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Electoral Credibility and the Prospects of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: The Role of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the power and responsibilities of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in electoral administrations in the country and the implications of the institution's under-performance on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Content Analytical Approach was adopted and the systems theory propounded by David Easton was used as theoretical foundation. The paper reveals that there has been fundamental and institutional constraints which subject INEC to government/political manipulations, a situation that is inimical for democratic consolidation in the country. INEC performance in the 2015 general elections notwithstanding, the body ought to be autonomous in all ramifications so as to be able to discharge its duties impartially and responsibly and hence, consolidate democracy in Nigeria by the instrumentality of credible elections.

Keywords: INEC, electoral, credibility, democratic consolidation and Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Elections are fundamentally the central institution of democratic governments. This is because, in an ideal democracy, the authority of the government derives purely from the consent of the electorate; hence, the principal platform for securing and translating that consent into governmental authority results from periodically conducting credible elections. Essentially, a democratic and credible election are characterized by competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive and transparently free and fair process; otherwise, the outcome would be enthronement of an illegitimate government which has negative implications for democratic consolidation. To achieve this, an independent electoral process is critical and electoral institutions must be truly independent of the executive or ruling party in all ramifications.

Be that as it may, experiences over the years, have shown that, despite painstaking efforts at electoral reforms in Nigeria, the electoral institution (INEC) has not been truly independent, rather, it has operated like a parastatal of the executive or ruling party of the time and this, results to high level electoral malpractices which threaten democratic consolidation in the country. This paper contends that the independence of INEC as provided by the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria is grossly defective and as such, the requisite independence status of the commission is not properly safeguarded. The defect is reflected in the clear lack of political will to protect the integrity of the Nigerian electoral process [1].

The Cardinal Objectives of This Paper are to: Identify factors that constitute electoral credibility; Assess the contributions of the INEC in ensuring electoral credibility and democratic consolidation in Nigeria against the backdrop of its avowed mandates; and Examine the challenges of the INEC in living up to its expected responsibilities as electoral umpire in Nigeria

The paper is divided into five sections.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

David Easton was the first political scientist to develop a system framework for political analysis [2]; [3]. Extrapolated from the biological sciences, a system can be seen as a set of interrelated elements or a set of inter dependent variables, while a political system on the other hand, can be seen as a "system of interactions in any society through which binding or authoritative allocations are made" [4].

What can be deduced from the above expose is that a typical system has certain peculiarities': first, a system is composed of elements or parts (sub-systems), that function as a whole; in other words, there is an organic unity and interdependence between component parts of a system such that any change in one part, causes a change in the other parts and by extension, the entire system, second, a system has identifiable boundaries distinguishing it from the Macrocosm within which it operates; hence, a system can be international or domestic, though both categories are sometimes, not mutually exclusive but complimentary and reciprocal. The impact of this is that, though a system may convey the notion of self-sufficiency, yet inter-and intra-system relations must exist. However, where these cooperative and harmonious relations are lost and/or denied, as in the Nigerian political system, then systemic breakdown would be inevitable.

According to the theory, a political

Section 1 captures the introduction and theoretical foundation of the paper; section two dwells on the classification of key concepts while section three deals with the methodology employed in the paper. Sections four discusses the Role/mandates of the INEC, its historicity and prospects of democratic consolidation in Nigeria under INEC leadership. Section five raps up the paper with conclusion and recommendations.

system is an activity in which input from the environment are converted into outputs through the authoritative allocation of values. Consequently, as delineated by Easton, there are four (4) main processes involved in a typical political system: the process; output process; the conversion and the feedback processes. This is perhaps, why [5], dubbed the system theory as "input-output analysis".

According to [6], while the inputs give the political system its dynamic character as it consists of: (i) demands (the raw materials that the political system is called upon to process), and (ii) support (favourable orientations and activity on the part of the people towards the political system and serving as the energy that processes demands); outputs on the other hand, refers to those values that have been authoritatively allocated for all of society. Hence, other elements of the political system include the conversion process which portrays how the various demands are converted into outputs expressed in form of public policies and programmes; and, the feedback process that provides information to policy makers on the impact of their policies on environment.

