

**ELECTORAL AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES
IN NIGERIA: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE
UGLY SIDES OF THE 2019 GENERAL
ELECTIONS**

HABU MOHAMMED, PHD
Department of Political Science
Bayero University Kano
Hmohammed.pol@buk.edu.ng
+234 8034251792

Being a Lead Paper Presented at the 1st International Conference on
Elections and Democratic Experiment in Nigeria with theme:
Nigerian Democratic Space and Electoral Processes in the Fourth Republic:
A Reflection on the 2019 General Election, held at University Auditorium,
Ibrahim Babangida University, Lapai, Niger State, 1st - 4th September, 2019.

Introduction

Electoral and democratic processes are two sides of the same coin in a liberal democracy. The two terms are not only interwoven and mutually reinforcing, but they also represent practices that are highly cherishable when their basic norms and institutions are cultivated and deepened, thereby creating the much expected ambience on which the consolidation of democracy takes place. If the institution of electoral process sneezes, those of democratic processes would eventually catch cold and render the nerves of democracy vulnerable to myriads of cyclical, systemic, institutional and structural decay and possible reversal. Though there can be election without democracy, the latter cannot see the light of the day, needless to say thrive, without the former. Essentially, since the resurgence of democratisation following the 'end' of the Cold war at the tail end of the 1980s, scholars in the field of political development in the 'third wave' of democratisation have been constantly engaging in scholarly discourses interrogating the irony of democracy without electoral integrity in the fragile democracies of Africa, Asia and Latin America. One of the area focus of the plethora of literature on electoral and democratic processes is Nigeria, which returned to democracy in 1999, following three decades of military rule. Since then, the conduct of general elections, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019, had been marred by crisis of rising expectations as a result of either flawed elections or at the alter of flawed democracy that negated the principle of public accountability. Until recently, specifically beginning in 2011, 2015 and at the minimal level, 2019, the country's electoral process has suffered a crisis of confidence in the face of limited democratic space, election rigging, electoral violence and disenfranchisement of electorate. In most part of these years, the country's electoral umpire is constitutionally entrusted manage elections and ensure free, fair and credible process and outcome, but not trusted for its betrayal of public trust and absent of neutrality.

Thus, it can be said that Nigeria's electoral and democratic processes since the return to democracy in 1999 have passed through high and low disillusionment and shinning points. This paper focuses on these points, with reflection on the conduct of the 2019 general election. Specifically, it interrogates trends and dynamic of the electoral and democratic processes of the general elections, which metaphorically represent the good, the bad and the ugly sides of the trajectories of that phase in the country's democratisation processes. In order to do justice to the paper, it is divided into four sections. Section one provides a general introduction. Section two operationalizes the key concepts in the keynote. Section three provides a general overview of the trends and dynamics of the Nigeria's democratic space

with special focus on the 2019 general elections. Section four examines the Nigeria's electoral process ahead of the 2023 general elections and; finally, section five concludes the paper.

Election, Electoral and Democratic Process –Conceptual Clarification

Election

Democratic political systems, particularly the liberal type, evolve through the process of elections. Political competition that is driven by unhindered political participation guarantees high level of certainty that election serves to represent the democratic expression of people's power. Therefore, election defined as a process of leadership selection and recruitment is an enduring process of political legitimacy through the cast of votes. It is conducted periodically, depending on the provision of the enabling electoral laws of each society, in order to renew or enlist new public officers who contest for such offices by a democratic means and under a platform of political parties. Thus, in addition to its coveted role as a democratic means of recruiting leaders, election in liberal democracies is a way of expressing the will of the people by the people and it represents the civic mandate of a society to change a government. However, the periodic conduct of election, which has become a ritual of democratic politics is by no means the manifestation of democracy. The latter's survival depends largely on whether or not the conduct of elections is competitively free, fair and credible. This partly explains why scholarly discourses on electoral matters consider elections as a means not an end, and as a process not an event.

