship, 15 Senatorial seats, and 49 House of Representatives seats. Finally, the AC received 7 percent of the Presidential election votes, 1 Governorship; 1 Senatorial seat and 3 House of Representatives seats. According to these figures, PDP secured two-thirds majority in both chambers of the National Assembly, 79 percent in the Senate, and 68 percent in the House of Representatives out of the 249 declared results. Remarkably, it won the Governorship of Sokoto, Jigawa and Kebbi States which had previously been considered ANPP strongholds and Anambra State where APGA supposed to reign supreme but lost the Governorship in Bauchi State to ANPP, and the Governorship of both Imo and Abia States to PPA, (EUEOM, 2007).

The election was adjudged by both local and international election observation and monitoring groups as the worst in the electoral history of Nigeria. Emordi and Osiki (2008) noted that, "there is no doubt that the 2007 polls will go down in history as the worst widely rigged, most violent and most brazenly manipulated, thus elevating those of 2003 to a most credible exercise". In assessing the conduct of the election, the European Union Election Monitors in their Final Report remarked that in 42 percent of polling stations observed, the overall conduct of polling was rated as poor or very poor, which is a very high percentage compared to other EU observations (EUEOM, 2007:32). In short, evidences of maladministration and manipulation of the 2007 general elections to serve the interests of the ruling PDP was unprecedented (Aiyede 2007; Ojo 2007; Suberu 2007). Some of the irregularities that undercut the elections include late commencement of voting in many parts of the country, inadequate voting materials, lack of secrecy in the voting process, omission of names and or pictures of some candidates from the ballot papers, prevalence of under-age voting, and rampant cases of ballot bag snatching at gun point by party thugs and militias, (Omotola, 2009). Others include the stuffing of ballot bags with already thumb-printed ballot papers, reported cases of collaboration between security officials and party agents, lack of transparency in the collation, counting, and tabulation of votes and outright falsification of result (Adejumobi, 2007). Accordingly, the election of 2007 witnessed a replication of the same absurdity in election management by the tacit connivance of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under Prof. Maurice Iwu (Okibe, 2015).

Not only that voting did not go on well in many polling stations across the country but many INEC officials were so partial that they went ahead to announce results in favour of the ruling party where candidates of opposition parties won. Most of these manipulations did not go unnoticed hence a follow up mass protest to register public displeasure against the oddity. The NDI (2007) reports that:

- Election Day violence was followed by public protests in many states as INEC announced results mostly in favour of the PDP that in some cases were at odds with anticipated results. In some instances, INEC's national headquarters announced results whereas the responsibility was supposed to have fallen to the Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs), who served as Chief Returning officers for the gubernatorial elections. In Delta state, the results were declared in Abuja before the collation and counting of votes had finished in the state.

Elections are supposed to produce widely accepted leaders and political system that elicits supports of the citizenry. It has always been argued that election is the bastion of democratic stability and measure of leadership legitimacy. The implication is that when election is mismanaged or abused in a bid to satisfy idiosyncratic tendencies, it weakens the foundation of free choice which is a condition for electoral credibility. All these prerequisites were lacking in the 2007 general elections, hence, the European Union Election Observation Monitoring Group reports:

- The 2007 State and Federal elections fell short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections. They were marred by very poor organization, lack of essential transparency, widespread procedural irregularities, and substantial evidence of fraud, widespread voter disenfranchisement on different stages of the process, lack of equal conditions for political parties, (EUEOM: 2007).

Nigerians virtually lost confidence in the electoral process after the 2007 elections because INEC deceived the masses. After the 2007 phenomenal betrayal in Nigeria by INEC, President Goodluck Jonathan in 2010 appointed Professor Attahiru Jega to step into the big shoes left in INEC by Prof. Maurice Iwu in readiness of 2011 general elections (Nkwede, 2015). INEC (2011) acknowledged the challenges and expectation of Nigerians and international community; and perhaps fully aware that:

- The two preceding general elections in 2003 and 2007 were widely criticized as largely flawed, and the Commission was generally held accountable for many of the flaws. Among the major problems identified with those elections for which the Commission was held responsible were a badly compiled roll of voters, shoddy preparations for the elections, poor management of results, aloofness from stakeholders, seeming inability to control the negative actions of political parties and candidates, as well as outright vote rigging in some cases. Consequently, there was a widespread negative perception of the Commission and its capacity to conduct credible elections at the time the present Commission was inaugurated. This created a major burden on the new Commission to deliver noticeably improved elections in 2011.

