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THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION IN NIGERIA: A CAVEAT SIGHTED BUT JETTISONED

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Abstract

The fraudulent notoriety of the electoral process in Nigeria is an ugly trend that undermines the democratic tenets. The democratic experience in Nigeria is a parody when juxtaposed with ideal democracies which the country tends to copy. Therefore, this paper looks into the 2023 presidential poll taking into consideration the introduction of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing (IReV) portal which opened a new page that is more technologically driven compared to the previous usage of the smart card reader device. The paper also examined major trajectories that shaped the 2023 election, ranging from the Obidient movement, religious sentiments, subversion of the electoral process, hate speech to vote buying. The study found out that caveats sighted in Nigeria are often jettisoned and nothing or little is done to avert the looming danger. It further discovers that the 2023 poll is the worst in terms of voter's turnout and the most keenly contested which broke the usual two-horse race. The 2023 election is second only to the 1979 poll in terms of margin of victory between the winner and the runner up. Secondary data was largely utilized in the study.

Keywords: Election, BVAS/IReV, Voters, INEC, Politics.

Introduction

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nigerians have been craving for more credible election that is transparent, free and fair. The Presidential and national assembly (Senatorial and House of Representatives) elections are conducted after every four years but can only be staggered when there is a need for rerun election to fill a vacuum left behind as a result of death or recall of a legislator. In the build up to the 2023 elections in Nigeria, many yearned for a more credible electoral process by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The loud advocacy for a credible electoral instrument and process led to the signing of the 2022 Electoral Bill into Law. The 2022 Electoral Act has given birth to a more advanced

technological innovation with the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BIVAS).The 2023 poll was keenly contested which broke the two-horse race pattern.

> Tinubu won in Ekiti, Kwara, Ondo, Oyo, Ogun, Jigawa, Niger, Benue, Kogi, Borno, Zamfara and Rivers states. Atiku won in Osun, Yobe, Gombe, Adamawa, Katsina, Akwa Ibom, Bauchi, Bayelsa, Kaduna, Kebbi and Sokoto states. Obi won in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Imo, Delta, Cross River, Lagos, Edo, Enugu, Plateau, Nasarawa and Federal Capital Territory, FCT, Abuja.Ndujihe (2023).

The top three candidates in the 2023 election gave a decent outing. Bola Tinubu of APC won inn12 states, Atiku Abubakar of PDP won in 12 states too while Peter Obi of LP WON IN 11 states and the FCT. The former Governor of Kano state, Senator Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso came fourth and won in Kano state only. The traditional two-horse race pattern has been altered. This is a big lesson to the two dominant political parties.

Worthy of note is that between 1959 and 2019, governments in Nigeria conducted 11 national elections with enormous cost on the citizens. The federal government spent N450 billion to enable the electoral body (INEC) conduct elections between 1999 and 2019. The N450 billion cost excludes grants from development partners in both cash and logistics support. The 2011 elections in particular cost the government N112.9 billion, it cost the government N108.8 billion in 2015 and a whopping sum of N242 billion in 2019.Apart from N40 billion annual budget, INEC wants N305 billion to conduct 2023 polls. (*Premium Times*, 20/12/2021). The huge amount budgeted and spent in conducting elections in Nigeria is to a very large extent at the detriment of development when converted to infrastructural development. This does not negate the essence/importance of conducting elections but the cost is on the high side.

Clarification of Concepts

For a better understanding of this work, the need for clarification of some concepts is important.

BVAS and IReV

BVAS means Bimodal Voter Accreditation System while IReV means INEC Results Viewing portal. The BVAS is an electronic device that is designed to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and verify the voter holding the PVC through his/her fingerprints and facial recognition. The BVAS shows Polling Unit (PU) information, the total number of registered voters and the total number of accredited voters. The BVAS is also used to transmit the snapshot of the result sheets at polling units to the INEC portal for the public to see. (Oyemike, 2023). IReV is an online portal where polling unit level results are uploaded directly from the polling unit, transmitted and published for the public which increases transparency and public trust in the electoral process. "According to INEC, the IReV has been displayed in 105 elections involving 16,694,461 registered voters since it was first introduced in the 2020 Nasarawa Central bye-election." Itodo (2022)

