

REVISITING CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: ITS RELEVANCE TO 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS?

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Abstract

The attention of the international community is on Nigeria again because it is another electioneering period (though amidst worsening personal security situations) when it is expected that the country should solidify and consolidate its nascent democracy. In view of this, the purpose of this paper is to x-ray the historic 2015 general elections which have been widely acknowledged to be arguably, the freest, fairest and most credible in Nigeria's electoral history since independence and recommend derived lessons that should be applied to the forthcoming general elections in 2023 in order to have an even better electoral success. While x-raying an array of secondary data on 2015 general elections in Nigeria, it was observed that the exceptional roles of the international civil society organisations with the collaboration of some local ones contributed very significantly to making that year's electoral process and outcomes historically successful and this, no doubt, has not been adequately covered in extant literature. The paper argues that although civil society organisations have been involved in Nigeria's elections for decades, at no time have the international csos been so deeply committed as in 2015 due mainly to some pre-election's predictions about the country's breakup.

Keywords: 2015 general elections, civil society organisations, international civil society organisations, Nigeria elections, 2023 general elections.

Introduction

The attention of the international community will be on Nigeria because it is another electioneering period (Olowojolu and Ake, 2015). Thus, as the 2023 general elections in Nigeria are just around the corner it is another opportunity for the nation to solidify and consolidate its nascent democracy in other to reclaim its pride of place in the international arena. As the country gets ready for the 2023 general elections in a few months time, two of the most important things are that there be a level playing field and personal security as or more than experienced in 2015 when the most-widely acknowledged peaceful, credible, freest and fairest general elections in Nigeria's fourth republic were held which led to the historic defeat of the incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party by Muhammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of the opposition party, the All Progressive Congress, APC. Nigeria has never had it good like this in the annals of its electoral history since independence where a sitting president (Goodluck Jonathan) was defeated by a candidate (Muhammadu Buhari) from an opposition party in a general election characterised by a no do-or-die political atmosphere. Most interesting is that the incumbent president congratulated the opposition candidate even before the conclusion of the elections on noticing that the latter was already coasting to victory as indicated by the yet to be announced final results. This was unlike the past elections especially the 2003 and 2007 which "were ranked among the most violent and least credible in the world" (Aderonmu, 2013, p.20).

Perhaps, at this juncture we may ask, what made the historic 2015 general elections possible against the 2015 pre-election odd predictions? What are the contributions of the international actors especially the civil society organisations in the 2015 general elections? Put differently, which role did the international CSOs play to the success of the 2015 general elections that needs to be emulated in 2023?

Divergent views and opinions in extant literature are awash with the historic success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria (see Olowojolu & Ake, 2015; Itodo & Abah, 2016; Nwosumba, Abah

& Ngwube, 2016). Some opine that the historic electoral success was possible due to electoral reforms initiated and actualized by president Yar'Adua/Jonathan government earlier before the elections. To Olowojolu & Ake (2015) in their overview study of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the introduction of PVCs and Card Readers into the electoral process reduced electoral fraud and time wasting thereby indicating that the country can improve its electoral process through the injection of advance technology. Others like Itodo and Abah (2016) argue that the "un-reckoned" roles of those they refer to as the "peace shooters" that is the election peace committee during and after the elections contributed largely to the success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. However, these un-reckoned roles of the peace shooters are treated as part of the study carried out by Nwosumba, Abah and Ngwube (2016).

In the work, the scholars are of the view that both local and international civil society organisations, CSOs in collaboration with INEC played significant roles through the mass media in the sensitization of rural dwellers on the need to be registered during the registration of voters exercises as well as the collective resolve of some CSOs to ensure that some politicians signed a peace accord known as Abuja Peace Accord. This, they contend, accounts for the peaceful nature of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. As presented by the trio the outcome of the elections dumbfounded many who predicted doom for the country before the elections including local and International analysts and researchers as their expectation that electoral crisis might degenerate into wide, full-scale violence and probably war turned out negative. However, in spite of all the hullabalos, the country was able to manage itself and in fact, conducted satisfactorily, one of the best ever elections in Africa.

