

Elections Administration and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: An Appraisal of the 2019 General Elections

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Abstract

This article presents a detailed appraisal of the administration of the 2019 general elections with a special focus on polling station information, set up, the voting and counting process, conduct of security officials and declaration of results. Findings show an improvement in the conduct of elections and hence a deepening of democracy in Nigeria. These improvements include the use of card readers and greater participation by stakeholders including observer groups, CSOs and the media. Some of the challenges include disruptions occasioned by the postponement of the general elections, low voter turnouts, logistical challenges, late arrivals of materials and officials, the cumbersome voting process for uneducated and rural voters, weak capacity of ad-hoc staff, voter inducement, shortage of materials and personnel, and challenges with smart card readers. Others are lack of special provisions for people with disabilities, inadequate security in some cases, too many political parties listed on the ballot paper, high number of invalid votes, non-adherence to electoral guidelines, uneven distribution of voters and underage voting. Recommendations arising from the paper include reform of the Electoral Act to improve transparency and efficiency through the use of ICT tools, continuing voter education, capacity development for INEC/ad-hoc staff and security officials, improving elections logistics and smart card reader functionality. Similarly recommended are enhanced funding for INEC, ensuring strict adherence to guidelines, continuous civic and voter registration, adequate provision for people living with disabilities and effective security planning.

Keywords: Elections administration, Electoral Management Body, Democracy, Governance, Nigeria

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Introduction

Free, fair and regular elections as well as the right of all adult citizens to participate in the process on a non-discriminatory basis are the foundation of democracy. These conditions are also considered elemental for a free and just society. Through elections, citizens can choose parties, candidates and policies and ensure that elected officials are accountable to the people (Alemika, 2007). However, to be credible and legitimate, elections must not merely be rituals performed perfunctorily. Instead, they are expected to be instruments of real choice and change. Conceived in this way, elections are tools for promoting 'political participation, competition and legitimacy (Lindberg, 2006, Quin, 2006). In addition to that, elections provide a legitimate channel for political contestation and also contribute to ensuring an orderly transition of power.

However, whereas elections are a necessary condition for representative democracy, they are not sufficient. As stated by Michael Bratton, 'elections do not, in and of themselves, constitute a consolidated democracy', they 'remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments but as a requisite for broader democratic consolidation' (1998, p. 52). In fact, in some instances, elections are merely a 'symbolic recognition of by the electorate of political bargains already reached by elite actors' (Ellis, 2000, p. 44). Where the election process fails to reflect the actual choice of the people, i.e. 'elections without a choice' (Ibrahim, 2003), it results not only in distrust but also disenchantment with democracy itself. This has been the case in many African countries where elections have been used to legitimise authoritarianism. Examples include Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Cameroon, Kenya and Togo where elections were used by incumbent heads of states to perpetuate themselves in power (Ellis, 2000).

Whereas some have argued that there is usually a decline in electoral integrity over time (Bratton, 2004), others have contended that the quality of elections improves in successive elections (Lindberg, 2004). Both theses have been validated by trends in elections in different parts of Africa as shown by Alemika (2007). A comprehensive framework for measuring the quality of elections (covering freeness, fairness and administrative efficacy) developed Elklit & Reynolds (2005) includes considerations for broad-based issues such as the legal framework as well as all aspects of administration and management of elections. Elections administration is complex and integrates all pre, during and post elections activities. If poorly handled or mismanaged, the legitimacy of the whole process could be undermined resulting in a decline in public trust in democratic processes and institutions (Hall, 2017).

As shown by Omotola (2010), elections in Nigeria since 1999 have faced several challenges with regards to quality, credibility and sustainability. His analysis of the three consecutive elections (1999, 2003 and 2007) identified the institutional weakness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Nigeria's electoral management body, as a major challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Other associated challenges with elections in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular also include poor electoral administration (Jinadu, 1997), electoral violence, fraud and manipulation of electoral outcomes, poor civic and voter education etc. (IPI, 2011)

It is within this context that this paper provides a detailed analysis of the conduct of the 2019 general elections. It covers the following aspects of the elections: polling station information, set up, the voting process, counting process, the conduct of security officials and the declaration of results.

Background to the 2019 General Elections

The 2019 General Elections was the sixth to be held at a four-year interval since the commencement of Nigeria's Fourth Republic in 1999. Elections for the office of the President and members of National Assembly elections were originally scheduled to take place on February 16, 2019. However, logistics challenges compelled Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to reschedule the elections less than 24 hours to commencement. They were eventually held on February 23, 2019, in 119,973 polling units nationwide. Data from INEC shows that the elections were for a total of 1,558 electoral constituencies, 60 executive positions, 109 Senatorial districts, 360 federal constituencies, 991 state House of Assembly constituencies, and 68 Federal Capital Territory (FCT) chairmen and council members (INEC, 2019). The elections were held in 29 states across the country, the only exception being the seven (7) states where governorship elections have become staggered since 2011 due to court judgments.