A detailed discussion of this it not necessary here but it is instructive to note that [7], also drew attention to a salient feature that is critical in a political system maintaining

homeostatic equilibrium, and that is the ability of the political system to meet the demands from its environment. Accordingly, while too many demands can pull down a system, yet unfulfilled demands, particularly when they are genuine, is capable of spelling doom for the political system as those whose genuine aspirations are side-tracked or traded off, are most likely to withdraw their supports for the political system; hence, occasioning stress.

Liberal democracy entails unfettered access to the greatest number of citizens in the determination of their national affairs. Consequently, when this privilege is hijacked by an oligarchy or subtly withdrawn from the masses like was prominent with the PDP dominated government in the country in recent times, the political system is bound to experience instability and disaffection.

The above scenario serves as a platform to posit that the osmotic take-over of the political landscape of the county by then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP); dovetailing in some unfulfilled demands by the citizens of Nigeria for a viable oppositional alternative to realize their political objectives and make their inputs with the political conversion box is potentially destructive both for the party and for the society at large. The outcome of the Nigerian general elections 2015 for example, has proved this ascertain beyond reasonable doubts. This is significant for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification Electoral Credibility

Elections are said to be credible, when rules, regulations and laws governing the electoral process are followed and ultimately, credible candidate are freely and fairly

selected to represent the electorate. In other words, a free and fair election, legitimizes an electoral outcome. According to [8], there are four major variables on which the concept of free and fair elections rests. These are: (i) the political parties; (ii) the individuals; (iii) the voting process, and (iv) the election outcome.

Starting with the political parties, he argued that in a multiparty democracy, for an election to be considered as free and fair, the:

Parties must be free to compete, to organize, to recruit members, to articulate policies, to stage rallies and to solicit votes. The less the political system restrains opposing parties from the business of organizing and campaigning, and the less it systematically, favours a particular party (typically the ruling party), the freer and fairer the election may be said to have been.

By the same logic, for an election to be free and fair, the:

Individual must be free to participate in the political process to join the party of their choice, to campaign for its platform and of course, to vote for it (or not to vote at all).

Furthermore, on the voting process:

Each person should have one and only one vote. Each person should be counted equally. No one who satisfies some limited set of conditions (such as minimum age and sound mind) should be refused registrations, no registered voter should be prevented from voting, nor should anyone be allowed to vote more than once, nor should any votes be counted for a party except those individuals legally cast, nor should any legally and properly cast votes be discarded or disregarded.

And, on the election outcome, an election would be free and fair if the results are: Accurately reported and the legitimate voters allowed to assume office.

Accordingly, when all the conditions germane to the four variables as

defined above are observed in the process, conduct and outcome of an election, that election could be considered to be free and fair; hence, credible. However, the taste of the providing is often believed to be in the eating. It is common knowledge that the above outlined conditions are hardly possible in any election particularly in Nigeria. The activities of such bodies or group like the electoral commission, the behavior of politicians and security agents, often determine how far, such conditions as highlighted can be possible.

Democratic Consolidation

Before delving into the concept of democratic consolidation, it is pertinent to first and foremost, know what democracy entails. The theory of democracy is rooted in the ancient Greek Polity, which classified governance in terms of number of participants in the process of decision-making. According to them, a government is classified in a continuum ranging from rule by an individual (Monarchy) through rule by few (Oligarchy) to rule by many (democracy). The central focus is the locus of power and how power is applied in a political system. They contend that the few individuals controlling the financial, industrial and communications of a nation constitute the ruling class which is a small group that rule modern society [9]

Conceptually, democracies are complex and have varied meaning to different people. According to Abraham Lincoln, democracy simple means, government of the people by the people and for the people. This implies that democracy is all about consensus government, freely chosen by the people to determine the ideals, aspiration, welfare, progress and overall interest of the people. A government of this nature operates at the people's mercy, who themselves, hold such government

accountable by means of periodic election process. In other words, the people are enabled to govern themselves through the instrumentality of constant interaction and discussions of such issues of common interest, voting in elections and offering to be voted for. A democratic government therefore, is propelled by the collective ideal, energy, wisdom, understanding, knowledge and perception of the people rather than the views, opinions and ideas of a single individual who happen to be at the helms. The main attribute of an ideal democracy is that those holding political office do not have automatic security of tenure but can be challenged and even displaced according to the people's will through a wide range of institutional mechanism [10]. Some of the institutional mechanism under reference is the conduct of periodic elections which indeed, is the major objective of democratization. It is noteworthy to stress that elections are not only meant to ensure, confirm or re-confirm the legitimacy of those in government by means of regular consent but also to provide a conducive atmosphere for democracy to thrive.