Although the positions of the literature have indeed tried to relate the different roles of the electoral reforms of pre-2015 and civil society organisations to the successful outcome of the 2015 general elections enough contributions have not been deeply made to critically examine how the international civil society organisations significantly helped in providing a propitious electoral environment and processes that helped immensely to make the outcome of the 2015 general elections especially the presidential election historic as never before in Nigeria's electoral history. This paper is joining this debate considering that as the upcoming general elections in Nigeria are very close, elections which present another opportunity for the nation to solidify and consolidate its nascent democracy (see Vanguard, 2022) there is a need to reappraise the historic success of the 2015 general elections in order to suggest what should be emulated for another historic electoral outcome in the country in 2023 to be possible. The paper follows the trendy nature of the debate about the civil society which Kukah (1999) says has become more urgent since the seeming collapse of the democracy project midway in many African countries. Thus, for this paper to contribute in narrowing the gap identified in the literature and join the debate especially as it is tailored to the making of a successful 2023 elections in Nigeria, it specifically focuses deeply on reappraising the significant relationship between the roles of the international civil society organisations and the historic 2015 general elections in Nigeria. We will continue to talk on this 2015 general elections and the roles of international civil society organisations because the elections are historic and have remained the best in the country and so needs to be emulated in 2023. There is no doubt that Nigeria enjoyed enormous momentary goodwill from the international community as a result of the achievement (Olowojolu & Ake, 2015) and the country needs again now that its international image is gloomy.

Methodology

This study uses the historical research design known as the ex-post facto (after the facts) research design because the 2015 general elections had taken place and the data are already in existence (see Ndiyo, 2005 as cited in Sylvanus et al., 2022). Being a qualitative research, the paper adopts historical method of inquiry. Historical method is associated with Machiavelli, Vico, Montesquieu, Savigny, Maine, Seeley and Freeman and stresses the use of historical evidence for

a proper study of political phenomena (Johari, 2013). The implication is that the researcher needs historical evidence to build a relationship between distant occurrences, the present events and future predictions of what are likely to happen. The fact that this study takes root in history makes historical analytical method the chosen instrument of analysis. However, in spite of the limitations of the method, the ability of the researcher to use it effectively without any statistical interpretation is an evidence of the qualitative orientation of the paper. Data collection is done by x-raying and dissecting the array of documented information dotted in many publicly endorsed and accepted printed and electronic secondary sources like books, journals, newspapers, the internet and their like. So the combination of facts from already certified secondary data makes the paper authentic and as such, an acceptable public document. Thus, the essence of drawing echoes from documents on the past 2015 general elections is to bring back the winning strategies and means through which the electioneering processes and outcomes of that year produced a historic success which were widely adjudged arguably as the best in the country since independence, now that the 2023 general elections are around the corner. Hence, the analysis as contained in the paper is to serve the interests of electoral policy makers and the umpire, INEC, civil society groups in Nigeria, the international community at large but with particular reference to the international civil society organisations, the voters and other stakeholders.

Conceptual Analysis

Civil Society

Civil society as a concept has no straightjacket definition since it has over the years been contextually used by scholars and practitioners in different ways. In VanDyck's report for Center for Strategic and International Studies (2017) the most commonly used definition of civil society was created by CIVICUS which conceives it as the arena outside the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organisations, and institutions to advance shared interests. However, civil society organisations are critical recipes for democratic consolidation globally, especially in Africa, where liberal democratic institutions are fledgling and fragile.

In the classical era, the term civil society was used to denote a regime that was committed to secure the rule of law for the common good on behalf of people. Common good meant the provision of basic rights, public safety, education for all, and basic infrastructure like roads, electricity, pipe borne water, hospitals among others. In this perspective, civil society was viewed as a good society where democratic dividends are delivered to the populace. To Osborne (2021), civil society is exactly what could be referred to as a forum for intermediate powers, a fact corroborated by Chukwuma (2005) who defined civil society as a set of institutions, organisations and behaviour situated between the state, business world and family.