The total number of registered voters going into the elections was 84,004,084 out of the country's projected population of 192 million people in 2019 (INEC, 2019). INEC figures indicate that 72,775,502 million (86.6%) of these obtained their Permanent Voters Cards (PVC), a prerequisite for participation in the elections. The total voter turnout for the Presidential and National Assembly elections, however, was 28,614,190 representing approximately 34% of the total number of registered voters.

Seventy-three (73) political parties presented candidates for the presidential and National Assembly elections. The total number of registered political parties at the time was ninety-one (91) 23,218 candidates contested for 1,558 elective positions in Federal, State and FCT electoral constituencies. Elections were cancelled in 1,420 Polling units (1.2%), 307 Wards/ Registration Areas (RAs) (3.5%), 115 LGAs (14.9%), across 7 states for several reasons advanced by INEC including violence and disruption of voting and/or collation of results in some polling units, wards/RAs and constituencies. As a result, supplementary elections were subsequently held to determine the winners of these electoral constituencies.

Observers have monitored elections in Nigeria since 1999 and this trend continued in 2019 when 73,258 observers from 120 accredited national observer groups and 39 foreign observer groups participated in the Presidential and National Assembly elections (INEC, 2019). One of the national observer groups was NILDS, which is a statutory body established in 2011 to build the capacity of legislators and other democratic actors. Section 2(j) of the Institute's Act gives it powers to monitor elections. In furtherance of this mandate, the Institute has participated in elections observation since 2015. In 2019, the Institute consolidated its previous experience and enlisted observers in all six (6) geo-political zones in the country. This is in line with the Institute's mandate to engage in elections observation as a means of promoting confidence in the electoral processes and outcomes and make recommendations to INEC and other stakeholders on how to strengthen electoral integrity.

Methodology

The Institute deployed one hundred and four (104) observers to selected states in each of the six (6) geo-political zones. The observers received intensive training prior to their deployment and were duly registered by INEC. The methodology adopted by observers was 'stationary observation', which involves assigning an observer to a particular polling unit, to observe elections in that polling unit from the beginning to the end in line with the approved Checklist developed by the Institute (*see appendix 1*). However, where there are two polling units located close to each other, the assigned observers made efforts to cover the additional polling unit concurrently. The specific focus of the observers includes all issues relating to the Standard Procedure for the Conduct of Democratic Elections as laid out in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Guidelines for the conduct of the 2019 General Elections. These include, but are not limited to, the following: the arrival of polling officials and materials, setting up of polling unit, accreditation and voting, duration of the voting process, adherence to the voting procedure including secrecy of ballot and security, orderliness and serenity of the polling unit. Other procedures covered are accessibility of the polling unit by physically challenged or persons with disabilities, the integrity of sorting and counting of ballots, announcement and transmission of polling unit results, transparency of the entire process, performance (competence, professionalism, non-partisanship) of the election officials and

inclusiveness of the process, in respect of the participation of women, youth and the physically challenged and use and functionality of technology, i.e. Smart Card Readers (SCRS).

Observers from the Institute recorded their observations of the conduct of elections by completing the prepared Checklist. They also took notes, made recordings and documented events using cameras. They equally conducted interviews with electorates, officials, members of the media and other stakeholders including party officials, security agents and CSOs. Each observer prepared and submitted reports which were reviewed, analysed and consolidated into a single official report by the Institute's coordinating team. The primary data generated by the observers was complemented by secondary empirical data, sourced from INEC official publications as well as other published documents.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the key findings drawn from the observers deployed nationwide to monitor the conduct of the Presidential and National Assembly elections. It specifically details compliance to or infractions of established Guidelines. The presentation is made according to the key variables on the Checklist used for reporting by the field observers.

The postponement of the general elections by INEC was attributed, in large parts, to logistical challenges, particularly the inability to despatch materials in time for elections across the country. Many observers reported the late arrival of security materials to states and subsequently to the voting units (Taraba, Ogun, Abia, Zamfara, Bwari in FCT, Benue, Bauchi). Some states (Akwa Ibom) experienced a shortage of vehicles to transport personnel and materials. As a result of this, in some states, polls opened late and the election process continued well into the night and sometimes the next day (e.g. Dala, Tarauni and Kumbotso LGAs in Kano State).

Logistical challenges were not only restricted to the arrival of materials but extended to the preparedness of INEC *ad hoc* staff many of whom were not properly mobilised and left without accommodation nor transportation to designated PUs. This was aggravated by the postponement of the polls. Social media was replete with images of members of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) deployed to the various states as *ad hoc* staff sleeping in open spaces and car parks. No provisions were made for the accommodation of corps members who were also not paid their entitlements before deployment. This dampened their morale and affected their preparedness and concentration on election day. This in turn contributed to the numerous incidences of collation errors, inaccurate entries and improper documentation.

