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Credible Elections in Nigeria: The Role of Information Communication Technology

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Abstract:

The beauty of democracy is that it enables the electorate to determine who governs them. Elections offer them that privilege of choosing their leaders. But when elections are not credible, free and fair these lofty objectives could not be achieved. It is only credible, free and fair elections where the will of majority prevails that will guarantee good governance cum sustainable development. This is because politicians will be on their toes to deliver good governance as that is the only thing that earn them their positions. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Many a time votes do not count and the will of majority do not prevail. Judiciary many a times are handicapped in addressing injustices done during election as cases are always decided based on available evidence. This paper focuses on the how ICT can be applied to ensure credible election.

Keywords: Credible election, national development, information communication

1. Introduction

To *elect* means 'to choose or make a decision', and so sometimes other forms of ballot such as referendums are referred to as elections, especially in the United States. Wikipedia defines election as 'An election is a formal group decision making process by which a population choose an individual to hold public office 'It is a formal process of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting. Elections were used as early in history as ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and throughout the Medieval period to select rulers such as the Holy Roman Emperor , the pope . Most countries hold elections in at least the formal sense, but in many of them the elections are not competitive (e.g., all but one party may be forbidden to contest) or the electoral situation is in other respects highly compromised. Elections are the central institution of democratic representative governments. In a democracy, the authority of the government derives solely from the consent of the governed. The principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority is the holding of free and fair elections.

An election is the process of voting to choose someone to be their political leader or representative in government. In a democracy the right to vote is the main way most citizens can influence the decision about how their Country is governed. Citizens get the chance when the Government decides to hold an election. To win an election, the politicians have to persuade the people to vote for them. Each political party need to identify their policies (plan of action) explaining what they will do if they were elected. Each political party presents list of policies that the party promises to carry out if they were elected.

But if the process is manipulated the election will not reflect the wish of the people and politicians will no longer be accountable to the people but to their means of getting their position. When few people can manipulate the outcome of an election, then there is danger and it is no longer democracy which is government of the people by the people for the people. People in power will no longer be on their toe to perform. They will not mind if the policies they are implementing is acceptable to the people or not. They will only mind their means of getting to power. It is only credible, free and fair election that will guarantee good governance. To conduct credible, free and fair election is not always easy as politicians are always out to cut corners and gain undue advantage over their opponents. The role of that Information Communication Technology can play to make this feasible is the focus of this paper.

2. Methodology

This study is a qualitative research. It relied basically on the documentary method of data collection as well as field observation during the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. The documentary method is concerned with the analysis of documents that contain information about a given phenomenon under investigation. Documentary method is the technique used to categorize, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, most commonly written documents whether in the private or public domain'. The method is often considered a monopoly of professional historians, librarians and information science specialists. Hence, it is largely under-utilized and often considered a subsidiary research method in the social sciences.

3. Literature Review

The prevalence of electoral irregularities in many transitional democracies, especially in Africa, has accentuated the clamour for and use of voting technologies to uncover and reduce electoral fraud. Thus, some studies have been quite enthusiastic about the role of digital technology in electoral administration (Gelb and Decker, 2012). The declining quality of Nigerian elections is a threat to democratic consolidation. The 2007 General Elections were the third in the series that map Nigeria's democratization since 1999. The elections offered another opportunity for change and power turnover in the country. However, judging by the overall quality and outcomes of the elections, the expectations of many Nigerians and international partners were dashed. The elections were marred by massive irregularities as reported by different accredited election observers like the TMG, The Carter Center, NDI, IRI and EU-EOM. The results of the elections were bitterly contested in an unprecedented but largely non-violent manner (Nwangwu & Onah, 2018). In which way can ICT help to promote the credibility of our election. Determined to improve the outcome of the 2011 polls, INEC introduced technological innovations, which were used to curb electoral fraud. These included a biometric PVC and card reader machine used to verify the authenticity of the PVC, and also carry out a verification of the intending voter by matching the biometrics obtained from the voter on the spot with those stored on the PVC (Orji, 2017)