4.4. The 2011 General Elections

In order to change the tempo and improve upon election administration, INEC introduced some changes. As part of the reforms towards the 2011 general elections, it introduced a new biometric register of voters, a re-modified open ballot system, security features on sensitive electoral materials (e.g., serial numbering and colour-coding of ballot papers and results sheets and security coding of ballot boxes). Others include: modified ad hoc staff engagement, more transparent framework for results collation and returns, open and transparent procedures, modalities and processes on Election Day, closer collaboration and partnerships with critical stakeholders, enhanced voter education and citizen engagement, staff training and retraining, creation of inter-agency consultative committee on election security. This was to ensure the effective engagement of all the security agencies during election periods (INEC, 2014). In addition, it reversed the timetable and sequence of the elections from the earlier ascending to now descending order, so that elections into national offices were conducted first before those of states. From the level of preparations, there was every indication that INEC was disposed to redressing the past hitches that hindered Nigeria's electoral process; to assure the democratic world that votes will start to count in Nigeria.

Consequently, the National Assembly Elections was held on Saturday the 9th of April, 2011; the Presidential Elections on Saturday the 16th of April, 2011; while the Gubernatorial and State Legislative Elections held on Tuesday the 26th of April, 2011; being a new date the election was rescheduled to hold after the earlier date was cancelled. The two major contenders in the Presidential election were the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). Noteworthy is the fact that it was the first elections to be conducted by INEC under the leadership of Prof Attahiru Jega. At the end of the election, the then incumbent President Good Luck Jonathan won. Political analysts share the view that the 2011 general elections signaled the era of optimism in Nigeria's electoral process when Nigerians began to witness a relatively free and fair election due to INEC's effectiveness in preparations and actual conduct of the election as well as the collation of results and prompt announcement of the outcome. The disposition of INEC to conduct credible elections no doubt changed the disposition of the political elites towards rigging of the 2011 general election. Arguably, it is suggested that INEC's improvement in the conduct of the elections does not imply that there were no problems associated with the elections or that INEC got it fully right as far as election administration in Nigeria is concerned. The Human Rights Watch Group notes that despite the improvements, there were still incidents of violence, hijacking of ballot boxes by party thugs, and reports of police misconduct, particularly in southeast Nigeria and the volatile Niger Delta region. According to the reports, the elections were also marred by allegations of vote buying, ballot-box stuffing, and inflation of results, most noticeably in southeastern Nigeria - Jonathan's stronghold - where official results in the presidential election in some rural areas recorded close to 100 percent voter turnout, (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

Nonetheless, the ugliest twist was the post-election violence that heralded the declaration of the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan as the winner of the presidential election. Those who had supported General Muhammadu Buhari and envisaged that he would win vented the anger inflamed by their loss on innocent citizens. It is reported that as much as 800 persons lost their lives and 65, 000 people were displaced as a result of post-election violence (Human Rights Watch, 2011). This was perpetuated by ethnic jingoists that clamored for their turn in the presidency and were bent in getting it.

4.5. The 2015 General Elections

The landmark elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were in 2015. In significant ways, the elections demonstrated the willingness of the governing elites to lay formidable foundation for sustainable growth in our democratic practice. However, by the published election timetable, the national and states elections had earlier been scheduled to take place on the 14th and 28th February, 2015 but were rescheduled as a result of security challenges. The Presidential election was contested by 14 political parties but the Peoples Democratic Party and the All Progressive Congress (APC) were the visible ones. The Peoples

Democratic Party nominated the then incumbent President, Goodluck Jonathan and his vice Namadi Sambo while the All Progressive Congress, had General Muhammadu Buhari as its candidate and Yemi Osibanjo, as his running mate. Presidential, National Assembly and State House of Assembly elections were held in all the 36 state, while gubernatorial elections were held in 29 states. The Presidential and National Assembly elections held on March 28th; while Governorship and State Assembly elections held on April 11th.