INEC Guidelines for the 2019 elections require that once at a Polling Unit (PU), a voter first present his/her Permanent Voters Card (PVC) to one of the Polling officials for verification and authentication using the Smart Card Reader (SCR). It is only after being verified and authenticated that a voter proceeds to go through the rest of the voting process, which includes, confirmation of name in the Register of Voters, if confirmed, then receiving ballot paper(s) and then finally voting in secret, but putting the marked and folded ballot paper into the ballot box in public view.

Field reports by NILDS observers show that in the overwhelming majority of the PUs, accreditation and voting were conducted smoothly. In general, there was adherence to the voting procedures including the secrecy of the ballot. Only in relatively few cases, were cases of failure of SCRs observed but the challenges were ultimately addressed by INEC operational/technical staff after an interval and the process resumed and continued. In general, the Smart Card Readers worked effectively. There are relatively fewer reported cases of faulty card readers, which required replacement. Some of the challenges noticed with regards to the functionality of the card reader relate to authenticating fingerprints. These seem to be attributable to a lack of proper training by the polling staff assigned to operate them.

In some Polling Units, prominent politicians were followed by a large crowd, which temporarily disrupted activities. For example, In Unit 047, Alausa/Oregun/Olusosun where Senator Ahmed Tinubu, former Governor of Lagos State voted, it was observed that the polling environment became rowdy on his arrival. Journalists, of both print and electronic media, numbering about 50 were following him at each stage of the voting process video recording and taking pictures. This particular situation made the environment very vulnerable to manipulations by mischief politicians. Indeed, it was observed that when serving governors turned out to vote, media frenzy and chants by supporters temporarily disrupt the voting process until they cast their vote and departed. This affected security and unduly 'politicised the atmosphere.

In general, in manning the accreditation and voting process, INEC *ad hoc* staff seem to have been inadequately trained for their duties, not only in operating the card reader but also in managing large crowds and rowdiness of party agents. Besides, there seems to be a lack of proactive communication between INEC and Ad hoc staff in the polling centres, hindering speedy addressing of challenges, which emerge during the voting process.

The voting process was observed to be relatively cumbersome for many, probably uneducated and rural voters. The ballot paper is long and rather clumsy, due to the large number of political parties and their symbols on it, which appeared to be confusing to the electorate. Some voters found it difficult to identify the symbol of the political party of their choice. Although in its voter education programme, INEC tried to guide voters on the best way to fold the ballot paper before inserting it into the ballot box, an overwhelming majority of the voters either did not get the information or simply failed to heed INEC's guidance.

Significantly, field observers reported low voter turnouts in virtually all the PUs observed. Many reasons may be responsible for this. In some PUs, prolonged delay in commencement made some voters leave without voting. In general, however, the inadequacy of voter education, insufficient mobilization by political parties and candidates, and fear of violence in highly contested environments may all have combined to depress voter turnout. Proportionally, in many of the PUs, more women seem to have turned out to vote than men.

Transparency of the electoral process implies openness in the conduct of all those involved in the handling of the conduct of the process, with nothing whatsoever hidden from public view and review; electoral operations are supposed to be conducted in accordance with established rules and regulations, and all involved are supposed to be accountable for their conduct. Using this definition/criterion, even though the 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections cannot be said to be perfect, they can certainly be said to have substantially met the standard tests of accountability.

No doubt, as described in the preceding paragraphs, many challenges, some very serious, have been observed. But they are relatively few and do not significantly negate the overall integrity of the electoral process. In the overwhelming majority of the PUs observed nationwide, from opening to completion of the polls, and from collation to announcement of results, elections were conducted, smoothly, peacefully, and in substantial compliance with INEC's rules and regulations and international norms and standards of free, fair and credible elections. Given the reputed success of the 2015 elections, Nigeria went into the 2019 elections with very high expectations for an excellent process. This expectation may not have been satisfied, especially given the postponement and rescheduling of the elections a few hours to commencement as initially scheduled, and the noteworthy delays, when elections eventually commenced on February 23. Nonetheless, using all the key indices of measuring electoral integrity, the 2019 elections have obtained scores, which are higher and more than above average.

NILDS field observers witnessed the result collation and return. They observed that in general, the process was peaceful and transparent. The Collation Centres were adequately secured, Party agents and observers witnessed the process. The two major parties, namely APC and PDP deployed agents to many of the PUs, but the other parties had superficial and inadequate coverage of the PUs by their party agents. There are only a few reported cases of denial of party agents and/or observers' entry into the Collation centres, or disruption of the collation by thugs. But these seem to be isolated cases. There were reports of a few places where lack of electricity and other facilities constrained collation. There were also a few reported cases of prominent politicians and/or candidates being at collation centres, which is seen to be either disruptive or intimidating. In general, it can be said that there was appreciable integrity of sorting, counting and collation of results. The reported cases of irregularities, such as disruption of collation or attempted efforts to scuttle the process, also seemingly few and isolated, nonetheless impinge upon the desired holistic integrity of the electoral process and thus, needs to be taken seriously and addressed for the future.