Therefore, as a process, the history of election in Nigeria predates the independence of the country in 1960, to cover the periods of colonial transitional period of rule when political parties were formed and their members contested for the available public offices on the match to self-government. Thus far, Nigeria has conducted elections in 1951, 1954, 1959, 1964, 1979, 1983, 1991, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. In each of these elections, the process produced trajectories that are in some cases unique, while in some other cases the experience had no dividing line of separating one election from the other and still in some instances successive elections could be generally regarded as manipulated and turbulent. Meanwhile, it is imperative to note that in each of these experiences the conduct of elections had a life of its own. Put differently, the 'health' of the electoral process is profoundly determined by the extent to which stakeholders, included but not limited to the electoral umpire, perform their expected roles in the electoral cycle – pre-election, election and post-election periods. This brings us to the concept of electoral process.

Electoral Process

The electoral process can be defined as the entire gamut of the process leading to the conduct of election, and to some extent, activities in the aftermath of the conduct of elections. It is a totality of activities that span over a period of time with each stakeholder having a role to play in order to see the overall success of the process. Electoral process encompasses preparations for elections by the electoral umpire from the registration of political parties and voters and to the setting up of the legal framework governing the process and the final conduct of the exercise. Significantly, the electoral process of a representative democracy must entail a series of scheduled activities such as voter registration and education, registration of political parties and electioneering campaign, recruitment of adhoc electoral officers and their training, production and release of enabling laws guiding the conduct of political parties and their candidates, the management of logistics and the conduct of election, announcement of winners of election and hearing of election petitions. In deed, the electoral process embeds the high and low points of activities leading to the conduct of elections and declaration of results. As a process, electoral process is a two way approach. It serves the political environment in the sense that it provides the institutional, administrative and technical resources that are directed at fulfilling the goal of election with political legitimacy through the conduct of credible electoral outcome. An electoral process also receives the input of political parties, electorate, and civil society organizations as well as local and international stakeholders such as multilateral agencies and other development partners.

In a sense, electoral process is literally a process, which does not operate in a vacuum; it is mutually reinforcing through the combine role of election managers and election stakeholders that are both internal and external to a political environment in which elections take place. At every stage of this process, the interplay of institutions, social groups and individuals guarantees electoral outcome and brings democracy to fruition. Therefore, electoral process is an important benchmark of assessing the robustness or otherwise of a democratic process.

Democratic Process

Democratic process is an umbrella platform on which election and electoral process take their natural process. It is an aspect of democractization that integrate all other activities leading to the deepening of democratic values institutionally and internalization of political culture in civil society. This is to say, democratic process affects various institutions as the latter are also the pillars on which it is built. The failure of democratic process to develop institutional changes that help consolidate democracy is related to the governance issue. Thus, democratic process is shaped by the extent to which it supports the electoral process to produce, in the final analysis, free, fair and credible government that enjoys political legitimacy. Like the electoral process, the democratic process is shaped by endogenous and exogenous factors that are, by and large, operating in a certain order of democratic sustenance.

Democratic Space and Electoral Process in Nigeria

The logic of conceptualizing election, electoral process and democracy is actually to understand their relationship and the contradictions in the process of bringing democracy about in Nigeria. In the context Nigeria's democratisation process, these interwove concepts are manifestly evolving and have not reached their full potentials, needless to warrant us to mention their contributions to democratic consolidation. In any case, the growth and development of representative democracy in the country since independence suggest that the country's democratic space in the First, Second, Third and Fourth Republics have been dotted with high and low points of practices and actions. These points either worked against the realisation of free, fair and credible elections or served as a direct threat to the democratic process. The parliamentary elections in the First Republic were fiercely contested by regionally-based political parties amidst allegations of electoral rigging, ethnic and regional contestations that essentially polarized the country along North-South political poles. Hence, primordial politics with its appeals to ethnic jingoism was manifested in the suppression and oppression of members of opposition parties took a centre stage of the country's democratic space with dare consequences on national integration and democratic sustenance. The abrupt end of the republic which was brought about by a military coup was in response to the lingering political crises that engulfed the country, particularly following the 1964 population census controversy and the 1964/65 western region political impasse.