Election

Election can simply be defined as an act of choosing or being chosen to represent or lead people where nomination and voting takes place under a constituted electoral body. Worth

noting is that elections were employed in ancient Athens and Rome to choose Popes and Roman Emperors. The gradual but steady growth of representative democracy in Europe and North America starting in 17th century gave rise to elections at various levels. Ene (n.d) defined election as "an act of choosing or selecting candidates who will represent the people of a country in the parliament and in other positions in government." Through free, fair and credible elections, leaders emerge without legitimacy questions. According to Pomper, (1967)

> Popular elections are generally assumed to be the crucial element of democratic governments, but the significance of elections is so widely assumed that it is rarely examined…elections would improve the workings of politics, even if they would not insure the quality of the resulting product. A principal procedural benefit claimed has been the achievement of legitimate government.

Elections are not conducted as an exclusive preserve of ushering in government officials. Non-governmental organizations conduct elections into various positions where the ultimate will of the voters or electorates is achieved. Election provide avenue for voters to select leaders of their choice and hold them accountable. Elections are means of selecting/choosing those to represent the people in different public positions within a polity. Election provides citizens with opportunity to influence policy making. (Azutoru, 2011)

Margin of victory in Presidential elections from 1979-2023

An overview of the margin of victory or gap between the winners and runners up in the Presidential polls from 1979 to 2023 is given below:

1979 (1.77 million); 1983 (4.174 million); 1993 (2.389 million); 1999 (7.638 million); 2003 (11.746 million); 2007 (18.03 million); 2011 (10.28 million); 2015 (2.572 million); 2019 (3.929 million); 2023 (1.81 million)

The margins of victory presented above shows that the 1979 election produced the lowest margin of victory followed by 2023 polls. The 2007 election produced the highest margin of victory (18. 03 million votes) followed by the 2003 elections (11.746 votes). Worth noting is that in 1979, Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) polled 5,688,857 votes (33.77 %) while Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) had 4,916,651 votes and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria Peoples Party (NPP) came third with 2,822,523 votes (16.75 %). In 1983, Shehu Shagari sought for re-election and garnered 12,081,471 votes (47.51%); Obafemi Awolowo had 7,907,209 votes (31.09 %); while Nnamdi Azikiwe got 3,557,113 votes (13.99%) to come third but Shagari's regime was truncated by the military. (Ndujihe, 2023).

In an attempt to return to civilian rule, election was conducted in 1993. Chief MKO Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) Abiola polled 8,341,309 votes (58.36 %) to defeat Alhaji Bashir Othman Tofa of National Republican Convention (NRC) who polled 5,952,087 votes (41.64 %) but the election was annulled by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida's military junta. Three political parties were cleared by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to participate in the general election. However, an agreement was reached by the Alliance for Democracy (AD) and All People's Party (APP) to field Chief Olu Falae as a joint Presidential candidate to slug it out with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Olusegun Obasanjo won the election with 18,738,154 (62.78%) while Olu Falae got 11,110,287 votes (37.22%).

In 2003, Obasanjo sought for re-election and had 19 challengers but only Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) of the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) gave a reasonable but ineffective challenge. Olusegun Obasanjo of PDP got 24,456,140 votes (61.94%), Buhari had 12,710,022 (32.19%) while late Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu of All Progressives Grand Alliance, APGA, came a distant third with 1,297,445 votes (3.29%). In 2007, Dr. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua won the highly controversial poll contested by 25 candidates. Yar'Adua of PDP polled 24,638,063 votes (69.60%). Buhari of the ANPP came second with 6,605,288 votes (18.66%) while Atiku Abubakar of the Action Congress (AC) garnered 2,637,848 votes (7.48%) to become third.

In 2011, after Yar'Adua died, his Vice, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who eventually succeeded him got the ticket of the PDP. Jonathan got 22,495,187 votes (58.87%) to defeat 19 other contestants. Muhammadu Buhari who contested under the platform of Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) came second with 12,214,853 votes (31.97%). "The 2015 election was a straight battle between Buhari of the APC (15,424,921 or 53.96 percent of votes) and then incumbent President Jonathan of the PDP, who polled 12,858,162 votes (44.96 percent)" Ndujihe (2023). PDP was defeated for the first time since 1999 by the All Progressives Congress which is a conglomeration of different political parties.