Significantly, it was noted that the number of invalid votes was relatively high. This may be due largely to inadequate voters' education by INEC and political parties and/or high levels of illiterate voters.

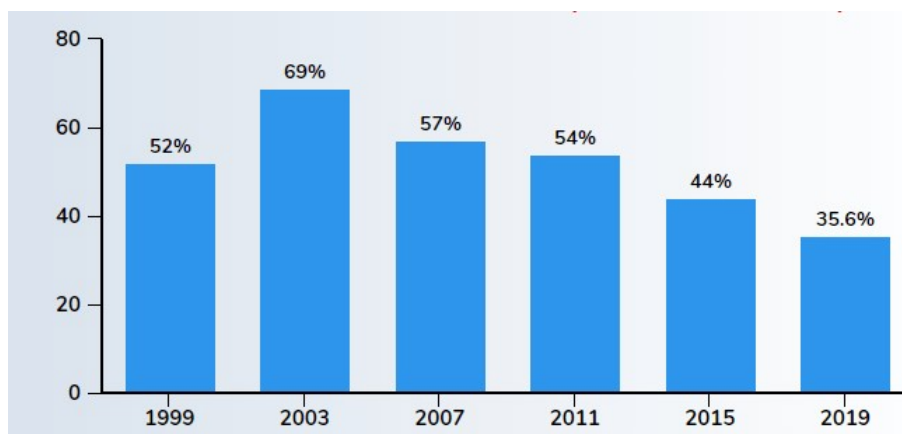
It was also widely reported that the collation process is too long and cumbersome. Results are counted and collated at the PUs, Wards, LGA/INEC collation centre and finally INEC office at the state level. Whereas some have argued that this process creates avenues for rigging, others say it serves to safeguard the process and make it difficult to rig.

INEC specified that voting nationwide was to commence at 8.00 am and end at 2 pm. Due to the late commencement of voting in many PUs, voting only ended around 5 pm in most polling units. This is because, in PUs where delay in commencement was for a couple of hours or more and was attributable to the failure of the card reader, or other unforeseen but genuine reasons, INEC allowed for an extension of the duration of the voting process by up to 3 hours on average. In very few isolated cases, voting was postponed to the following day. In general, however, the voting process went on smoothly, with the PU results publicly collated/counted and announced, the result sheets signed by party agents present and a copy was posted on the wall for all to see.

In 2015, the Commonwealth Observer Mission which observed the 2015 general election recommended, among others, simultaneous accreditation and voting. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) adopted

this recommendation and had enough time to test run the process in the 194 off-season elections it had conducted prior to the 2019 general elections (Jannah, 2019). Observers reported that this system facilitated a smooth voting process.

In general, the 2019 presidential and National Assembly elections recorded an unprecedentedly low level of turnout. According to figures by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the total number of accredited voters in the 2019 presidential and National Assembly elections, was 29,364,209 out of the 82,344,107 registered voters. This represented a 35.6% voter turnout. This is the lowest since the advent of the Fourth Republic. In 1999, voter turnout was 52 per cent, while it was 69 per cent 2003. It dipped to 57 per cent in 2007 and 54 per cent in 2011. At the height of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2015, voter turnout was 44 per cent.



Source: INEC, 2019

This was reported by the Institute's observers who noted that in many States (including Ogun, Rivers, Kogi, Niger) voter turnout was considerably low. This could, in part, be attributed to the postponement of the elections by INEC from 16th to 23rd February 2019. The postponement was reported to have caused widespread disruptions and inconveniences to voters, many of whom could not travel back to their respective states on the rescheduled date. Additionally, the postponement cast a dark shadow on the credibility of INEC as an unbiased and its readiness to conduct the elections even on the re-scheduled date. Generally, women turnout was higher than men in some states (e.g. Rivers)

Preparatory to the 2015 elections, while seeking to improve effectiveness and efficiency of deployment of logistics, INEC devised a system of ensuring that all materials and staff for the elections arrive at the designated Registration Area Centre (RAC) at the ward level in the evening of Friday, the eve of the elections, from where the distribution of materials to the polling units takes place, and election officials deployed to the polling units very early in the morning to open on time for commencement of polls. For example, it is from the RACs that by 6 am on Saturday of the elections staff carrying the election materials are escorted by security personnel to each of the polling units in the Ward. This system was meant to ensure efficient decentralized logistics deployment so that PUs are properly set up in good time, for voting to commence at 8 am. It has been in use since after the 2011 elections and especially during 2015. It was expected to work seamlessly in the 2019 elections.