3.1. Any Improvement?

Despite the mixed views of Nigerians on the credibility of the 2015 election, it appears better than previous four elections. Although, more petitions are still expected, the 140 received so far is a huge improvement over the 400 received in 2011, 1250 got in 2007, 560 in 2003 (Ndujihe&Kumolu, 2015). According Nwangwu&Onah (2018) 'The introduction Smart Card reader to a large extent reduce various avenues of committing fraud. There is virtually no petition from the entire North-West while North-East and North-Central have fewer than 30 petitions each. This differential must be understood in the context of a massive failure by the SCR to read biometric information contained in the PVCs and to accredit voters in Southern Nigeria. This made the use of manual accreditation inevitable in these regions. Similarly, electoral violence was more pervasive in these areas, especially Akwa-Ibom and Rivers States'. Aderounmu (2018) highlighted areas where ICT tools and applications could transform future electoral processes and elections in Nigeria to include: civic education, e-inclusion, political campaigns, constituency delimitation, voter registration, data capture, voter verification and voting, vote counting and computation, and result dissemination. According to him, 'It is a welcome development that the leveraging of technology had started, even if rudimentary, with the last 2015 elections that ushered in the present administration in Nigeria, but there is still a long way to go,'

The role that ICT can play in our elections are quite obvious. But the issue is are we ready? In the words of Erhagbe (2000), 'we are still lagging behind; a lot of things still need to be done in a country where power supply is epileptic or not available at all. For you to get the electronic system to work it would depend a lot on the availability of power'. Our recent attempts at using electronic devices for verification, by way of accreditation and voting ran into many hitches because of power problems and non-functional materials. He is of the opinion that we perfect what we have right now and work towards the possibility e-voting in future. Osakue (2011) was on the same page Erhaghe. He posited that 'In spite of the desirability of electronic voting, wishes are not horses; if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. For you to successfully implement an agenda of electronic voting, your power infrastructure must be intact and we do not have it now' The beauty of it is that it is clear that ICT can revolutionize our electoral process. There is no point waiting. We should take the bull by the horn.

3.2. What Is Credible Election

Mollah (2016) free, fair and credible election is one of the basic and crucial prerequisites and elements of democratic Government and Governance. The election will be credible when rules, regulations and laws governing the electoral process will be followed by and ultimately, the credible candidate will be freely and fairly elected to represent the electorate.

Diamond (2002) presented four components of free and fair elections as (i) Independent political parties will compete in freely and fair atmosphere (ii) Individual must be free to participate in politics and election process based on their own choice (iii) Election process would be free and fair so that adult franchise can apply their voting right with equal weight and (iv) final outcome of the election or counting would be accurate and legitimate.

Rajasingham (2005) mentioned three elements of free, fair and credible election: (1) An enabling legislative framework, (2) The impartial and neutral administration including election commission, and (3) Competitive electoral process accepted to all the political parties.

Therefore, free and fair elections entail universal and equal access to the electoral process and to ballots which are secret and free. This requires an absence of fraud and threats and that the votes are applied fairly into elections in a transparent manner and in accordance with the law.

From the above discussion the following general features of free and fair election have been identified:

- An effective legal framework;
- To ensure equal voting rights of universal adult franchise;
- Direct and secret voting system;
- Election commission would be independent;
- Security of voters must be ensured before and after election;
- The fair play of election administration;
- Competitive election among all parties;
- Access to media and election observers in election process;
- Free speech and association;
- Counting votes accurately;
- Impartiality of acting government.

4. Hitches to Credible Election

There are many factors that militate against credible pools.

4.1. Undue Influence from Government

One is undue interference from the incumbent Government. In most cases the electoral body is not truly independent. They take order from the sitting Government and seek clarification before they do certain things. They are easily seen dancing to the tune of Government in power. Ojo (2019) quoted the former Soviet Union President, Josef Stalin, as saying, 'It's not the people who vote that count, it's the people who count the votes. There have been cases where Government in power mount excessive pressure on INEC staff, to manipulate the electoral process, change results, declare a conclusion election inconclusive etc. If electoral empire is not truly independent then it will be extremely difficult to have free and fair election.

4.2. Weak Laws

Weak law is one of the most common reason why election do not meet International standard of being free and fair. There are loopholes in the law that hamper credible pools. Perhaps, in a bid to improve the electoral system, the National Assembly passed the Electoral (Amendment) Bill 2018, amending the 2015 Electoral Act to give legal backing to the use of the card reader and electronic transmission of results for the electoral umpire (Okere 2019). Elizabeth (2019) observed that the failure of President Muhammadu Buhari to sign the amended electoral bill that should have guaranteed improved electoral reform citing proximity to the election, impacted legal framework of the polls. Till date the National Assembly is still dragging their feet in amending the electoral act.

4.3. Unprofessional Conduct of Security Agents

Security agents lose their sense of their professionalism. They take order from party in power and at times help them to manipulate electoral process. They were used to intimidate opponents; undue arrest and harassment of the opposition were meant to whip them into line. At times voters were scared away. When security agents behave in an unprofessional way like that, it will be difficult to have a free and fair election.