The apparent lost of hope for a permanent solution to the debilitating political standstill in the First Republic plunged the country into a severe, cyclical and brutal military authoritarian regimes that knew nothing close to the opening of democratic space for public participation in the selection of public officers and decision making process. Except for the Murtala/Obasanjo 'corrective' military regime, which laid the foundation of the Second Republic and returned the country to civilian rule in 1979, subsequent military regimes that came to power did not provide the political atmosphere that was needed to expand the political space for any meaningful democratisation. The transition to civilian rule that eventually led to the return to democracy in 1999 was a child of necessity. It was the Nigerians collective response to the dejection of transition to civilian rule "without end" and the prolonged but disturbing periods of military authoritarian rule since the 1980s. For example, the transition to civilian rule that eventually ended with the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election was not only a charade from the start, it was also contrary to the sensibilities of Nigerians who wanted a strong foundation of democracy having gone through unbearable undemocratic practices for years. Democratic institutions were not rooted from the very society they were meant to serve; the yawning gap between the state and society was alarming and the relationship between the latter and the general economy was sour in the face of the implementation of the neo-liberal Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Worse

still, during the three decades of military rule, civil society was gagged but it miraculously survived the assault of despotic military rulers and continued to agitate for the end of military rule and the return of the country to democracy. If anything, the doggedness and robustness of civil society organizations in the fight against human rights violation and the quest for the return to democracy had compelled the military government that came after the demise of General Sani Abacha in 1998 to roll out a 'marathon' transition to civilian rule. Thus, the death of Abacha signaled a breathing space for political and administrative reforms spearheaded by his successor, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, that heralded the return to civilian rule in 1999.

In general six major observations stand clear from Nigeria's experience with the prolonged military rule. Firstly, the almost three decades of military rule had narrowed democratic space and limited the capacity of democratic institutions to grow, needless to become matured and sophisticated for effective public participation. Secondly, lack of an open political system had made the militarization of Nigeria's political process possible with less or virtually no attempt at instituting changes that would lead to the entrenchment of democratic political culture in the political elite and society. Thirdly, the leading institution that steers the electoral process prepared to be subservient to the government in power despite the appellation of 'independent' attached to its name, thereby making the electoral process and the election management body suffering from the crisis of legitimacy each time the umpire conducted general elections. Until recently, specifically since the conduct of the 2015 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has had to grapple with its credibility and because of its alleged nauseating experience of being a party to electoral rigging in favor of the political party in power. Fourthly, politicians who would have been the doyen of democracy had passed through different kinds of permutations in the decades of military rule with no clear cut distinction between them and military political class on matters of public accountability, due process and responsiveness to the society. Fifthly, consequent upon the latter viewpoint, political corruption in various forms of its manifestation has become a means of ascending power without necessarily a recourse to the rules of the game. This is essentially because in power lies a goldmine of riches through the process of clientelism and primitive capitalist accumulation, which makes politics a sector that attracts ambitious people in search of making money quickly. Sixthly, on their part, the electorate, who lack the basic political education to master their own destiny and consider the electoral process as their own project with full ownership and rights to determine their choice and protect it, exhibit tendencies that represents weak institutional foundation of democratic practices. This condition has made it practically easy for practices such as vote buying, political violence and political thuggery among youths to thrive.

Taken together, the above factors have produced yet another forms of political competitions that are embedded in party politics. At another level, the condition has also compounded the dilemmas of democracy, making the Nigerian situation very difficult for its democratic space and electoral processes to adjust to the best practices.

Democratic Space and Electoral Process: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly Sides of the 2019 General Elections

Since independence Nigeria has never experienced any peaceful elections largely because of the patterns of party politics, which take the nature of unhealthy competition for power, and the tendency of the political class to infringe laid down political and electoral laws. The nature of electoral competition has over the years resulted in either violence in the course of the preparation for elections or after their conduct, with the electoral umpire heavily blamed for condoning, aiding or abating electoral misconducts. Therefore, for us to understand the realities of the 2019 general elections, it is pertinent to briefly comprehend the scenario of Nigeria's democratic space and electoral process in the Fourth Republic. Needless to say that the journey to the 2019 general elections started from the robust performance of INEC in the conduct of the 2015 general elections. Some political commentators would

trace the journey from the reform of the institution following the 2011 general elections and the lessons learned therefrom. In either case, it is imperative to note that the electoral body in Nigeria since 1999 has suffered a serious crisis of credibility owing largely to its alleged involvement in the massive electoral rigging in the conduct of successive elections, particularly the ones conducted in 2003, 2007 and to a lesser extent, that of the 2011.