The means of making democracy to thrive brings us to the issue of democratic consolidation. Consolidation implies that the seed of democracy is given sufficient fertile ground to germinate, grow, strengthened and sustained through genuine and deep rooted political will. Unfortunately democratic consolidation in Nigeria is threatened by the perennial factors of electoral fraud, electoral violence, ethnicity, the "born-to-rule syndrome" Godfatherism and even external conspiracies in some cases. That the Nigerian democracy, over the years, is bedeviled by these factors is perhaps Common knowledge. For instance according to [11], a

combination of administrative inefficiency, deliberate political scheming by some of the stakeholders in the electoral process had always raised formidable obstacles that would expose the voting process to serious crisis of credibility. This situation is true of all elections in Nigeria, particularly, the 2003 general elections which [12], described as "this madness called election 2003" the voting process was characterized by all manners of fraud, manipulation, violence and irregularities that often resulted in victory being given to the wrong candidate or party. In the celebrated case of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, the counting of votes was scuttled and

the apparent winner of the election was denied opportunity to assume office. As a result, election outcomes were always highly disputed and often rejected by declared losers. All these, are inimical to democratic consolidation. For democracy to be truly consolidated in Nigeria, there is need to have credible election, rule of law, electoral justice in terms of result declaration, intra-party democracy devoid of imposition of candidates, transparency of the electoral umpires, absence of intimidation by security agents and, above all, a violence-free atmosphere for elections conduct such that, a level playing ground is given to all contestants.

METHODOLOGY

Content Analytical Approach was adopted for this paper. Data were extensively drawn from the secondary source via the instrumentality of text books, journals, magazines, newspapers and periodicals as well as from official publications particularly information from INEC official documents/publication, direct observation, media commentaries, structured interviews of political analysts as well as from scholarly articles on elections and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. These helped us extensively in giving insight into the origin of INEC, its historicity and electoral administrations in Nigeria.

Establishment/Composition of INEC

The numerous issues and activities involved in the electoral process requires that an independent body should be put in place to oversee electoral administration in the country. Both the military and the civilian regimes have acknowledged this essence in the democratization process. Hence, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 153(1) provides for the establishment of the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), among other Federal Executive bodies.

Accordingly, INEC was inaugurated on 11 August, 1998 by the then Head of State, General Abdulsalami Abubakar in pursuance of the regime's transition to civil rule programme earmarked for may 29, 1999 [13].

As the constitution stipulates: There shall be established for the federation the following bodies, namely;

- a. Code of conduct Bureau -
- b. Independent National Electoral Commission,

Similarly, section 154(1) of the 1999 constitution, the power to appoint the chairman and members of the commission is vested in the president, whose action is subject to confirmation by the senate. The exercise of this power also behooves the president to consult the Council of State (8.154) (3). The members of the commission to be appointed by the president as encapsulated in part 1 of the third schedule of the constitution are as follows;

- a. Chairman, who shall be the Chief

Electoral Commissioner, and

b. Twelve other members to be known as National Electoral Commissioners, who shall be persons of unquestionable integrity and not be less than fifty years and forty years of age, respectively.

In addition, the same third schedule of the constitution provides that;

There shall be for each state of the federation and the federal capital Territory, Abuja, a resident Electoral Commissioner who shall:

a. be appointed by the president;
b. be persons of unquestionable integrity
c. not be less than forty years of age

A closer and critical examination of the foregoing constitutional provisions on the establishment and composition of the INEC, reveals that: previous electoral commissions such as the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO); National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) did not have the prefix "Independent" to their names. The independent "prefix" results from the yearning of Nigerians and her governments over the years, to break from the historic ugly experience of electoral failures. However, there is indeed, nothing in a name as the taste of the pudding is always believed to reside in the eating. Hence, the change in the nomenclature of the commission notwithstanding, its character and proneness to the manipulation by the executive and party in power is yet to be changed.