Buhari of APC in his re-election bid had the upper hand in the 2019 election where he contested against 73 other contestants where he won. Buhari garnered 15,191,847 votes (55.60%) while Atiku Abubakar of PDP came second with 11,262,978 votes (41.22%). The 2023 poll result as announced by INEC shows that Bola Ahmed Tinubu of APC "secured a total of 8,794,726. Atiku Abubakar of PDP had the second highest figure with 6,984,520 votes, while Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) was next with 6,101,533 votes." Are (2023).Going into the 2023 election, the total number of registered voters stood at 93,469,008 while 25,286,616 were accredited to vote.

Voter turnout

The 2023 Presidential election remained the worst in terms of voter turnout compared to other polls. The 2023 turnout of 25,286,616 (27%) figure is the least turnout in presidential contests in Nigeria. The 2007 election had a 57.49 % voter turnout. The turnout in 2011 was 53.68%. the turnout for other elections were 1999 (52.26%), 1983 (38.94 %), 1993 (36.65 %), 1979 (35.25%); and 2019 (34.75 %).The 2023 poll is the most keenly contested poll with a closely-knitted result across the country. The possible reasons for the low voters' turnout could be as a result of insecurity, inability of millions of voters to collect their Permanent Voter's Cards (PVCs), inability of INEC to remove names of dead voters in their register and hardship/cash crunch occasioned by the Naira redesign policy of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) which created scarcity of cash which to an extent affected many.

Major trajectories that shaped the 2023 poll

Every election period has certain trajectories that shapes it and 2023 poll is not an exception. Thus:

i. The *Obidients* Movement: The yearning of the youths and their like minds to have a new breed of political order with dexterity and a relatively youthful vigour spurred a large number of Nigerians to throw their weight behind Peter Obi. Hence, the coining of the name *Obidients* referring to supporters of Peter Obi's presidential ambition. The #EndSars spontaneous protests across Nigeria in 2020 were a warning sign for impending revolution. The #EndSars movement against police brutality was highjacked by hoodlums and led to violence (Shul-Nom, 2020). One could be right to say that the *Obidients* movement is the actualization of the impending revolution as forecasted by Shul-NomYohanna Bako as captured in "*The #EndSars spontaneous protests in Nigeria: A warning sign for impending revolution"*. The *Obidients* movement was a non-violent revolution that was underrated but created a major upset in the 2023 poll.

The *Obidients* saw in Peter Obi a jinx breaker:

> He was the first governor to regain his mandate through court in Nigeria; first person to introduce staggered election in our electoral system in 2007; first governor to win without structure in 2003 with APGA in Anambra state; he paid up Anambra state debts leaving a whopping savings of N75 billion $150 million in savings…their mind was made up, Obi is the answer for the call for a new Nigeria….Some of their achievements (*Obidients*) are already well known: First presidential candidate to challenge the big dominant parties without an elected representative in government (no structure); first person in Nigeria to win equal states (12 states) with the ruling parties during collation of results with a party (LP) without structure. *The Sun* (2023).

The glaring infrastructural and leadership deficit in the country occasioned by poor economy/ double digits inflation, poverty, corruption, marginalization, religious bigotry and high unemployment rate must have triggered the *Obidient* Movement. The youths sought for a sigh of relief through Peter Obis' quest to be the president. Without 'structure', the Labour Party (LP) defied all odds by clinching 11 states and the FCT.

ii. **Religious sentiments:** The Muslim-Muslim ticket fielded by APC which paired Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima (both Muslims) raised the eye brows of many, especially Christians which heated the polity and largely prompted a very good number of Christians to support the Labour Party (LP) candidate, Peter Obi. This trajectory has planted a seed of resentment that its fruits is not yet known. It is often said that Nigeria is a religious country, this assertion is nebulous because religious people are expected to act in tandem with the dictates of their religious beliefs. However, religion is used to win election and gain dubious favour but Nigeria's current underdeveloped status is at variance with the notion that Nigerians are religious people. There are firebrand crooks across all the religions in Nigeria who are holding development drive to ransom. Development and economic growth is not hinged on religion. China has become a global force in terms of her economic growth without riding on any religious platform.

iii. **Subversion of the electoral process**: Subversion of electoral process is multilayered and multifaceted ranging from the electoral umpire (INEC), politicians and security personnel. Since independence, politicians in their bid for power and in their desire not to only defeat opponents or opposition but to eliminate it, they have shown little regards for the

rules of the game. INEC failed to adhere to its own rules as announced before the 2023 poll especially the one bordering on uploading of results in real-time. London based Chatham House, an independent policy institute founded in 1920, stated that from its analysis of the February 25 Presidential election, it would appear that INEC failed to learn new lessons.