In most of these elections, the democratic space was overly charged and dotted with undemocratic tendencies and attitudes, which affected the legitimacy of the government and its capacity to introduce meaningful reforms of the electoral system. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, the Peoples Democratic party has held power for a period that spanned over four consecutive elections (2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015) in its sixteen years of managing the affairs of the country. During these years, the country was almost operating a one party system with the ruling party controlling power after every election, hence the PDP gained control of power and resources unmatched by any political party to the extent that even its major leaders had on several occasion boasted that it would continue to wrestle power for the next 50 years. Although the PDP was the biggest party in the country with widespread membership throughout the length and breadth of the country, it however perfected political corruption, which directly or indirectly had worked for it in the manipulation of the country's electoral process to the party's advantage (Faboyede, 2014). One of the manifest legacies of party politics in the Fourth Republic has been the abuse of the incumbency power, which not only the PDP but other ruling parties in the states of the federation are known for. Similarly, although the number of registered political parties has increased over years, most of them are organizationally and resourcefully weak to operate on the same pedestal with the dominant political parties, particularly the ruling party.

Electoral rigging was one of the predicaments of Nigeria's electoral process. This was exposed considerably in the 2007 general elections, which was widely acclaimed as the most badly conducted since the return to civilian rule in 1999. The elections produced a government without legitimacy and its capacity to conscientiously saddle with the affairs of governance was retrospectively compromised. It was in recognition of the irregularities of the conduct of the 2007 general elections that President Umaru Musa Yar'adua decided to set up the National Electoral Reform Committee (NERC) under the chairmanship of Justice Muhammadu Uwais in order to investigate what went wrong and what to do to reform the country's electoral laws. After months of fact finding and public hearing nationwide, the report of the committee was presented its implementation has not seen the light of the day. Nigerians are still yearning for the implementation of recommendations of the Uwais Committee's report, which they believe it contains a lot of best practices that can serve as a major surgical operation on the country's electoral process. But what in practical terms seemed to be a turning point in the history of Nigeria's electoral process were the administrative and logistical reforms introduced by Attahiru Muhammadu Jega's led INEC (Mohammed, 2015), which the current leadership of the umpire maintained and improved upon to guide the conduct of the 2019 general elections.

Thus, the 2011 general elections were conducted against the background of public, and indeed the international community's, disillusionment with the Nigeria's electoral system (Jega, 2015: xiii). Therefore, in order to ensure integrity and transparency in the electoral process, INEC had to give premium attention to logistics and other operational requisites in its scheme of activities. The Commission had to grapple with numerous challenges. First, having recognised the role played by voter registration in ensuring credible election, one of the first INEC's efforts was the screening of the existing register of voters. Surprisingly, apart from the detection of multiple identities and clone names on the voter register such as Mike Tyson and Mickey Mouse, distorted information on age and gender of voters were also found. This experience prompted INEC to embark on a fresh voter registration; hence the commission was able to register 77,528,040 Nigerians in approximately three weeks (NDI Report, 2011). Unlike the previous voter registration exercise, some biometric features such as fingerprints and photographs were added using the Automated Fingerprints Identification System (AFIS) software to

remove multiple registrations. Side-by-side with this technique, an update of voter register through the adoption of Continuous Voter Registration (CRV) method was also undertaken (Jega, 2015).

Indeed, on logistics, preparations for the 2011 general elections marked a significant watershed over the 2007 elections. The pre-election reform measures saw increased awareness on the part of Nigerians on election matters. The measures taken by INEC had profoundly boosted public confidence in its leadership, particularly the introduction of high level engagement with stakeholders and the adoption of new legal framework (the Electoral Act, 2010) for the election (NDI Report, 2011:7). However, despite these reforms and many others, Nigeria was at far distance from getting out of the doldrums of election logistics. The election was not only postponed on logistic issues when voters were already at the polls, but its aftermath was associated with violence.