Against the foregoing, it can be said that these civil society organisations and institutions include non- governmental organisations, private voluntary organisations, people's organisations, civic organisations, community based organisations, cultural, gender, religious, and social organisations such as civic clubs and trade unions (Chukwuma, 2005; Uwan & Yearoo, 2009). In a similar vein, Ikelegbe sees civil society as the associational life of citizens characterised by common interests, civil and public purposes, and voluntary collective autonomous actions. It also stretches to include all those associations that enable citizens to participate voluntarily, freely and openly within the public realm, and operate and function independent of and outside state and corporate powers though, relating with them (Ikelegbe, 2013). Civil society acts as a buffer against the power of the central government and in that capacity encourages individuals to follow their own courses without fear of intimidation from the central government. The essence of civil society is to advance the interest of a group of people with a common socio-economic, political or cultural interest with the objective of not to capture political power or make profits but to provide and advance the course of good governance and common good of its members (Ghaus-Pasha, 2004, p.9).

Going by the conceptualisations above, civil society is therefore conceived in this paper in line with Nwosumba, Abah and Ngwube (2016) to mean the third sector, the collectivity of associational groups that are different from the state, business and family that are geared towards the promotion of group goals and objectives. Civil society provides the necessary social factors that interface between the government and the citizens especially in the promotion of good democratic governance. Their responsibilities are clearly defined and cut across social, political, economic and cultural matrix of human society.

"The debate over civil society in Africa is, some would say, relatively new. In fact, the expression itself was first used in relation to Africa only recently and was brought into prominence" by Jean-Francois Bayart (Kukah, 1999, p.37). This notwithstanding, in Nigeria, particularly since the return of civil rule in 1999 civil society organisations have played and are still playing meaningful roles in the sustenance of democracy through advocacy, civic education, social capital formation, citizen litigation, economic development, human capacity building, budget tracking, anti corruption crusade and electoral advancement among others. In spite of these roles, Nigeria has not been able to conduct a widely accepted credible, free and fair elections as the ones in 2015. Thus, the 2015 general election marked a watershed in the annals of Nigeria's electoral system as it was an election that was tension-soaked and generated staccato debates among scholars and public commentators (Nwosumba, Abah & Ngwube, 2016) but later turned out to be arguably, adjudged the most peaceful and successful in the country since independence. Thanks to the significant roles of the international civil society organisations for their uncommon commitment though with the collaboration of the local csos, to making the elections successful and historic. International civil society organisations are therefore conceptualised in this paper as part of the civil society family which is playing an intermediate roles between the state and the citizens but with across-the-national boundaries of states' scope in operation. So, unlike the local csos which are limited to operate within their national boundaries, international csos are mostly operating outside their national boundaries and so are sometimes multi-nationally oriented and based. They are usually like other csos that are not for profit.

General Elections in Nigeria

According to Flanders (1980, p. 114), the word election comes from a Latin root meaning "to choose....An election is the method of filling an office by vote, particularly by the electorate...." Election is therefore an indispensable aspect of democracy as there can be no true liberal democracy without a credible, free and fair election. Election is the periodic organised and systemic procedures and processes for selecting political representatives in a liberal democratic society. However, it can be said that election is a major standard for gauging the level of democratic consolidation in a given society. Ideally, election is a necessary recipe of democracy but in Africa, where liberal democracy is a new trend due to age-long monarchies and governance through royal blood, elections have become a major challenge to democracy (Jega, 2011). General elections in Nigeria in this sense implies elections that are nationally oriented and based. For example, the 2015 general elections in Nigeria were nationally oriented and based and so represent what this paper refers to as general elections because they were simultaneously organised at the local, states and national levels.

Although elections are expected to be free, fair and credible they "are not really free unless the people voting in them are free from fear of those in power" (Flanders, 1980, p.114). Although this fact is provable as it applies to advanced democracies, the question is whether the people voting in Nigeria's elections are free from fear of those in power. It is conceived in this paper as an indictment of Nigeria as far as general elections are concerned because no single general elections in the country has been conducted and the outcomes widely accepted by the local, national and international community as being indeed free, fair and credible before 2015. Even the 1993 general elections midwived by military president General Ibrahim Babangida

adjudged widely to be free and fair were annulled by the same president. It is against the foregoing point about voters being free from fear of those in power that the roles of the civil society organisations in nascent democracy such as Nigeria are considered imperative.