The run up to the election was emotive, tension soaked and many Nigerians feared that it will plunge the country into serious crisis. In fact, Nigerians had expected war at the end of the election and everybody was apprehensive of what would become of the country after. Abubakar (2014), quoted by Ojonemi, et al (2015), captured the scene and mood of the moment and admitted inter alia, that:

- As political animals that we are, nothing seems to have gripped the imagination of Nigerians as the issue of the coming 2015 general elections, which in my view is a watershed moment in the history of our dear country. The way we are able to handle this very important event will largely determine how successful we will be in our efforts at remaining a united, indivisible and stable country. Already, the fault lines are apparent and politicians are ready to exploit them to the fullest to achieve their sometimes not so noble objectives. The North is determined to have it back and its leaders are pulling all the stops to see that that happens. On the other hand, the body language of the incumbent president strongly suggests he wants another term in office. The unfolding scenario may portend danger to our nation if Nigerians from all parts of the country do not close ranks and put the interest of the nation first. The post-election violence of 2011 should be a reminder that election matters in the country have become serious business, which must be handled with the utmost seriousness and patriotism in order to avoid repeat of history.

Eventually, those negative expectations became defeatist dream as the election was to turn out to be a huge success and a different ball game. As a matter of fact, what became the outcome of the 2015 general elections surprised Nigerians and the global community many of who had looked forward to our disintegration. In other words, everybody was dumbfounded and flabbergasted by the goodwill of President Goodluck Jonathan, and the Presidential Candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) when he humbly, patriotically and dispassionately conceded defeat and congratulated his rival, General Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC), even before the results were announced. It caught war mongers napping and disarmed those welding arms preparatory for assault on the nation and her hapless citizens. Generally, that singular nationalistic action by President Goodluck Jonathan saved the country from imminent war and therefore unprecedented in the turbulent electoral history of Nigeria where every qualified and unqualified contestant in election wants to win at all cost.

The election was praised by both electorates and the observers as not only unique but a pacesetter for future elections. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM 2015) in its reports observed that “Election day overall passed peacefully with appropriate performance by security agencies and EU EOM observers saw no evidence of systematic manipulations”. Also, the Commonwealth Observer Group (COG 2015) noted that: “Notwithstanding the organizational and technical deficiencies, the conduct of the Presidential and National Assembly Elections were generally peaceful and transparent”. The United States government in a press statement released through the secretary of state, John Kerry, congratulated Nigerians and the Nigerian government on the historic and largely peaceful elections. It applauded all voters who showed patience and demonstrated commitment to participate in the democratic process. It commended Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission and its Chairman, Attahiru Jega, on the generally orderly vote, on the use of technology such as card readers to increase the credibility and transparency of the electoral process and on prompt communication of the results. The statement noted that while there were reports of logistical problems, such incidents did not undermine the overall outcome of the election (Kerry, 2015). The government of the United States lauded both the former President Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari for their public commitments to the Abuja Accord signed in January and reaffirmed on March 26, respecting the official results and encouraging their supporters to do same (Kerry, 2015).

The success of the election is attributed to the leadership dynamism of Prof. Attahiru Jega, the Chairman of INEC who in his wisdom introduced some technological innovations especially the Permanent Voters Card, PVC and the card reading machine, aimed at checkmating rigging, impersonation and related electoral malpractices. In any case, it must be noted that Nigeria is an emerging democracy and is currently grappling with its electoral process and Nigeria’s electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission is gradually learning the ropes of the electoral process. For instance, while the Card Readers aided in keeping away fake voters, it however had its faults as in most of the polling units visited, especially in the finger print identification. Incredibly, the Card Reader was also reported to have failed Mr. President himself while standing for accreditation in his polling unit at Bayelsa State. This means that even though the 2015 general election was an improvement when compared to other elections conducted in Nigeria’s sixteen years of uninterrupted democracy, it was still far from being perfect. To this extent, Udu (2015) notes:

- Despite the acceptance of the outcome of the presidential election and the subsequent and historic concession of defeat by the incumbent president; the 2015 election like its predecessors witnessed some documented electoral flaws. Some of these deficiencies in INEC management of the election included but not restricted to: late arrival of election materials, overcrowding, failure of the card reader, result manipulation and voting of under-aged in some units in the Northern part of the country.