Also, observers reported similar challenges on election day. Late arrivals of materials and officials were recorded at many of the polling units (PUs) nationwide, which also created delays in setting up the PUs for commencement of voting at the designated time of 8 am. It is estimated that, nationwide, not up to 50% of the 119,973 PUs commenced voting at the designated time of 8 am. Indeed, by 2 pm, when voting was to have ended, there were reported still many reported cases of PUs where voting had not commenced. For instance, at many PUs along Ashi-Bashorun, UI-Ojo Road, Ikolaba-Agodi Gate Road and Sango-UI Road – all in Oyo State. For instance, at Ward 5, Unit 5 (Ashi Area) voting materials did not arrive until 1.00 pm which delayed both accreditation and voting. Materials arrived at Ward 5, Unit 34 (New Bodija Area) at 11.00 am. Similarly, the late arrival of voting materials and election officials delayed the voting process at Ward 5, Unit 6 (Custom Area) along Ikolaba Agodi Gate Road where accreditation started at 11.00 am At Ward 11, Unit 1 (Oni and Sons Area, Ring Road), there was a shortage of election personnel and voting materials resulting in late accreditation and voting.

Reasons given for the delays in the arrival of materials and staff at the PUs and late commencement of voting include late arrival of materials from the INEC LGA offices to the RACs; late arrivals of ad hoc Staff to the RACs; late commencement of distribution of materials at the RACs by the Supervisory Presiding Officers (SPOs); late deployment of security personnel to escort materials and personnel from the RACs to the PUs; and lack of or

inadequacy of transportation for materials and officials from the RACs to the PUs. In a particular LGA in Lagos State, late commencement of voting was attributed to protest by ad hoc staff for non-payment of promised allowances. In Oyo state, in one area, delay in commencement was caused by the inability of the officials to locate the PUs in good time.

Field observers recorded shoddy arrangements and preparation of the RACs in many places. Gaps and inadequacies were observed with regards to water provision, electricity supply, accommodation for *ad hoc* staff, especially Corps Members who served as Presiding Officers (POs) and Assistant Presiding Officers (APOs).

A related challenge observed was the failure by INEC to make contingency arrangements where elections take-off was delayed or where counting extended late into the evening/night. In almost all cases, there was no provision for lighting and officers had to improvise with many using phone torchlights. This was observed in many PUs (Ibadan South West, Dutse Alhaji in Abuja) where lack of proper lighting slowed down the process of collating and transferring results to the broadsheet. It also contributed to some errors in the entry of results. Finally, in some states (e.g. Hotooro and Gyadi Gyadi Arewa Wards, Kano), there were reported cases of mix-up of election materials (such as results sheets) between PUs. This delayed the start of polls as the mistake had to be addressed before elections could proceed.

To sum up, INEC seemed to still grapple with acute challenges of logistics and deployment, as a result of which voting continues to commence late, contrary to global standards and expectations of PUs being ready for elections as and when due. These challenges need to be addressed shortly to reduce the frustration of voters with the process and also improve the integrity of the elections. It is known that the late arrival of election officials and materials at PUs tends to frustrate, demoralize, and even demobilize, voters. Many who could not withstand the inconveniences caused by such delays, give up and return home, and fail to vote.

It was widely observed that many of the ad hoc staff deployed by INEC in many parts of the country were either inexperienced or not adequately trained. As a result, the conduct of elections in those areas was sometimes muddled as the responsible officers failed to properly coordinate the voting activities in the respective PUs. In some states (e.g. Oyo) the weak capacity of ad-hoc staff and even INEC officials resulted in collation errors, inaccurate entry and improper documentation. On occasions (Bwari, FCT), figures were wrongly entered into result sheets, records of sensitive materials were poorly kept and there were cases of mismatch between the number of accredited voters (based on the card reader) and total votes cast. Some of these mistakes were picked up by collation officers and results had to be rewritten and corrected. This delayed the announcement of results and increased tension as voters who had stayed back became increasingly agitated. In some states (e.g. Akwa Ibom), the predominantly young *ad hoc* officers who had little or no prior experience in elections faced difficulty in dealing with stakeholders and some of them were easily intimidated.