As analysed by Itodo and Abah (2016), the fear prior to the 2015 general elections about the odd predictions that the country was prone to breaking up due to election crisis was so large that the offices of the Special Adviser to the President on Inter Party Affairs and National Security Adviser together with other stakeholders like the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP and European peace building organisations converged to work out a framework to douse the tension and this culminated to the forming of the national peace committee which midwived the eventual signing of the now famous Abuja Peace Accord. The roles of the international civil society organisations in the making of the 2015 historic electoral success owing to the peace accord signed and kept speak volume (see also Nwosumba, Abah & Ngwube, 2016). In the end, the successful and peaceful outcomes of the elections indicate that when there is a level playing field for all political players and lack of fear of those in power the tendency of conducting free, fair and credible elections in any democracy and not only Nigeria is guaranteed. Assuming the electoral environment was still characterised by the hitherto, do-or-die politics prevalent in the fourth republic, there would not have been the possibility of an opposition party presidential candidate winning an incumbent president who also was the presidential candidate of the ruling party. It has never happened in Nigeria until 2015. More so, as can be argued, if the relationship between the state and civil society in Nigeria has remained largely that of extreme dependence of the latter on the former (see Kukah, 1999) as before there is no how the csos would have played their intermediate roles significantly. The jettisoning of the politics of do-or-die within the electoral period also paved the way for the csos. Considering the foregoing it, therefore, becomes a challenge for Nigeria to create a level playing field and peaceful electoral atmosphere in which all the political participants, electorates and contestants alike, shall do the business of 2023 election without the fear of those in power. This does not imply however, that the paper is saying that an opposition candidate must win as in 2015 before the 2023 elections outcomes should be widely accepted as being the most credible, peaceful and freest rather, it is saying that the most credible and accepted candidates should win if the electoral process at all stages is devoid of do-or-die politics and played on a level field.

Suffice it to say therefore that given the fact that elections are free when the people voting in them are free from fear of those in power, there is then the need that elections should be free, fair and credible everywhere including Nigeria. This will encourage political participation and reduce political apathy. Thus, considering that the possible benefits of voting (political participation) outweigh those of political apathy it is necessary that voters in Nigeria should be free from fear of those in power. Olubusoye et al (2020) on this note corroborate that elections offer the citizenry opportunities to exercise their basic rights as abstaining from voting amounts to dereliction of civic duty. Nigeria should to create enabling environment for an increased political participation in the country in 2023.

Theoretical Explanation

Liberal theory of civil society holds that the existence of civil society is highly imperative in a democratic society because it promotes freedom, equality, tolerance, accountability and progress. Liberalism is a negation to autocratic ideology and is sine qua non to democracy. To an extent according to Osborne (2021), civil society can be described as a liberal idea. As a political ideology, liberalism espouses citizen's freedom of association, expression, thought among others (Fadakinte, 2013). Alluding to this fact, Osborne (2021) stresses that "for much liberal democratic thought civil society is represented as a bulwark against the alternatives of occluded, wholly privatised, even atomised existence and a big state that suppresses personal freedoms by

imposing its own norms exclusively." To the liberals, civil society is crucial in any democratic nation, especially in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria because it promotes unrestricted freedom, tolerance, and equity, freedom of expression and association which are germane for building a violent free democratic society. By providing guidelines and legal provisions for openness and freedom, citizens are better informed and empowered to participate in governance. The survival of these liberal tenets inhibits the emergence of dictators and attenuates democratic culture.

Within the above perspectives, civil society stands as an alternative way to aggregating social, political and economic forces outside the state which help to monitor, observe and gauge government policies and programmes on the citizens and to articulate the views and interests of people outside the arena of political corridor to the government. Liberalism which emerged with the fall of feudalism and communism and the triumph of capitalism is contemporarily being vanguarded by liberal institutions like the United Nations Organisations (UNO & family), International Monetary Fund, (IMF), World Bank (WB) European Union (EU) among others. These agencies believe that the existence of civil society helps to deepen democracy by promoting accountability, transparency and prudence in governance. In fact, western donor organisations like IMF and WB have made the establishment and promotion of virile civil society a prerequisite for granting aids to developing countries of Africa and Asia.