Even though the Chairman of INEC, Prof. Jega is applauded for conducting a seemingly free and fair election, some commentators denounce him for skewing the election in favour of General Muhammadu Buhari a Northern candidate. Femi Aribisala in a media article, titled: “How Jega Executed Jonathan’s Fall,” asserts vehemently, that Buhari prevailed as a result of a deliberate disenfranchisement of the Igbo by INEC through the manipulation of the PVC distribution and the failure of the Card Reader in the

South-East and the South-South zones of the country (Citizens' Advocate, April 19, 2015:11). According to the report, INEC ensured that, far more disproportionately and relative to other geopolitical zones, millions of South-East voters disappeared from the voters' register, between 2011 and 2015 to pave way for the emergence of a Northern presidential candidate. It cites as an example the failed attempt to create 29,000 additional polling units; allocating 21,000 of these to the north and only 8,000 to the entire south. It notes that had this arrangement succeeded, it would have meant that more additional polling units were allocated to Abuja alone than the entire South-East. The failure of the polling unit's proposal however, gave rise to another alternative game plan evidenced in the bogus and lopsided, distribution of the PVCs, apparently skewed against the south where only 7.6 million were registered and 5.6 million PVCs collected, comparable to the war-torn North-East with 9.1 million registered voters and 7.4 million PVCs collected (Aribisala, 2015). However, the most outrageous were the figures recorded in the North-West, where 17.6 million registrations took place and 15.1 million PVCs collection was recorded, much more than the entire South-East and South-South combined. The implications of all these is the disenfranchisement of voters in the South in favour of the North. Corroborating these claims, Udu (2015) argues that:

- A further analysis of the above scenario shows that over 2.4 million South-East voters were successfully disenfranchised. For instance, in the 2011 presidential election, 38 million Nigerians voted for Buhari and President Jonathan while in 2015, this figure dropped drastically to 28 million. While the vote of the South-West remained virtually constant evidenced by 4.6 million in 2011 and 4.2 million in the 2015 election, that of the South-East staggered from 5 million in 2011 to only 2.6 million in the 2015 presidential election. This is obviously a drastic drop as while the north was posting its traditional homogeneous figures, the south posted relatively disappointing figures due to the above documented scheming by the INEC under Jega's leadership.

The quantum of petitions filed after an election goes to show the extent of acceptability of the election as being credible or not. From available records, so far, the 2015 elections recorded the least cases of electoral disputes after the elections. For instance, after the 2003 elections, a total of 560 election petition cases were filed; 1250 in 2007, and 400 in 2011 (This Day, 2011). In the case of the 2015 elections, the EU EOM noted in its report that only one case of election petition (challenging the parliamentary elections) was filed as at the time the report was being prepared which was after the national and state elections (EU EOM, 2015: 1). No doubt, there were many petitions filed challenging the gubernatorial and parliamentary elections, but they are not comparable to what used to be the case after previous elections in Nigeria. In short, there is a drastic drop in election petitions challenging the outcome of the 2015 elections. It shows a remarkable improvement in the conduct of elections in Nigeria and marks a good development for the integrity of the Nigeria electoral process.

5. The Conduct of Elections in Nigeria: From Pessimism to Optimism

It is common knowledge that elections conducted in Nigeria since 1960 have been anything but credible. It is such that the military used the excuse of bungled elections to seize the apparatus of government in some coup d'états in Nigeria like in 1966 and 1985. Even after the restoration of democratic governance in 1979, the problem continued and the military had to strike again and again until another restoration of democratic governance in 1999. The consequence of many years of dashed hopes with regard to credible election administration is that Nigerians were forced to form negative perceptions about election. The spate of electoral violence that accompanied most elections conducted in Nigeria compounded the problem thus making Nigerians to have mixed feelings about elections, some apprehensive of elections, others became apolitical and apathetic about elections. Nigerians then began to perceive politics generally as a dirty game. The impact of this development on the psyche of Nigerians with regard to political participation took a dangerous dimension. It made many to lose interest in anything politics even election. The election conducted in 2003 made matters worse and the 2007 general elections crucified the equation as many were no more interested in coming out during elections for fear of being wounded or even being killed as has happened to many. Many felt that it was useless coming out to vote since their votes don't count as the results of elections were already determined. On election days, people stayed in-doors, sleeping and watching video films while some adults of voting age played football all over the places. All these and more made Nigerians pessimistic. This was the era of pessimism when Nigerians became apprehensive of election matters.