Again, as an executive body created by the president, INEC and similar parastatals are but mere quasi-autonomous bodies which autonomy is limited and controlled. Hence the independence of the INEC is more or less limited to discipline of its staff and other electoral personnel. This situation has grave implications for funding of the commission and on its ability to discharge its duties and responsibilities impartially devoid of executive/political influence. This is because, by implication, INEC has

no direct fiscal allocation to it but depends on the presidency for fund and, we all know that he who pays the piper often dictates the tunes.

Furthermore, the observed quasi-autonomous nature of the INEC, particularly on the appointment of the chairman, commission members and the resident Electoral Commissioners has implications for autonomy in the real sense of the word. For instance, it implies that these persons will serve their tenures at the pleasures of the president who appointed them and also could change or reconstitute the entire body at will, especially at situations his control and directives are perceived to be resisted; the recourse to the senate and council of state notwithstanding. Similarly, there is the natural tendency of an office holder to favour the person who appointed him/her especially if his/her term is on the verge of expiration and there is the natural desire to be re-appointed [14]. The same implication as above is true of a new president coming on board if it is perceived that the existing commission may not be sufficiently loyal- in which situation, the new president may dissolve and reconstitute the commission to his taste and this is definitely, inimical to the growth, stability and development of the required resilience to live up to the avowed mandates of the INEC.

The Role/Mandates of the INEC

The mandates of the INEC are as stipulated in pare 1 of the third schedule of the 1999 constitution and well-documented by INEC in its reports of activities (1998-1999) as follows:

- (i) Organize, undertake and supervise all the elections to the offices 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;
- (ii) Register political parties in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and an Act of the National Assembly;
- (iii) Monitor the organization and operation of the political parties, including their finances;
- (iv) Arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts for

political parties, and publish a report on each examination and audit for public information;

(v) Arrange and conduct registration of persons qualified to vote, and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election under this constitution;

(vi) Monitor political campaigns and provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties;

(vii) Ensure that all electoral commissioners, electoral and returning officers take and subscribe to the oath of office prescribed by law;

(viii) Delegate any of its powers to any Resident Electoral Commissioners; and

(ix) Carry out such other functions as may be conferred upon it by an Act of the National Assembly (INEC, 2015).

While inaugurating INEC on August 12, 1998. Gen. Abubakar reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to allow the electoral umpire to operate independently; so did President Goodluck Jonathan while appointing the previous INEC Chairman, Professor Attahiru Jega in 2011. As a neutral, non-partisan electoral agency, INEC is expected to exhibit unalloyed impartiality and transparency in its conducts of elections in Nigeria. Since its inception, INEC has conducted many general elections in the country: the 2003, 2007, 2011 and the 2015 general elections under Prof. Jega as well as the 2019 General election under Prof. Mahmood Yakubu.

The pertinent question that arises at this juncture is: how far has the INEC lived up to the foregoing avowed mandates or better still, how independent is the INEC in carrying out its roles and responsibilities as electoral umpire in Nigeria? To answer this question objectively, there is need to explore the historicity of electoral institutions in Nigeria; in addition to the foregoing observations already pointed out in the proceeding paragraphs.

Historicity of Electoral Institutions in Nigeria

The problems of the electoral authorities in Nigeria started with the post-independence Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) which had Sir, Kofo Abayomi as its first head and which was later replaced by the 1966

military coup. About ten (10) years later, and that was in 1976, General Obasanjo established the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) headed by Chief Michael Ani and subsequently, promulgated Decree 41 of 1979 [15]. Unfortunately, the contentious issue of two-third of the nineteen state forced Chief Ani out of FEDECO and he was immediately replaced by Justice Ovie-whisky. Furthermore, the allegiance of FEDECO to the Federal Government and the fraud of the 1983 elections caused its replacement by National Electoral Commission (NEC) by Decree 23 of 1987 and Professor Erne Awa was appointed as its head. Consequently, upon the attempted ban on erstwhile politicians and the local government elections of 1987 which was conducted on a zero party basis, professor Awa was removed and immediately replaced with professor Humphrey Nwosu. The Nwosu led NEC registered 13 political parties in 1990 but the Babangida's administration cancelled it and imposed two parties: the National Republican Party (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) on Nigerians. The INEC under Prof. Nwosu conducted the June 12 election, released results in 14 out of 30 states but was abruptly stopped by the military, dashing the hope of Chief MKO Abiola of the SDP who was poised to emerge as president of the country. Nwosu was replaced with Prof. Okon Uya whose tenure witnessed widespread condemnation by Nigerians on the ground that president Babangida appropriated Abiola's mandate. Babangida handed over to Chief Ernest shoneken's interim government which was sacked by General Sani Abacha in 1993; who dissolved NEC, replaced it with the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) under Chief Dagogo-Jack. He was equally under the military government manipulations until the sudden death of General Abacha in 1998 when Abdulsalami Abubakar dissolved all his political structures and reconstituted the independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) with Justice Ephraim Akpata as its head. Justice Akpata lived up to expectation but was succeeded by Dr. Abel Guobedia when he died in 2000. Guobedia was again manipulated by