Also, the background to the elections also set in motion anxiety and fear that if anything went wrong, there could be a reversal of past electoral successes recorded. Prior to the election, INEC organised 200 off-cycle elections, including seven governorship elections, which raised a lot of questions about the umpire's neutrality, particularly the 2018 governorship election held in Osun State. If anything, the number of inconclusive elections recorded in some of the elections conducted after the 2015 had really led many observers of Nigerian politics to believe that extra caution was needed in the management of the 2019 general elections. Thus, arising from the catalogue of inconclusive elections, the issue of logistic ahead of the elections was prominently discussed by political parties, civil society organisations as well as the international community.

It is important to note that the ability to conduct free, fair and credible elections is highly dependent on the coordination of logistics by INEC (INEC, 2015 General Election Report). Two major areas that bordered on election logistics, which the INEC adopted in post-2015 preparations for the next general elections stand very clear (see INEC:2019 Election Project Plan: Consolidating Free, Fair and Credible Elections in Nigeria, 2018). First, the practice of developing and implementing an Election Project Plan (EPP) to guide elections was retained and embarked upon promptly. Second, in pursuant of the powers conferred on it by Section 153 of the Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended), in January 2019, the electoral umpire officially published the Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of General Elections.

Though the postponement of the 2019 Nigeria's general election was not envisaged, it was clear to observers of the 'body language' of INEC that there was a lot of hurdles to cross, particularly on the issue of voters register. INEC was grappling with a huge number of uncollected PVCs since 2015, which was put at 7 million, with Lagos State having the highest number of uncollected PVC (1.4million). There were also a total request for transfer of 400 PVCs; a total request for replacement of 700 PVCs, among other unattended issues to the elections (Mahmoud Yakubu, cited in Institute for Media and Society IMS, July 2, 2018). The initial deadline for the collection of PVCs was February 8, 2019, but largely due to the fact that many registered voters did not collect their PVCs the electoral umpire extended the period of collection by three days and from 9am - 6pm daily. Like the postponement of the 2015 general elections, which gave INEC the opportunity to increase PVC collections, the 2019 election postponement also offered that opportunity. On Monday February 11, 2019, the last day for the PVC collection, INEC announced that out of 84,000,484 registered voters, a 22 percent increase from 2015; the total number of PVCs collected stood at 72,775,585, which represents 86.3 percent of the total PVCs produced (Mahmoud Yakubu, cited in Sahara Reporters, February 21, 2019). Despite this appreciable fit, however, the postponement of the election created spiral effects on the integrity of the election (EU Election Observation Final Report, 2019:3).

Little wonder, then, following the last minute postponement of the general election the commission had faced intense criticisms from the general public, questioning not only the setting up of a separate logistic committee but also its composition. In any case, whatever efforts the committee put ahead of the

elections could only be assessed by the conduct of the actual exercise. It should be noted that the postponement of the election in 2019 had also created another logistic challenge for the conduct of the exercise. Despite an appreciable percentage of PVC collection, many potential voters did not get their voters card and the electoral commission itself revealed that 11 million of the cards printed had not been collected. Similarly, all the Card Reader Machines (CRMs) that were initially programmed to work on the original planned voting day had to be re-programmed within the space of the days extended for the conduct of the elections. Though INEC was able to make up for the 4,600 smart card readers destroyed in a fire incident in Anambra State by redistributing devices from other states, on the eve of the election another logistic blunder was occasioned in some states (Giles and Mwai, cited in BBC News, February 22, 2019). This time around, some election materials were found in the wrong states; sensitive materials that were labelled Edo were taken to Delta State and result sheets that were meant to arrive Imo, Lagos, Kano and Kwara States were incidentally delivered to other states across the country. The wrongly packaged sensitive materials had to be rejected and sent back to Abuja for proper repackaging.