However, with improvements in the conduct of elections as occasioned by the 2011 elections, many Nigerians started having hope for the country and its electoral process. Even though there were post-election violence after the 2011 presidential elections, many people knew it was not as a result of miscarriage of the elections but rather the misguided perception that a certain candidate from a certain ethnic group ought to have won. In any case, that has not changed the mindset of the people which began to change for good with regard to election as people started having hope in the Nigeria electoral process. The conduct of the 2015 general election finally gave hope to Nigerians that their votes count and that sovereignty belongs to the people; that it is the people who choose their leaders. This is the era of optimism in the Nigeria electoral process. The optimism was further consummated with the action of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan an incumbent president who conceded victory to an opposition candidate. Nigerians had never seen anything like that in their electoral process. Moreover, when they were preparing for war, they witnessed peace. What again, Nigeria has arrived at credible election delivery and there is no going back.

6. Sustaining the Conduct of Credible Election in Nigeria

It is important that the optimism of Nigerians in having credible election delivery gained by the conduct of the 2011 and 2015 general elections be sustained. Nigeria has come of age and Nigerians cannot afford to continue in the part of election mismanagement for it hampers progress, since the outcome is the enthronement of people who are not credible in the governance of the nation. It is

unfortunate that good things are rarely sustained in Nigeria just as the Nigerian Bar Association Election Working Group (NBA, 2016) succinctly notes:

- Nigeria is a nation that is famous for taking one step forward and then two or more steps backwards. Whenever one step is taken in the right direction, several other steps would be taken in the wrong one. This is probably one of the major reasons why we have failed to make a lasting and permanent progress in a lot of things. It is important to note that the role of credible elections in a democracy cannot be overemphasized. If we are to keep improving and edging closer to electoral perfection, we must build on the successes of the 2015 elections.

In order to sustain the gains of the 2015 general elections namely, the introduction of the card readers and the sanitization of the voter's register, accreditation and voting processes and thus continue on the part of credible election delivery, the following recommendations made by the Nigerian Bar Association are upheld by this paper: Electoral reforms, de-registration of political parties, ensuring justice by Election Tribunals, prosecution of electoral offenders, better independence of the judiciary, and quicker provision of funds, (NBA, 2016).

6.1. Electoral Reforms

It is recommended that we assess the gains made after every election and incorporate such gains in the system and discard obnoxious ones. Therefore, in order to accommodate the gains of the progress made in the Nigerian electoral system like the introduction of the permanent voter's card, the card reader and the changes in the accreditation and voting processes, there is an urgent need for reforms in the electoral law. In this regard, the NBA suggested that among other things:

- The need for electoral reform in the country to allow for electronic voting has become absolutely necessary against the backdrop of election rigging, widespread rejection of declared results, as well as loss of lives and property. More importantly, our electoral laws appear to be ill-equipped to adequately address these concerns. We need to put in place a democratic process that maintains accurate list of citizens who are eligible to vote and encourages every eligible voter to participate effectively in the process. There is a need to improve the voting system and enhance ballot security. Most importantly, the political class must have respect for the rule of law while we must, as people reject the pervasive culture of corruption in our body polity and be prepared to hold our elected officers accountable for their actions, (NBA, 2016).

6.2. De-registration of Political Parties

In as much as it is necessary to operate the multi-party system as two party systems is not desirable, there are too many political parties in Nigeria as we have today and unfortunately these parties are not ideologically based. The Nigerian Bar Association suggests using winning of election as a basis for determining the strength of political parties and going by the 2015 general elections, only eight political parties were able to win at least one seat as released by INEC. They include All Progressives' Congress (APC), Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), Labour Party (LP), Accord Party (AP), Peoples' Democratic Movement (PDM), Peoples' Progressive Alliance (PPA) and Social Democratic Party (SDP). While two-party system may limit the options of Nigerians, 8 parties are more than enough, we do not need 30 or 40 parties, (NBA, 2016). De-registration of all other political parties in Nigeria is therefore recommended.