Besides, with the exercise and location of all powers and authority with state, a third party is needed to ensure that there is accountability and respect for the constitution. This ultimately helps to curtail the emergence of dictatorial or authoritarian regimes and further promotes democracy and good governance which are germane for the welfare of all the people. The roles as played by the csos in Nigeria's 2015 general elections especially in the signing and keeping to Abuja Peace Accord attests to the foregoing because by the politicians and their parties playing to agreement reached by all of them and as moderated by the civil society yielded a huge electoral success. In a nutshell, Nigeria's democracy was strengthened as it avoided an enthronement of a dictatorial or authoritarian regime when the defeated incumbent president Jonathan accepted defeat and handed over power to the opponent who won the presidential election. This is history that has not been made by the country since independence. It is within this theoretical plank that this study adopts liberal theory of civil society in the study. The reason for adopting this theory is because it will help explain the activities of civil society organisations in Nigeria's 2015 general elections which is advocated herein for emulation in 2023 when the next general elections are to be held in the country.

Roles of the International Civil Society in 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

Since the return of civil rule in Nigeria on 29th May, 1999, elections have become a recurrent political process in the country (Mercy, 2012, p.42). However, due to the high demographic spread, ignorance and incessant ethno-religious cum political innuendos, past elections have been fraught with misdemeanors and the electoral umpire seemingly incapacitated to deliver a credible election (Jega, 2011, p.8). As a result of this, civil society organisations have been horizontally and vertically integrated in the conduct of elections in Nigeria.

Generally, many civil society organisations participated in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It is estimated that over 3000 CSOs were directly and indirectly involved in Nigeria's fifth quadrennial elections in 2015. Although only 107 were registered by the INEC to fully observe and monitor the presidential and National Assembly elections across the 774 Local Government Areas of Nigeria (INEC 2015). Other numerous faith and community based CSOs such as community based organisations, labour groups and the media were involved in all the tripartite stages of the election process (pre, during and post election stages).

Pre-Election Stage

During the pre election stage which involved planning, re validation of voters register, registration

of prospective voters, production and distribution of Permanent Voter's cards, issuance of voter's cards and voters' education, Civil society organizations in Nigeria played significant roles in the build up to the general elections. For instance, the Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa (CDD) was involved in the sensitization of Nigeria through the Mass media, street rallies, workshops and conferences on how to conduct a credible 2015 elections in Nigeria. They closely monitored and critiqued the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) strategies adopted during the nationwide voter's register validation.

Civil society organisations were highly instrumental to the success of the 2015 polls in Nigeria through their dogged commitments to voter's education and general public enlightenment on the civic responsibilities of citizens. At the end of voter registration preparatory to the 2015 elections, INEC produced a total of 68,833,476 Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs) for registered voters for the 2015 elections and beyond (INEC 2015). This new card had new features which helped to minimize electoral frauds. Patrick observes that the PVCs contained the:

Biometric details of the voter whose passport sized photograph appear in front. These cards have many components and specialized features such as base substrate, security printing, personalization, lamination and chip embedding; it is designed with an average lifespan often (10) years. With this innovation, voters could access their status in the voters' register by sending a text message "INEC, state of registration, last name, last five digits of the Voter Identification Number (i.e., on the TVC) and sending the SMS to short code 20120." This replaced the Temporary Voters Card (TVC) and automatically ceased to be operational in the 2015 general elections. The PVCs issued by INEC considerably curbed the issue of multiple registrations, cloning, and voter's card theft. In the past, politicians mobilized their thugs who are smuggled into the registration exercise to manipulate things (Patrick, 2015, p.11).

While INEC should be commended for these innovations, it is germane and imperative to equally acknowledge the unparalleled financial role of civil society organizations in making the entire registration and production of PVCs possible. Although the election was budgeted for by the Federal Government of Nigeria, different Non-Government organizations and donor agencies made enormous financial donations to INEC. In fact, INEC established a consolidated account known as Donor Basket Fund in which donor organizations made their donations into. The funds from Donor Basket Fund were used in paying ad-hoc staff of INEC and for offsetting other financial and logistical challenges (Jega, 2015).