the SDP government in the 2003 general elections which was adjudged as one of the worst elections the country has ever had since the birth of democracy in Nigeria. The contagious story was continued in 2007 election under Professor Maurice Iwu who was replaced with Atahiru Jega. It is clear from the foregoing, that there have been fundamental structural and institutional constraints which subject electoral management bodies to government manipulations and subsequently marred the history of electoral administration in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, the/INEC under Prof. Jega appeared to have enjoyed sufficient measure of independence of the executive and, we are all witnesses to the outcome of the 2015 general elections particularly, the presidential election. It is generally believed that, the greatest strength of the INEC, under Jega was the innovation and use of the Biometric Card Reader and the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) in the 2015 general elections which assisted in minimizing incidences of rigging and related electoral fraud at the elections. We shall discuss this in greater details in the next section. Finally, the INEC under its current chairman Prof. Mahmood Yakubu conducted the 2019 general elections which did not witness any significant improvement from earlier years.

INEC and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

This study simply defines democratic consolidation, in Nigeria as the progressive process of transforming from a minimal, semi-democracy to a liberal democratic status by concurrently entrenching democratic values, rule of law, allowing the seed of democracy to germinate, grow, blossom, become deep-rooted and strengthened to thrive on a sustainable basis. This presupposes, steadily eliminating such impediments as military political incursion, corruption, civil authoritarianism and such negative forces like electoral fraud and violence. We

therefore, attempt to appraise the contribution of the INEC to democratic consolidation in Nigeria within these perspectives.

The temptation to assess electoral institution (INEC) by strictly normative theoretical criteria is quite strong but could prove to be both unrealistic and of little heuristic value [16].

Accordingly, O'Dannell has rightly cautioned against approaches which seek to measure regime consolidation by "unwarranted generalization "casually drawn" and "empirically untraceable" measurement categories by the same token, any meaningful appraisal must be steeply nuanced, and set within the prism of the prevailing political environment and culture of the system under reference. Hence, we classify Nigeria as an epitome of Diamond's "electoral democracy" steeply marked by Terry Karl's "fallacy of electoralism" which Diamond defines as the mistake of:

Privileging electoral contestation over other dimensions of democracy and ignoring the degree to which multiparty elections even if genuinely competitive may effectively deny significant section of the population the opportunity to contest for power or advance and defend their interests, or may leave significant arenas of decision making power beyond the reach or control of elected officials [17].

In electoral democracies such as Nigeria, there is the tendency for too much, premium to be placed on the ritual of periodic elections as the single most important of functional democratic rule, even where other requirements such as voters choice, transparent and accessible decision-making process, etc are glaringly absent. By classifying Nigeria as an electoral democracy one would expect that the quality and effectiveness of socio-political and democratic institutions should be superb. This is so, because, Nigeria pursues the basic conditions of democratic rule such as mutli-partyism, periodic elections, universal adult suffering as it establishes the physical paraphernalia of democracy such as legislative houses and electoral commissions, etc. Such

expectations can safely be described as modest and realistic.

Be that as it may, it is common knowledge that the INEC, like its predecessors, has performed below constitutional and civic expectations. This being the case, what then are reasons behind the perennial underperformance of electoral regulatory institutions in Nigeria, particularly, the INEC? Are the observations that the INEC was constitutionally weakened and submerged as an adjunct of the presidency sufficient variables to explain its lack of objectivity and professionalism as evidenced in previous elections such as the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and the 2019 general elections in Nigeria? There are however, indications that, there are several other factors which are non-constitutional and which tend to reinforce the institutions under performance.