6.3. Ensuring that Justice is done by Election Petition Tribunals

In order to sustain the optimism of Nigerians in the electoral process, it is necessary that the various Election Petition Tribunals constituted ensure that justice is speedily dispensed and done at a reasonable time. There is no doubt that many things went wrong in form of rigging in many places during the elections as many contestants were shortchanged and such people must surely go to the tribunals for justice. It is only when justice is seemed to have been done that Nigerians will have confidence in the electoral process. A situation where money exchanges hands and justice go in abeyance is not healthy for our country and our electoral system. The court is said to be the last hope of the common man. According to the NBA (2016), "the success of the tribunals would determine the future level of confidence people will repose in the electoral process. If the tribunals do not prove to be a solution, people will resort to winning elections at all cost to avoid going to courts or resort to jungle justice".

6.4. Prosecution of Electoral Offenders

One of the flaws of the Nigerian electoral process is that electoral offenders have never been prosecuted. People commit all sorts of crimes during elections and go scot free and in the next election, the same people and more others do the same thing and nobody punishes them. Since this is the case, it continues; but the question is, when will this come to an end? Now is the opportune time. The NBA (2016) notes: "Electoral offenders are never seen to be punished in Nigeria; even when the court gives judgment in a case, it only awards victory to the petitioner or orders for a re-run, and it never punishes anyone. This has led to impunity in our electoral system as people rig without fear of the consequences. Perpetrators of electoral crimes in the 2015 elections must not be allowed to get away with it. The NBA has at different times and fora offered its assistance to INEC on this matter. If electoral offenders are prosecuted it will act as a deterrent to others".

6.5. *Better Independence of INEC*

INEC goes by the name, Independent National Electoral Commission, but it is not independent in many essential respects, namely, in the appointment of its key officers, in finance and in the control of security agents working for it during elections. There is need for full independence in these issues, for “he who plays the piper dictates the tune”; which means that the man who appoints the key officers of INEC has much influence over them as has happened in many occasions in Nigeria. If INEC officials refuse to do the bidding of the man who controls the funds, he could delay releasing money to them or even frustrate them for they cannot work without money.

The NBA (2016) notes that in the build-up to the 2015 elections, the independence of the electoral body was threatened whereas the law mandates INEC to fully take charge of election issues. The body recommends that the law must be respected and unless in emergency and unavoidable cases, no one should directly or indirectly dictate to INEC what it should do or not. There is also need for INEC to be in control of security agents who work with them during elections. The NBA (2016) also notes that the role of these agencies in the conduct of elections cannot be over-emphasized, and they recommend for reforms that should be structured in such a way that the electoral umpire would have greater control over their deployment and operations during elections so as to reduce their alleged usage by unscrupulous politicians to engage in electoral malfeasance, voter intimidation and other illegal electoral-related activities. It is therefore necessary to put in place adequate legislation to ensure complete independence of INEC and ensure that such independence is maintained in all election matters.

7. Conclusion

A journey of one thousand miles begins with a step. Nigeria’s experiment with electoral democracy has been a turbulent one and Nigerians have perceived elections conducted in the country with mixed feelings depending on the outcome. In 1999, Nigerians rejoiced at the return of democracy after many years of being in limbo occasioned by military dictatorship. In 2003, they became scandalized after the faltering general election which was a kind of warfare. They waited to see what would happen in the next election and before, during and after the 2007 general elections; they lost hope in the Nigerian electoral process. Some even resolved never to participate in the polls again. This was the consequence of what they witnessed before, during and after the election which was adjudged by both local and international election monitors and observers as the worst election ever conducted in the political history of Nigeria.

However, the administration of the 2011 general elections made many Nigerians to begin to have hope in election as a democratic process once more but before the 2015 general elections, Nigerians were apprehensive again and feared for the disintegration of the country and the looming war that was hanging in the air. Fortunately, after the elections, Nigerians heaved a sigh of relief that Nigeria has arrived at credible election delivery where the sitting president could be defeated in the general election and instead of making troubles, he congratulated the opponent and the elections ended in peace instead of chaos as was expected. Nigerians disappointed the international community. The outcome of the election has given hope to the hopeless with regard to election administration in Nigeria.

This paper had recounted the story of Nigeria’s elections which had been perceived from the point of view of pessimism and optimism depending on the mood and outcome of the election. Nigerian election stakeholders including, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Assembly had incrementally added one reform or the other, one innovation or the other; removed one strategy or the other to arrive at the current stage in election administration. It is expected that the tempo of credible election administration in Nigeria as witnessed in the 2015 general election will be sustained through the recommendations made.

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