In addition to these, many International CSOs rendered free consultancy services to INEC especially in areas of training and re-training of electoral officers and voter education to help strengthen the nation's democratic process. Some of the International CSOs that rendered these services to INEC in the build up to the 2015 elections include; Ford Foundation, Mac Arthur Foundation, OSIWA-OSI Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), International Foundation for Electoral System (IFES), International Republic Institute (IRI), International IDEA among others (INEC, 2015). In fact, INEC identified four basic areas of support to include:

Offer Technical Assistance to the Commission in diverse fields. These include providing consultants who advise the Commission on Voter Registration, Voter Education, Media Work, Transmission of Results and Election Management generally, The Commission receives support for training. Several workshops and training are funded, including BRIDGE Training, support experience sharing between the Commission, Experts and Election Management Bodies..... The Commission also receives support, In its reviews of major electoral activities including the registration of voters and general elections (INEC, 2015).

More novel in the annals of Nigeria's electoral system was the establishment of a peace committee which later culminated to the signing of peace accord by all the political aspirants who participated in the elections. Commonly known as the Abuja Peace Accord, it was an initiative of civil society organizations particularly the Kukah Centre in partnership with the United Nations

Development Program (UNDP) to create a platform upon which all the presidential candidates made pragmatic commitment to strict adherence to basic electoral guidelines. Patrick specifically observes that the Abuja Accord:

was meant to brainstorm and generate commitment from the presidential candidates for a peaceful electoral process. Those in attendance were the 14 presidential candidates (prominent were those of the APC and PDP); national leaders of the political parties; Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General; Emeka Anyaoku, former Commonwealth Secretary General. The following were articles of the pact signed;..To run issue- based campaigns at national, state, and local government levels. In this, we pledge to reframe from campaigns that will involve religious incitements, ethnic or tribal profiling both by ourselves and by all agents acting hi our names. . . To reframe from making or causing to make in our names or that of our party any public statements, pronouncements, declarations or speeches that have the capacity to incite any form of violence before, during and after the election. . . To forcefully and publicly speak out against provocative utterances and oppose all acts of electoral violence, whether perpetrated by our supporters and or opponents. . To commit ourselves and political parties to the monitoring of the adherence to this accord if necessary by a national peace committee made up of respected statesmen and women, traditional and religious leaders,..All the institutions of government including INEC and security agencies, must act and be seen to act with impartiality (Parick, 2015, p.13).

The National Peace Committee working in collaboration with Kofi Annan Centre, Centre for Strategic Conflict Management (CSCM), Catholic's Justice, Peace and Development Commission, Alliance for Credible Elections (ACE) helped in ensuring that the Presidential candidates particularly Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC), and Goodluck Jonathan of the Peoples Democratic Party(PDP) kept to the terms of the peace agreements. Eminent Nigerians comprising of traditional rulers, religious leaders and retired distinguished civil servants were part of the National Peace Committee. Odey further observes that members of this committee include:

Former Head of States, General AbdusalamAbubakar. Other members included, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, former Chief of General Staff in the General Ibrahim Babangida's Administration (Vice Chairman); John Cardinal Onayiekan, Most Rev. Dr. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese; Alhaji Aliko Dangote; Justice Rose Ukeje (rtd); AihajiSa'adAbubakar, Sultan of Sokoto; Muhammad Musdafa, Lamido of Adarnawa; Most Rev. Nickolas Okoh, Primate, Anglican Communion; Pastor Ayo Oritsejfor, President, Christian Association of Nigeria; Dame Priscilla Kuye, former President, Nigerian Bar Association; Professor BolajiAkinyemi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs; Professor Ibrahim Gambari; Sam Pemu-Amuka, Publisher, Vanguard Newspaper; Professor Ameze Guobadia; and Professor Zainab Akali (Patrick, 2015, p.14; Ugbede, 2015, p.20).

Shortly after their inauguration, leaders of different civil society organisations in Nigeria through advocacy visited members of the National Peace Committee (NPC) to offer useful ideas on how to sustain the accord. The Media as a critical component of civil society gave utmost attention to the accord. In this perspective, different newspapers, both print and online, and television stations and radio stations dedicated special time sessions to stress the need for all the presidential candidates to honour the terms of the accord.