> Chatham House stated that less than half of the eligible voters could participate in the elections, despite the commission's N305 billion budgetary allocation…. The INEC's performance and controversies over these results mean that the electoral reforms and lessons declared to have been learned were not fully applied. It (INEC) failed to adhere to its own statements and guidelines, which derive from its laws, that election results would be uploaded to its portal using the BVAS directly from the polling unit in real-time for the public's viewing…INEC's sub-optimal performance must be taken seriously because Nigeria's path to recovery and stability must follow the way of accountability and electoral integrity. Addeh (2023)

The Adamawa State Resident Electoral Commissioner Barrister Hudu Yunusa Ari illegally declared Aisha Dahiru Binani the APC gubernatorial candidate as the winner of the supplementary election in the state and was shamelessly given cover by Police, DSS and NSCDC personnel. He sneaked into the collation centre two hours before the scheduled time for resumption of collation of results. He usurped the powers of the returning officer who is statutorily empowered to declare the winner of the poll. Governor Ahmadu Fintiri of PDP was later declared winner and Barrister Hudu was later suspended by INEC. This shows the level of irresponsible behaviours demonstrated by some INEC staff and security men.

iv. **Vote buying**: Simply put, vote buying is an exchange of money or 'gifts' for vote. Prior to and during the 2023 presidential and national assembly election, virtually all the political parties and aspirants were involved in vote buying tactics in various forms which include but not limited to: issuing cash to delegates for votes during political parties' primary elections, giving voters cash on Election Day, distribution of assorted food items, wrappers or gadgets. "…in every country where vote markets thrive, they produce a range of harmful consequences. Vote trading enables state capture and undermines democracy, as corrupt politicians are likely to be elected, rather than voted out." Hoffmann & Patel (2022)

> Wholesale bribery works by paying for votes delivered in block rather than individually. Block voting is very common in impoverished traditional rural societies: the local big shot gives the lead and his advice is not seriously questioned. When votes are counted it is common for many villages to have voted 100 percent for one candidate. If the big shot determines the voting, it is obviously cheaper to buy his support directly rather than try to attract individual votes…. Most politicians try to ingratiate themselves with voters, but a radically different technique is to intimidate them. Collier (2009)

The vote buying antics in Nigeria is not only perpetuated by the ruling party alone. Other opposition parties too indulge in vote buying but the party in government has more war chest due to graft. The cash crunch during the 2023 poll occasioned by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) Naira redesign policy was vehemently kicked against by key APC party stalwarts.

A caveat sighted but jettisoned

Early warning signs of a disaster ought to be quickly followed with early response to avert a looming danger. Some of the following challenges existed either prior to, during or after the 2023 presidential and national assembly election:

i. ***Hate Speech***: Hate speech simply means a communication expressing hatred for a person or a group of people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, race, gender or political affiliation which can degenerate into spasms of violence. The incendiary messages on digital and social media platforms allow hateful messages to spread wide and quick. (Shul-Nom, 2018). Prior to 2007 elections, President Olusegun Obasanjo while addressing elders and other stakeholders from Abeokuta North Local Government Area of Ogun State declared that the 2007 elections would be a do or die affair for the country and his ruling PDP. (Larewaju, 2007). In another sad development, prior to 2019 elections, Nasir El-Rufai (Governor of Kaduna State) came under serious criticisms for saying that foreigners will leave in body bags if they intervene in the forthcoming elections. (Ibrahim, 2019).In 2015, the Oba of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu was in the news for a bad reason over his hateful comment and threat to the Igbos in Lagos. According to Tukur (2015):

> During a courtesy visit to the Oba at his Palace by Eze Ndigbo (Igbo traditional ruler) of all the local governments in Lagos on Sunday, Mr. Akiolu had said that Igbo residents in the state should cast their votes to the governorship candidate of the APC, Akinwunmi Ambode, or "perish inside the lagoon".