Like in the past INEC tradition, it worked with transport unions to help handle movements of election materials to polling centres on the day of elections, the commission had signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), Road Transport Employees Association of Nigeria (RTEAN), and National Association of Road Transport Owners (NATO) for efficient logistics in the general election. The private transporters were required to deliver personnel and electoral materials at 119,973 locations and 57,000 voting points nationwide, which they must all open simultaneously on election day. Inappropriately, in some states like Taraba sensitive election materials were not received from INEC as at 12.00 noon a day to the commencement of Presidential and National Assembly elections scheduled to start at 8.00 am the next day. Similarly, on the day of the election there was a rampant case of late arrival of adhoc staff of INEC, and late arrival of voting materials was recorded in some states, particularly in Lagos, Kano and Rivers States. There, voters were at their respective polling stations at 8.00am but election materials and staff were nowhere to be found, sometimes until 12.00 noon. The result of such delays impacted negatively on the ability of INEC to give Nigerians the opportunity to conduct their civic mandate and this also affected the electoral integrity that the electoral body has been claiming to instill in the conduct of elections in Nigeria (YIAGA, Wednesday February 27, 2019:1).

Thus, it is imperative to note that the 2019 general elections had fell short of those the 2015, nevertheless, INEC had shown a significant steps to mitigate some nagging challenges of the conduct of elections but for some factors. Some of these factors are within INEC's powers, and still others are beyond its mandate. For example, the flawed party primaries that characterised some political parties prior to the general election had not only generated an extended crisis of logistics to INEC, but also put it at a very tight condition and serious dilemma in its preparations for governorship, National and State Assembly elections. In the case of Zamfara State, following the two contradictory court judgements, the electoral umpire had to stop the state's APC candidates from fielding candidates for the 2019 general elections. Later, barely two days to the governorship election, another court judgement ordered for the reinstatement of the APC on the ballot paper when it finally passed a judgement to the effect that the party would contest the elections. The court rulings had affected the logistics of INEC profoundly. In fact, more than any other factor, the large number of political parties (93) participated in the 2019 general elections had also created a lot of logistic problem for INEC. Accommodating each party on a single ballot papers for all the elections had affected the process of result collation.

It is also important to note that INEC introduced various improvements prior to the general elections, specifically on logistics. It would be recalled that following the postponement of the 2019 general elections, INEC also set up two adhoc committees in order to ensure seamless preparations for the rescheduled elections. The first was responsible for electoral logistics, comprising relevant security agencies whose role is spelt out in Section 29 (3) of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended). The second adhoc committee is entirely internal to the commission and was responsible for the national collation

centre from where the results of the election were announced. Amina Zakari, an INEC Commissioner, whose earlier appointment as head of the electoral operations and logistics created eyebrow by the opposition peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which alledged that she is a relation of President Muhammadu Buhari, chaired the latter committee.

In addition, INEC was able to make electoral participation more accessible through a much faster voting process of continuous accreditation and voting. This development made it easier for voters to spend less time at polling units. Though measures were taken to lessen risks of vote-buying through a new method of ballot folding, and a ban on the use of mobile phones in voting booths (EU Election Observation Final Report, 2019), such acts were perpetrated in some polling units, particularly in the re-run of governorship elections in some of the affected states.

Nigeria's Electoral Process ahead of the 2023 General Elections – Policy Issues

Generally, the 2019 elections could be regarded as one election with many faces – the high and low points which can best be described as the good, the bad and the ugly sides of the elections. At the height of the analysis of the election is the issue of logistics, particularly at the peak of the elections' preparations was the sudden postponement, which dissipated the energies of not only the INEC Staff and national and international election observers, but also the voters. The resultant rescheduling of the elections by some weeks notwithstanding, the experience had further exposed the vulnerability of the electoral umpire to logistic challenges of implementation of planning elections. The fact that the 2019 elections has recoded 34.1 percent voter turn out, which indicates a reduction of nearly a million votes from 2015 (EU Election Observation Final Report, 2019), attests to the rupture of logistics arising from the postponement of the election. Therefore, comparing the difference between the 2015 (or even 2011), and the 2019 general elections in the area of logistics is tantamount to understanding the high and low points of Nigeria's robustness in the management of elections. Of course the high point was the former, while the low point represents the latter. Having drawn this dividing line, one should not loose sight of the fact that the issue of logistic lapses in the course of preparations for election is often exaggerated, mostly against the electoral body, without understanding the role of other stakeholders in the electoral process. It is in this connection that we need to understand the role of the Nigerian society.