Election Stage

This stage was one of the most critical and tension-soaked stages in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. This is because it is usually events at this stage that determine political victories and failures of political aspirants. Some of the critical roles that civil society organisations played on election days include; mass orientation, enlightenment and dissemination of on-the-spot reports of elections across the country (Mercy, 2012, p.48; Eric, 2015). The civil society situation room (Situation Room) was very active in this regard. The Situation Room was a coalition of about 60 Civil Society Organisations that kept vigil on all the processes leading to the elections. Led by the

Executive Director of the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), Clement Nwankwo, the group's members monitored the electoral process, keeping Nigerians informed about developments through briefings at its situation room in Abuja. The Situation Room collaborated with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to ensure that there was smooth dissemination of electoral information between INEC and the Media, CSOs and the general public. Also the Situation Room through sheer activism and watch dog role, sought clarifications on any electoral matter that was foggy such as security, training and posting of INEC officials (Eric, 2015). Nigeria's 2015 general elections were postponed from the earlier dates of February 14 and 28 to April. The Civil Society Situation Room publicly criticized INEC, the Nigeria Police and other law enforcement agencies for failing to safeguard and consolidate Nigeria's democracy (Eric, 2015). The Situation Room shortly after the initial postponement also issued a Press Conference on February 12 in Abuja warning all those planning to disrupt the elections to desist from such act. Eric (2015, p. 35), urged major stakeholders, particularly the courts, the security agencies and religious organisations to be wary and desist from yielding themselves as tools to truncate the democratic process. Warning against any further tinkering with the election timetable it is believed that the postponement of the elections, for whatever reason, will undermine whatever modicum of legitimacy the electoral process still has and may ultimately be the trigger for massive unrest, violence and armed conflict, effectively setting the stage for civil unrest.

At the conclusion of the first round of voting on March, 28 the group after a thorough assessment of the exercise, observed some lapses, including late arrival of electoral officers to polling centres, reported cases of the malfunctioning of the card reader machines, partisan conduct by some security personnel, among others. In a statement it issued on March 29, the group stated that the failure of the card reader in some cases, which forced INEC to revert to manual accreditation, undermined the full benefit anticipated by the use of biometric technology and imposed unnecessary hardship on Nigerians. It also warned about the threat posed to the credibility of the process, where security agencies failed to prevent interference in the electoral process in some states. It urged the security agencies and officials to conduct themselves according to established standards of professional conduct, and asked INEC to correct its own deficiencies and inform the Nigerian public as to what to expect during the next round of elections.

Some international CSOS that were accredited along local ones for the elections according to INEC include but are not restricted to the following: 1) UNDP/DGD Project 2) Oxford Department Of International Development, University Of Oxford 3) Independent Electoral Boundaries Commission, Kenya 4) African Union Election Observation Mission 5) Commonwealth Observers Mission 6) Centre For Conflict Management, Kennesaw State University, Atlanta. Georgia USA 7) European Union Elections Observation Mission 8) ECOWAS Mission 9) African Students Association Of Ireland (ASAI) 10) International Republican Institute (IRI) 12) International Foundation For Electoral Systems (IFES) (Nwosumba, Abah and Ngwube 2016).

In addition, all the accredited observer groups monitored voting exercises at the polling stations and recorded the dynamics of transparency and equity in the voting process. Apart from these, they also monitored and observed the process of counting of election results at the polling stations and followed such results down to the INEC offices in various Local Government Areas where collation of Local Government Area results were coordinated and forwarded to the state headquarters. During the 2015 presidential and National Assembly elections, civil society organizations played their watchdog role by critically interfacing in all the stages of the elections. The *raison detre* for this is to deepen democratic accountability, equity, fair play and transparency in democratic process and that yielded a positive result, the type of electoral history that Nigeria was not witnessed prior to 2015 general elections.

In a similar vein, the current globalisation process played a critical role in the elections through the enhancement of means of information and communication. This can be seen in the way the civil

society organizations especially with the use of social media helped greatly to ensure transparency and credibility in the conduct of 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Through the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Blackberry Messenger, WhatsApps, Twitter, Blog, MySpace, YouTube and Instagram, accredited election observers tracked election procedures and results. These platforms apart from being important tools for voters education, also emerged as important means of electioneering and policing of election results and new platform (Liberty, 2015). For instance, an online Newspaper, PREMIUM TIMES, through the use of the above social media platforms sent broadcast and re-broadcast messages to its subscribers. Premium Times reporters that monitored the election from different states shared live news and pictures at polling boots on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and uploaded Youtube Videos of election events.