The phenomenon of vote-buying that has recently characterised elections in Nigeria assumed greater prominence in the 2019 general elections. Section 124 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended) provides that paying money to any other person for bribery at any election attracts the following penalties on conviction, a maximum fine of five hundred thousand Naira N500 000, 12 months imprisonment or both. The sanctions are prescribed for those who receive inducement for votes cast. Notwithstanding this, there were many cases of vote-buying reported by observers. Whereas in some states there were no observable incidents of vote-buying in some parts of the country, in others it was rampant and even brazen (e.g. Kogi) and sometimes voters themselves demanded money from political party agents. In some instances, observers reported massive vote-buying by agents of the major political parties, particularly the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (e.g. Ward 6, Unit 1 in Sabo in Oyo State, Zamfara). The various parties have evolved advanced techniques to clandestinely buy votes. In many states, however, vote-buying was subtle. For instance, in some PUs (e.g. 017 Epe), tickets were given by party agents to voters who voted for their party. These tickets are then tendered by the voter to a designated agent who takes the voter to the actual payment point – usually outside the PU. This shrewd method of vote-buying meant that there was no open exchange of money for votes at the PUs and as such, no arrests were made by the Police. In some instances, (e.g. Oyo State), some political parties also distributed food and beverages at PUs to induce voters and to sway INEC officials and *ad hoc* staff. In other places, politicians provided buses to transport voters living far away from PUs. Observers noted that the security agents at the PUs look the other way and seem indifferent, if not complicit in the acts. This situation is so pervasive that it threatens the fairness, freeness and integrity of the voting process. Vote buying is still prominent in the electoral process. It even got to a level that some voters openly demanded financial inducement to vote.

A recurrent problem reported by observers is the shortage of important, even if sometimes basic materials. This included a shortage of materials for observers before the election. In many states (e.g. Delta), there was a shortage of jackets and caps for accredited election observers. As a result, some observers only had accreditation letters as a means of identification. This in turn made it easy for non-accredited individuals to impersonate observers.

Secondly, on election days proper, observers reported widespread shortage of materials ballot papers, gum, ink pad, etc. in some PUs (e.g. Pusokoh Polling Unit, Badagry where there was a shortfall of papers for House of Representatives, Kogi). In some parts of Oyo North, it was reported that some registration collation centres lacked basic supplies. In addition to the shortage of materials, some states reported a shortage of personnel (e.g. Zamfara).

The use of Smart Card Readers was introduced by INEC in 2015 and has undoubtedly changed the nature of elections in Nigeria. It can be argued that it is the single most important innovation to our electoral process since independence. It took away power from politicians and placed it in the hands of the people. Despite its limitations, the use of PVCs and smart card readers has strengthened the democratic process in Nigeria. When it was first introduced in 2015, there were widespread reports of technical glitches with the devices ranging from battery failures, failure to decode fingerprints and outright failure in some instances. Some of these challenges, it was later revealed, could be attributed to a lack of proper understanding among some INEC staff on how to properly use the devices. Despite these hiccups, the card readers changed elections in Nigeria for good. There were expectations that the problems experienced in 2015 would have been resolved going into the 2019 elections. Whereas most observers did not report any problems with Card Readers, many others reported cases of smart card failure and malfunction in some states (e.g. Ogun, Akwa Ibom, Enugu, Sokoto, Kano, Zamfara, Benue, Bwari, Kogi, Kaduna). This led to delays in accreditation. Despite these delays, voting time was not extended and many voters were thus not able to cast their votes.

In some states (e.g. 6 PUs at Unguwa Uku ward, Kano, Niger), voters were allowed to vote manually when the Smart Card Readers (SCR) failed to authenticate their PVCs and verify their fingerprints. This is contrary to INEC's initial position that voters would not be allowed to vote without PVCs accepted by Smart Card Readers.

The National Population Commission of Nigeria (NPC) estimates that as of 2018, no fewer than nineteen 19 million Nigerians are living with disabilities. Of this number, the Joint Association of People with Disability claim that about ten (10) million are registered voters and have collected their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) (Adebayo, 2019). In recognition of the rights and privileges of this group, President Muhammadu Buhari assented to the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018. Despite their numbers and growing recognition for inclusive development, there were no special provisions in most PUs to assist people with disability to cast their votes comfortably (this include in states like Zamfara, Benue, Taraba). This is despite assurances by the Commission that it would provide assistive materials such as magnifying glasses and transcriptions of voter materials to Braille to ensure full participation of people with disabilities in the electoral process (NAN, 2018). Some PUS located in schools with storey buildings were inaccessible to the physically challenged. However, in some PUs (e.g. Kano) people with disabilities, the elderly and pregnant women were given special treatment as they were allowed to vote first before other voters.

The provision of adequate security is a prerequisite for the conduct of peaceful elections. This is, even more, the case in Nigeria where various parts of the country continue to face problems of insecurity. In the North East - which includes the states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe – elections were held under the shadow of Boko haram who, despite being significantly degraded, still pose significant security challenges. Also, in the North Central geo-political zone - constituting of Kogi, Niger, Benue, Kwara, Plateau, Nasarawa, and the Federal Capital Territory, there has been an escalation of conflict between predominantly Fulani Muslim herdsmen and Christian sedentary farmers. Furthermore, there has been an escalation of violence in the North-West (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara, and of Katsina States) occasioned by the activities of bandits and cattle rustlers. In the South-South geo-political zone, despite the Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP), there have been pockets of attacks carried out by militant groups. In the South-East, secessionist agitations and the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its eventual proscription as a terrorist created tension in the zone.