Undoubtedly, the Nigerian electorate has a long way to go in aiding the electoral body to achieve the goal of electoral integrity. They need to take a total ownership of election by demonstrating to over ambitious politicians that the electoral process is a matter of national project, which must be protected and defended to the letter. Political education is required at all levels to ensure that the “capture” of elections by politicians is completely eliminated through a well orchestrated collective will to support, defend and protect peoples mandate. These qualities were substantially or partly demonstrated in the conduct of the 2015 elections, but ironically suspended in the 2019 general elections. Civil Society Organizations demonstrated more commitment and readiness to safeguard these three qualities (Support, Defend and Protect) in the 2015 general elections than in the 2019 elections largely because they felt that Nigeria's electoral system had crossed the rubicon of the past misconducts. Thus, there is the need to avoid complacency and face the realities of the geography of the country's elections, the level of political consciousness of the electoral and the extent of political party institutionalization which, together, form some aspects of the country's political culture.

The role of academics in the conduct of the 2019 elections has also been one of the newest areas borne out of the need to put a stop to electoral misconducts with the connivance of electoral officials. Paradoxically, things had fall apart in the 2019 general elections when allegations of some academics conniving with political parties and candidates to compromise the integrity of the elections. This is a phenomenon that was not expected and of which there should be a change of framework of engaging academics by INEC in the conduct of elections. Like the electorates, the CSOs, the academics should also take ownership of the electoral process as a means of liberation from the country's problems of poor governance and underdevelopment.

In any case, there is the urgent need, at least before the next general election in 2023, to evolve some best practices in the management of election in order to change electoral landscape of the country. First, there is need to give the idea of introducing Electronic Voting System (EVS) a second look. The nature of the Nigeria's electoral geography requires that the conduct of election needs to be adequately facilitated through technology while also not compromising the integrity of the exercise. This measure requires elaborate efforts to improve the country's infrastructure, particularly power supply, and skills in handling the devices. There is need to train the ICT technical staff of INEC and adhoc staff to acquaint them with the technology. As the experience of India showcases, organization of a general election in the 21st century requires innovation in technology. In the case of Nigeria, the use of a card reader machine is an eye opener to modern technology. It is always better late than never. What is required at the moment is political education and awareness through voter education in order to get voters acquainted with the method.

Second, logistic factor in the planning of general election is, like the election exercise itself, a process; it has an unending life span. Therefore, there is the need to reflect over the former INEC Chairman's, Attahiru Jega, idea of creating more Polling Units (PUs) and centres in order to decentralise the existing ones. Unbundling will reform and improve upon the electoral process for free, fair and credible outcome with less hitches in the management of PUs as this would decongest the existing 119,973 PUs polling units. The former INEC chairman in reference had wanted to create additional 30,000 PUs across the country before the 2015 general elections but the idea was greeted with mixed reactions. It is hard time to face the reality of the country's electoral geography and avoid sentiments over national developmental issues.

Third, experience thus far has shown that one of the weakest chains in the management of election logistics in Nigeria is the movement of election materials, both sensitive and non-sensitive. INEC has always been left with no option other than to rely on its vehicles, those of other public institutions, including air force, and private transporters. The commission should seek for ways to extend partnership with public institutions like Universities and other related commissions such as the National Population Commission, Nigerian Postal Services (NIPOST) for support during the elections. As earlier noted, the issue of logistics requires the support of stakeholders. All the public institutions cited, including the Nigerian Army, the Airforce and the Police are key national holders that could support INEC on election duty. This can be achieved provided that a good working plan of action can be devised and agreement reached on modalities of engagement.