Other media organisations within and outside Nigeria used these platforms in the elections. Patrick observes that in order to effectively and efficiently cover the electoral process, both the print and non- print media created social media platforms. For instance, Channels TV, https://twitter.com/Channels_TV; Punch newspaper, <https://twitter.com/MobilePunch/status>; Vanguard newspaper, <https://twitter.com/vanguardngrnews>; the Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN) also launched a live lot of social media users through dedicated phone lines, BBM, Facebook, and Twitter accounts. Election observers like those with the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) used SMS to forward election reports. The provision of security for users makes it possible for prompt report of electoral irregularities anonymously or through pseudo-identities. This is evident when anybody with a smartphone or a digital camera could cover electoral proceedings and upload same on the internet. Nigerians and indeed the world were able to predict winners of the general elections due to social media reports (Patrick, 2015, p.14).

Thus, the success of the 2015 elections in Nigeria is also largely attributed to the gargantuan multifaceted roles that the third sector (CSO) especially the international partners played using the social media platform to educate and mobilise voters and ultimately monitor the election results from the local to the national levels, roles which helped to minimise electoral malfeasances in no small ways.

Lessons From 2015 General Elections For 2023

International civil society organisations having collaborated significantly with the local ones to achieve a first-of-its-kind electoral feat in Nigeria in 2015 where a do-or-die politics was jettisoned and a relatively more peaceful atmospheric electoral climate created be given another opportunity in 2023 for an improved strategic role. This is so because before and after the 2015 general elections no other general elections in the country since the fourth republic has been widely acknowledged to be such peaceful, free, fair, violent-free and credible. The fact that before the 2015 general elections, the electoral process in the country has been characterised by electoral fraud and violence, an anomaly which has made Nigeria to be unable to conduct an internationally recognised free, fair, peaceful and credible elections and that the international community has raised eyebrows about this especially when it comes to post-elections violence (Itodo & Onodugo, 2016) and that after that year's general elections the country recorded a historic successful outcome that both the local and international communities hailed is an evidence that something has been done differently. And this is largely attributed in this paper to the Abuja Peace Accord which the international civil society organisations played a critical role in its making and enforcement.

Evidence from authors supporting this claim can be seen for instance, in the way logistics support for the Peace Committee that spearheaded the signing of the Peace Accord "primarily came from the UNDP and a number of other international organisations including Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue...based in Geneva" (Itodo & Abah, 2016, p.37). Emeka Anyaoku, former Commonwealth General Secretary and Koffi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations who while in and out of their international offices still remain ardent advocates of

liberalism significantly impacted the roles of the international civil society organisations as their roles in the making and enforcement of the Abuja Peace Accord proved beyond doubt that they really worked for the success of the elections. For the 2023 general elections to be like the ones in 2015 or even better, Nigeria should first of all aspire to be a good international citizen. A good international citizen in this context requires as Itodo and Onodugo (2016) stressed, conducting free and fair elections that can be internationally recognised. It means therefore that for the process and outcomes of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria to be internationally recognised as being free, fair and credible it must tow the line of 2015 where a do-or-die political environment was avoided and a level playing field created for all the key political actors and their parties, a situation which in turn provided a propitious opportunity for the civil society to contribute significantly to making the elections a historic success. The Abuja Peace Accord should again be signed and enforced and the incumbent president and his party should, like other key political actors abide by the terms of the peace agreement signed. It goes to buttress the fact that if the incumbent president in 2015 did not abide by the terms of the agreement signed the process and probably, outcome of that year's elections would not have been historically successful as they turned out to be internationally recognised. It was in doing this that the roles of the civil society in the consolidation of the country's democracy in 2015 came to be highly appreciated. In conclusion, it is the opinion of this article that the civil society organisations (both international and local) should be enhanced and strengthened for more and increasing roles in the 2023 general elections especially in the areas that may attract the interests of the electorates to participate more than before in choosing the nation's next leaders. More to this, local civil society organisations should try to act above board for complimentary roles with their international counterparts considering, according to some that "the relationship between the state and civil society in Nigeria has been largely one of extreme dependence" (Kukah, 1999, p.58).

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