Preparatory to the 2019 elections, INEC has assured Nigerians before the election that adequate measures have been put in place, working in partnership with the security agencies, through the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) to secure the electoral environment. For example, it was said that an average of three unarmed security officials were assigned to each of the 119,973 polling units nationwide. In addition, there were going to be roving patrols of armed mobile police, stationed away from the PUs, but who could be called upon to provide security or restore peaceful conduct, should there be a breakdown in law and order in or around any PU. In addition, the military was said to have been assigned to do what is called “outer peripheral cordon”, manning roadblocks at the state boundaries and approaches to major towns and cities; with other mobile detachments, ready and waiting to be invited by the Police to assist them to quell breakdown of law and order, if and when necessary.

NIDLS field observers' reports indicate that, in general, nationwide, the electoral environment was secure and peaceful. There was a security presence, of unarmed personnel at the overwhelming majority of the PUs, although not up to 3 as planned by INEC and promised by the Inspector General of the Police (IG). The majority of the PUs

had at most 1 or 2 police or a combination of police, civil defence, immigration, customs, prisons, and fire service personnel. Security personnel deployed in some states were reported as inadequate (e.g. Ogun, Bwari, FCT, Benue). In some PUs in Oyo North, despite the tension and potential for tension and violence, the number of security officials deployed (1 police officer and 1 Civil Defence) appeared insufficient. Additionally, given the security situation in some parts of the north, observers noted that some PUs (in Gombe) were open, vulnerable and not well secured.

One of the concerns in the build-up to the general elections was voter intimidation by security personnel. This, of course, was predicated on similar occurrences in gubernatorial elections held in Ekiti and Osun in 2018. Observers reported direct involvement of the police and even the military in some states across the country (including Bwari in the FCT, Lagos, Benue, Rivers, and Nasarawa). There were a few reported cases of disruption and/or violence at PUs, which occurred despite the presence of the security personnel, either because they were overwhelmed as they are unarmed, or because they remained aloof and indifferent. In Rivers, Lagos, Oyo, Delta, and Kano states, electoral violence occurred much more than in other states, with reported deaths, the largest number reported from Rivers state. In some of these states (Imo and Rivers), the security officers appeared complicit in plans by politicians to intimidate voters or influence results. In Rivers state, in particular, there were reports of military disruptions of PUs and collation centres, with reported deaths. Some of the disruptions may well have been perpetrated by thugs affiliated with some powerful politicians wearing “police” or “army” and other security personnel’s uniforms and faking to be *bona fide* security officials.

In some cases, where voting, collation and announcement of results were delayed, extending well into the night or early morning, the police instructed collation officers and *ad hoc* staff to relocate from PUs to Local Government Collation Centres. Whereas this was done to guarantee the security of staff and election materials, the move was misunderstood by voters and party agents escalating tension. In a PU it was reported that the electorates and party agents seized the election materials and insisted that collation must be done at the venue.

Although in general the conduct of the elections was peaceful, traditional concerns about the negative role played by the security agencies in elections, especially the military, increased due to reported violent incidences and the alleged role of the Police and the Military. Incumbent executives increasingly use compromised security officials, including the military to influence electoral outcomes, thereby increasing violence in elections and drastically undermining the integrity of the electoral process.

The Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, registered 91 political parties and placed 79 presidential candidates on the ballot for the 2019 presidential elections (The Vanguard, 2019), the highest in Nigeria’s history. Whereas in the 2015 elections there were 14 presidential candidates, in 2011 there were 20. The numbers varied in previous elections: 18 in 2007; 20 in 2003; and only 2 in 1999. This made the ballot paper long, unwieldy and confusing for many voters. Many commentators have drawn attention to the immense cost of printing ballot papers containing all 73 parties and the waste of resources it eventually amounted to. This point is even made more prominent because just a few days before the elections, 46 of these political parties, under the aegis of Coalition of United Political Parties, adopted the PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, as their candidate (Fabiya & Adepegba, 2018). Similarly, 12 presidential candidates endorsed President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC. Furthermore, in many states, parties coalesced and declared their support for President Muhammadu Buhari (30 in Bauchi, 21 in Ekiti, 61 in Ogun, 53 in Lagos, etc.). The preponderance of political parties, many of which have been described as weak, has been blamed on the contentious 1999 Constitution and the Electoral Act which removed encumbrances that easily enable political associations to be registered as political parties. NILDS’ election observers noted that many voters found it difficult to identify the logo of the political party of their choice (Rivers, Gombe, Bauchi, Kogi).