Fourth, there is no gainsaying the fact that the existing 91 registered political parties in Nigeria are posing a great logistic challenge for INEC and voters. Too many political parties is a serious burden on result collation. Unlike in 2015 when INEC had a budget of N120 billion to conduct the polls, the 2019 elections recorded a whopping sum of N189 billion. While justifying the increased budget, INEC cited, among others, increased number of political parties. This increase always went, more than ever, with huge logistics to grapple with. This explains why after the February 23, Presidential elections collation of results had to be extended for three days. In most cases, some political parties in the country do not have offices in states other than the Federal Capital, Abuja. The experience of the collation of results and the low scores of some weak parties suggests that Nigeria does not need more than five or ten political parties, provided that these parties are national in outlook.

There is also the need for training of all ad hoc polling staff, election supervisors, and collation and returning officers. This is also very important because most of the challenges encountered in the course of collation of results in the 2019 general elections had to do with untrained or poorly trained staff who could not systematically organise themselves under high pressure of time. Practical training on the use of smart card readers, closing and counting procedures and completing polling unit result forms needs to be undertaken long way before the election to allow for further screening for the selection of adept adhoc staff for election.

Conclusion

The Nigeria's democratic space and electoral process are two sides of the same coin. There will be no constructive change in the democratic space without a corresponding change in the pattern of the electoral process. This explains why there is the urgent need to reform the electoral process at least from the perspective of the abandoned Uwais Committee Report of the Electoral Reform Committee. One of the areas of concern that will surely expand the democratic space is on the issue of internal party democracy. By allowing political parties to present a candidate INEC, the current Electoral Act (2010) has empowered political parties to perfect indecency in the selection of candidates, thereby creating opportunities for the chief executives of states and prominent party members to present candidates that do not participate in the primaries or their handpicked protégés. Therefore, the electoral process in Nigeria requires a drastic reform to ensure the independence of INEC from the control of the executive and the dribbling of the judiciary. While the former is always lackerdessical is releasing funds for the conduct of elections, the latter uses the instrumentalities of law to procrastinate the dispensation of justice on electoral matters, particularly the election petitions. Therefore, it is not bad at all if Nigeria will consider the creation of Election Petition Commission to reduce the burden of court cases before INEC at every electoral cycle.

Finally, I always hypothesize that the growth and development of Nigeria's democratic space is highly dependent on the sanctity of the electoral process. Nigeria has a lot justification to become the biggest democracy in black Africa in particular and developing democracies in general provided that election stakeholders take ownership of the electoral process as a national liberation struggle. As we venture into deliberations at this conference, it is expected that voices of wisdom can squarely address some of the myriad of challenges discussed in this keynote address in order to further amplify the need for a collective response to overcome the current dilemmas of our electoral process.

References

- European Union Election observation mission (2019), NIGERIA 2019, Final Report, EU
- Faboyede, O. (2014). Obasanjo and the burden of elections in Nigeria, 1999-2007: A Historical Analysis. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.4, No.8. pp. 267-275
- Giles, C. & Mwai, P. (2019). Nigeria Elections 2019: Is the Country Prepared?,BBC News Reality Check, February 22
- Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), (2015). 2015 General Election Report, Abuja: INEC
- Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), (2018). 2019 Election Project Plan: Consolidating Free, Fair and Credible Elections in Nigeria, Volume I, Abuja: INEC Headquarters
- Institute for Media and Society, IMS (2018). Our plans for hitch free 2019 polls- In Institute for Media and Society IMS, Online July 2,
- Jega, A. M. (2015). Election management in Nigeria: The evolution of the Nigerian electoral process, 2010-2015. Ibadan: Safari Books Ltd

Mohammed, H. (2015). Assessing the success of Nigeria's 2015 general elections for Sustainable Democracy. Mambayya House Journal of Democratic Studies, Vol. 6 Special Edition

National Democratic Institute (NDI), (2011). 2011 Nigerian elections, Final Report on the 2011 Nigerian General Elections. Abuja: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, December 2012

Sahara Reporters (2019, July 23). Breaking: 72.8 Million Nigerians collected PVCs, Says INEC.

YIAGA AFRICA (2019). Statement on the 2019 Presidential Election Results, Wednesday February 27
Retrieved from <https://www.yiaga.org>