4.4. The use of Thug

Politicians use thugs to unleash violence on opposition. There were reports of ballot box snatching and multiple thumb-printing in several states across the six geopolitical zones of the country during the 2011 and 2015 general elections (Okere 2019). They were used to scare away opposing electorate or cause confusion to make sure that election does not hold were they feel they were not strong. These have been the reason for high voter apathy.

4.5. Vote Buying

Vote buying is now one of the means politicians use to manipulate the election process. According ojo (2019), Nigerian politicians are notorious for vote buying. Politicians offer money to electorate to vote for them. Due to economic predicament prevalent in the land many fall for their money. Politicians are not charitable people. Their acts of charity are always attached with a string. It is aimed at wooing voters after which they will embark on large scale looting of state resources to recoup their investment.

5. Ways ICT Can Promote Credible Election

5.1. Voter Accreditation

Smart Card reader has been used to successfully accredit electorate for voting. Before the introduction of smart reader, Politicians easily connive with INEC staff to make use of unused ballot after the actual voting has taken place. This has been successfully eliminated as the card Reader can show the number of people that actually come out to vote. However, the operation of smart Card reader has not been very efficient which resulted to the use of incident form.

5.2. Election Monitoring

The usual practice of using human observers to monitor election is not effective. They cannot be everywhere during elections. They can be intimidated and chased away as was the case during Osun Governorship rerun. A CCTV (closed-circuit television) system can be used to monitor the entire election process from accreditation to result declaration. A CCTV camera at polling station will make any would-be trouble maker think twice about attempting to do something funny. It's a sure sign they will be seen and identified. Criminals target buildings and facilities when they see there is no monitoring or watchdog. The very presence of CCTV cameras at the voting centre is enough to deter potential criminals and prevent their action at the outset. It will as well prevent wrong doing by INEC staff as they know there is a record of all that transpires.

5.3. Detection of Fraud

With relevant ICT infrastructure varying degree of electoral fraud degree of electoral fraud can be detected. Ballot paper snatching, vote buying, intimidation of voters or INEC staff can be eliminated. Video clip of the electoral process can be played at any time to ascertain the veracity of what transpired. Oloyode (2017) posits that without the deployment of the CCTV, one will just be making a mockery of Computer based test. This device has ensured that even if a cheating candidate was not caught during examination, such candidate can be caught after examination.

5.4. Auditing of Electoral Process

You audit a process to determine whether there is compliance on a laid down procedure of doing something. In a manual process auditing is always very difficult. Fraud could be perfected so much that it becomes very difficult to detect and prove. Many a time fire burn down INEC offices after election. This may be intentional to cover fraud. But if relevant ICT techniques were used forensic analysis can be used to unearth anything untoward that might have taken place. A well-designed CCTV infrastructure is practically impenetrable and can provide 100% coverage. Multiple cameras keeping an eye on each other's blind spots in addition to keeping an eye on the most vulnerable areas of the election center. Full monitoring is not hampered by human errors such as the guard sleeping on duty or busy with something else. Accurate online s recording of the events documents everything needed by the judge to determine if the process is manipulated or not.

5.5. Transmission of Result

ICT can be used transmit result electronically immediately after the collation. Election results have often been manipulated after collation at the polling unit. Results can be changed on the way to central collation centre. But ICT tools can be used to transmit result immediately at the polling unit. The major thing that opposition is contesting in 2019 election is that the final result declared by INEC is not the actual result that came out from the polling stations.

We have made rigging impossible for them (electoral fraudsters) as there is no how the total number of votes cast at the polling unit could exceed the number of accredited persons. Such discrepancy in figures will be immediately spotted. This technology (SCR) made it impossible for any corrupt electoral officer to connive with any politician to pad-up results. The information stored in both the card readers and the result sheets taken to the ward levels would be retrieved once there is evidence of tampering (Oche, 2015)

6. Way Forward

The role that ICT can play in ensuring free, fair and credible election cannot be too stressed. Government should take the bull by the horn be providing all that is needed to get ICT functional and working. The argument that we are not yet ready does not hold water. When will we be ready? The earlier the better goes a popular saying.

It is only when we have credible election that we can have a Government that is accountable to the people, because of the fear that they will be voted out in subsequent election. It will enable the electorate to choose Party or individual with best policies and program to move the Country/ state out of the wood. It will increase participation and make the electoral process more competitive.

Therefore, various challenges ranging from Infrastructure, to legal frame work should be addressed to get the best out of Information Communication Technology. No investment made in this regard will be regretted as the benefit by far is more than the cost.

Various ways highlight in this paper that ICT can be used in our election should be implemented from accreditation to transmission of results.

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