This is so because, FEDECO, which did not suffer the same constitutional impediment as the INEC performed even worse and certainly more controversial than the INEC. The stark reality is that no house is ever stronger than the material with which it is built as no river can permanently rise beyond its source. Electoral commissions derive their character from the prevailing political order in the system they exist. Thus, we contend in this paper that, INEC has been atrophic, pliable and not truly autonomous from the various interests in political competition largely because it is not impervious to the steep venality, class and ethnic tensions, striking lack of accountability culture, philosophy of the end justifies the means and belief that politics, including political appointments are legitimate values to partaking of the national cake. Hence, since electoral commissioners and staff of the commission are part and parcel of the society they are subject to the same malady of entrenched sleaze and nepotism which directly impacts the organization they superintend and the whole political process. For instance, as [18] cited the case of N123 million fraud involving a senior officer of the commission over the award of a N3.5 billion contract for the supply and computerization of voters' register.

Therefore, INEC is akin to other institutions in Nigeria such as the Nigerian police force, military establishment, law courts, bureaucracy; etc, and cannot wisely be expected to be an oasis of perfection in a system where every other issue is a subject of material politicking.

Furthermore, another reason, according to [19], why electoral commissions in Nigeria are deemed to have underperformed in a comparative sense, is due to the quality-organization, cohesion and influence of civic society organizations. The role of civic society organizations in electoral process in both 1999 and 2003 though amidst observed flaws, was vital reason for the degree of success recorded in the elections of those years. Thus, electoral commissions can be expected to grow in strength as a function of the growth and vibrancy of civil society.

The high level of electoral-ignorance prevalent in the country over the years, has also contributed in no small measure to INEC performance in electoral administrations in the country. With political and more specifically electoral education, the society is better mobilized to scrutinize the process and electoral commissions and should be expected to be less gullible and more vociferous. A case in point is the 2015 general election under the Jega administration as INEC boss. The success of that election has been attributed to the level of political/electoral education, mobilization of the electorate and of course, the introduction of the Biometric Card Reader and the PVC innovation. Despite the failure of the card Reader in many places of the country particularly in the southern parts, it was an improvement on previous election administration in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, besides the acclaimed success of the 2015 general elections, there were pockets of allegation of ethnic sentiments exhibited by Jega led INEC in the elections. For instance, citing Aribisala's is media comment in Citizens Advocate, April 19, 2015, titled: How Jega Executed Jonathan's Fall", [20], reports that Buhari prevailed due to a deliberated disenfranchisement of the Igbo by INEC

through manipulation of the PVC distribution and failure of the card Reader in the south-East and south-south zones of Nigeria.

The report had that for more disproportionately and relative to other geopolitical zones, millions of south-East voters disappeared from voters register between 2011 and '2015 to pave way for a presidential candidate from the North to emerge.

The report further asserts that, had the failed attempt to create 29,000 additional pooling units, allocating 21,000 to the North and only 8000 to the entire south succeeded, it would have meant that Abuja alone would have had more additional poling units than the whole of South East zone put together. The failure of this game plan, however, gave rise to the bogus and lopsided distribution of the PVC apparently schemed against the south where only 7.6 million were registered and 5.6million PVC's collected as against the war-torn North-East which registered 9.1 million voters and collected 7.4 million PVCs [15]. The figures recorded in the North-West were most outrageous as 17.6million registrations were done and 15.1 million PVCs, collected. Much more than the whole of south-East and South-South zones combined. These are evidences of ethnic sentiment exhibit by electoral institution which is supposed to be impartial, providing a level playing ground for all zones of the country. The implications of this on democratic consolidation is far reaching.

Analyzing the above scenario further, it can be observed that over 2.4 million South-east voters were successfully disenfranchised. Evidently, in 2011 presidential election, 38 million Nigerians voted for Buhari and Jonathan while in 2015, this figure drastically dropped to 28 million while the vote of the South-West remained virtually constant evidenced by 4.5 million in 2011 and 4.2 million in 2015

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Democracy and elections are inseparable. However, only credible election can guarantee democratic consolidation. As [10], argued, democracy guarantees freedom and development and is indeed,

and that of the South-East staggered from 5 million in 2011 to only 2.6 million in 2015 elections. Hence, even where there is no executive interference in the activities of the INEC, as evidenced in the president Jonathan's administration, the activities of the electoral umpire can still be called to question if there is no clear and observed evidences that its leadership is unbiased, non-partisan and impartial in the discharge of its duties and responsibilities and this, is surely inimical to democratic consolidation in the country.