Traditional rulers, politicians, religious leaders and others spread hateful messages out of desperation to ensure that a particular political party or candidate emerge victorious during elections. After winning election, it is extremely difficult to unite the people. This gives room for mutual suspicion and bitterness.

ii. ***Failed promise by INEC***: The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) under the leadership of Prof. Mahmood Yakubu repeatedly gave Nigerians assurance that the introduction of BVAS and IReV portal will end election rigging and violence. The BVAS and IReV were used in Anambra, Osun and Ekiti governorship polls and other bye-elections. Nigerians were given the hope that the new technology will go a long way in proving a credible 2023 general elections but INEC failed to act according to her promise.

> Coming barely six days after Prof. Yakubu announced that the commission was "ready", it remains a mystery that INEC transmitted most of the parliamentary results as promised but resorted to the manual tabulation of the presidential figures. This gave room for the re-enactment of ballot snatching, violence, falsification of results, corruption of electoral officials by politicians and other forms of malfeasance…. What about the uncountable cases of PVC dumping, especially in Lagos and the South-East which Yakubu never bothered to address? And what about the child voters in the North who voted despite Yakubu's assurances that their names had been cleaned from the register? (*Vanguard, 16/3/2023*)

iii. Violence/intimidation of voters: Elections in Nigeria are often characterized by violence and intimidation of voters especially on Election Day in order to gain undue political advantage. The 2023 poll is not an exception, there were instances of ballot box snatching, preventing voters to gain access to their voting points and other forms of violence. Some politicians often use thugs to perpetrate nefarious acts especially in areas that the opposition party has strong support base or vice versa so as to prompt cancellation of elections in the affected areas which weakens the chances of having more votes. This is unacceptable and efforts must be taken by the relevant stakeholders to bring it to a stop.

iv. Exorbitant nomination forms: The expression of interest forms sold by political parties to aspirants vying for elective positions are beyond the reach of the common man. The major political parties, especially the ruling party tactically and technically make their forms available only to the wealthy class at the detriment of the poor, no matter how competent due to high cost of nomination forms. For example, on 20th April, 2022, the ruling APC announced the fees for its expression of interest and nomination forms for the 2023 general elections. The fees include N100 million for Presidential aspirants made up of N30 million for the nomination of interest form and N70 million for nomination form. N50 million was fixed for governorship aspirants, N20 million for and N10 million for Senatorial and House of Representatives aspirants respectively, and N2 million for state House of Assembly aspirants. The APC raised the fee for the presidential nomination forms by 263% over what it charged in 2014 as an opposition party. (Ojo, 2022)

According to Edeme (2022), "placing the party nomination form at N100m for APC and N40m for PDP is an indirect way of saying that people without deep pockets are not invited to participate in the electoral process". The reason for the high cost of the nomination forms is probably to raise funds for the party because members hardly pay or don't pay monthly dues at all. The major political parties jerk up their fees in order to reduce too many contestants during primary elections which may cause internal crisis. On the other hand, the minor political parties lower their nomination forms fee in order to attract more people into their folds.

Conclusion

Credible election is an integral component of a democratic system which ought to be conducted in a credible manner devoid of manipulative tendencies to subvert the process. The introduction of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal during the 2023 general elections is well thought innovation but it was not properly used as promised by the electoral umpire which undermines the validity of the election outcome. This is not to suggest that the entire process is a sham but it falls beyond the expectations of Nigerians given the promises made by INEC. The 2023 poll shows that the youth demography is increasingly more interested in getting involved in choosing who governs them.

The need for good leadership and good followership cannot be overemphasized. The myriad of challenges bedeviling our electoral system is as a result of bad leadership and followership. The lack of institutional and financial autonomy of the electoral umpire (INEC) is a clog in the wheel of progress which undermines the independent status of INEC because the chairman of the commission is appointed by the president. Other national commissioners of the

commission are also appointed by the president which to an extent, makes them vulnerable to doing the bidding of the incumbent president when he/she want to subvert the electoral process to favour the ruling party. Vote buying is another menace that should be addressed by the anti-graft agencies and the relevant security personnel by arresting and prosecuting vote buyers and their accomplice.

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