Again the February 23, 2019 presidential election in Nigeria was said to have been characterized by similar shortcomings that plagued previous elections in the country. Such shortcoming included but not in anyway restricted to: challenges of logistic faced by the INEC which resulted to widespread late commencement of the elections, untoward activities of party stalwarts which as it were, compromised the ability of voters to fully participate at the elections.

Additionally, there were observed discrepancies between the number of registered voters as announced by the INEC before the elections and actual figures recorded during collation. For instance, before the elections, INEC had clearly published that 84,004,084 were registered and went ahead to publicize the state by state breakdowns of this figure. The actual figure announced by state returning officers at collation centres was 82,344, 125; showing a shortfall of 1,659, 959 voters.

Against this backdrop coupled with widespread outcry of massive rigging by the ruling APC, violence of varying magnitude at some states of the federation and the very short notice postponement of the election by the INEC tend to substantiate the argument by many, that the electoral umpire (INEC) has not significantly improved from the status of its predecessors.

the sure antidote to war and hunger. The electoral institution (INEC), has conducted many elections in Nigeria amidst glaring constitutional defects.

Although the commission is portrayed to

be autonomous, in reality, it is a quasi-autonomous body. Its dependent nature on the executive as encapsulated in the constitution, clearly underscores this. For instance, section 154(1) of the 1999 constitution expressly confers the power to appoint the chairman, commission members and resident electoral commissioners from the states and the federal capital territory (FCT) on the president. This portends grave implications not only on autonomy of the commission but also on the critical issue of its funding. This implies that the tenures of the commission members are clearly on the discretion and pleasure of the president on whom their loyalty invariably rests [5].

The life span of the commission is equally affected, since any new president has the capability to dissolve it and appoint his own loyalist, particularly in a situation, composition of the existing commission is perceived to be unfavourable. A combination of these factors threaten the autonomy of the commission to impartially carry out its roles and responsibilities without undue influence/manipulation of the president and or party in power. Hence, electoral credibility cannot be guaranteed and democratic consolidation remains a mirage.

Based on the foregoing, this paper recommends that the power to appoint the chairman and commission members should be constitutionally vested in the council of states considering its composition and reflection of the federal character. In this way, INEC would be truly independent and better positioned to conduct free and fair election in the country uninterrupted overtly or covertly. This is the situation in South Africa evidenced in the South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), which was truly independent and conducted the third post-apartheid general elections in South Africa.

On the issue of funding, INEC should be granted fiscal autonomy. Rather than channeling its funding through the presidency, it should be charged to the consolidated revenue fund. Thus, the annual financial allocation to the commission should be reflected in the appropriation bill; while it's approved

budgeting allocations, should be disbursed directly to INEC by the Federation Account Allocation Committee via the first charge line under the consolidated revenue funds of the federal government. Alternatively, a national election fund could be established and the approved budgetary allocations of the commission, disbursed directly to INCE. This will, undoubtedly, further assure INEC's financial autonomy and prevent it from undue manipulation by the executive. Again, the independence of INEC can be better guaranteed if the commissioners are appointed from political parties and some interest groups such as; labour, Nigerian Bar Association, Nigeria Medical Association, committee of Vice-chancellors, the guild of Editors, CAN, etc.

Arising specifically from the 2019 General elections in the country, it is pertinent to suggest that the INEC in future elections, should publish complete and comprehensive results of elections at the states and national levels timely; review its successes and flaws with a view to strengthening area of weaknesses for purpose of future elections in addition to comprehensive reviews of recommendations by domestic and international credible election observers.

Similarly, communications/management of data between the states and the national level should be enhanced to ensure that information on electoral processes and results are transparently shared with the public timely.

It is equally expedient to reconsider the order and timing of General elections in the country such that sufficient time is given for preparation of elections both for INEC and the voting masses in order to ensure full participation at all levels of the elections in addition to empowering presiding officers with adequate authority to discharge their responsibilities in respect of electoral offences when they occur (Shara Reports, 2019).

The position of this paper is that, the essence of democracy is competition, inclusiveness and civil liberties. Democracy will die if it fails to serve as a platform for creating opportunities, managing diversities and encouraging the attainment of the common good. Above all electoral

credibility is a sine qua non for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

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