As with previous elections, a prominent feature of the 2019 general elections was the high number of invalid votes, an incident reported by many of the observers in various parts of the country. An analysis of the number of invalid votes from thirty-three (33) states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) by INEC revealed that 1,289,607 votes out of the 28,614,190 total votes cast at the poll were officially declared invalid. This is consistent with previous elections as shown by figures from INEC. In the 2011 presidential elections 1,259,506 votes were rejected as invalid out of the 39,469,484 votes cast while in 2015, 844,519 votes were rejected as invalid out of the 29,432,083 votes cast. Observers attribute the high number of invalid votes to inadequate voter education by both INEC and the political parties (e.g. Imo State, Abia, Gombe) as well as the unwieldy nature of the ballot paper which had 73 parties listed. Many voters found it confusing and difficult to identify or distinguish the symbols of the political party of their choice. The high number of invalid votes sometimes led to tension and protest in some PUs (e.g. in Kano).

INEC’s guideline on the 2019 elections categorically states that “voters may come to the Polling Unit with telephones and other electronic devices provided that they do not take them to the voting cubicles or take pictures

of other voters while they are voting.” Despite this instruction on the use of mobile and electronic devices, in some states (Rivers), many voters took their mobile phones to the polling booths. This increased the possibility of complicity in vote-buying.

In 2015, INEC created additional 30,000 units across the 36 states of the federation as well as the FCT to address the issue of congestion at election points, population shifts and the emergence of new settlements owing to growth in population since 1999. Yet, observers reported over congestion of voters at some voting points (for instance at Yorubaland in Oyo State, Benue, Sokoto) with fewer officials to attend to them whereas some other PUs had little traffic. Congestion led to disorderliness and marred the integrity of the voting process in those areas. Some observers reported difficulty by voters in locating their PUs. In some of the PUs (including Ward 6, Unit 7 (Sabo Area) in Oyo State, Enugu), there were cases of voters who could not locate their names in the voters’ register., few of the voters could not locate their names on the displayed list.

A high number of underage voters was reported in some parts of the country in the aftermath of the 2015 general elections. This was the case particularly in states like Kano and Katsina where children below the age of 18 were seen voting. Preparatory to the 2019 elections, INEC had taken measures to minimise cases of underage voting. In some states, like Kaduna, for instance, the Commission removed underage voters from the voters’ list (Egobiambu, 2019). Regardless, there were some reported cases of underage voting observed in states like Zamfara.

In many electoral jurisdictions, political parties and candidates contesting elections are by law and regulations permitted to designate and deploy accredited representatives/agents to observe polling, collation and return processes in elections. This is certainly the case in Nigeria. Theoretically, a political party or candidate able to deploy agents to cover more PUs and Collation Centres has better assurances of preventing being rigged out or gathering evidence to use in the Election tribunals to seek redress if they are rigged out. In reality, only a candidate or party who can deploy a large number of agents to cover most PUs and Collation Centres may likely prevent fraudulent activities or secure evidence of violations for effective use at the election petition tribunals.

Field reports indicate that few of the 73 political parties who fielded candidates for the presidential elections were able to deploy agents to polling units. Indeed, only the two major parties APC and PDP were able to do this insignificant number of polling units to be only used. Most of them, however, displayed a lack of familiarity with the electoral rules and regulations. Also, some party agents were either intimidated, coerced or bought over leading some to abandon their primary responsibility of protecting the best interests of their party/candidate. Yet other agents engage with the process aggressively and fraudulently such that they exhibited disruptive behaviours in PUs and Collation Centres when they perceived that they are losing.

Indeed, the number of political parties that participated in the election was large. For instance, the ballot paper for the presidential election contained 73 party logos. Imagine if each party has been able to deploy at least one-party Agent at the Polling station, it would have been very chaotic, rowdy and unruly. Ballot papers have been crowded by many party symbols, which must have confused many voters and accounted for the relatively large number of voided votes.

For the 2019 general elections, INEC permitted registered observer groups to deploy in the field about 70,000 domestic and 3,000 international observers. Reports by observers are generally constructive and provide insights to the election management body on what went well and what was done wrong, or needs improvement in the electoral process. In Nigeria, INEC traditionally leverages these reports to take inputs into preparations for subsequent elections. Hence, to assist their deployment, INEC traditionally provides information and other kits to enable observers to prepare and engage appropriately with the electoral process. However, there were observed challenges in the distribution of materials for observers by INEC. No observer in the state was given the flash drive with basic information and briefing, which is supposed to be one of the materials that were to be given to all international and national observers. Some of the observers did not get their complete kits as promised. Even identity cards and tags were not sufficiently distributed. There seems to be general disorganization in the handling of election observers.

Drawing from these findings a number of both specific and general recommendations are offered as detailed in what follows, for both INEC and other stakeholders, to improve the integrity of Nigeria’s future elections and deepen democratic development.

From the foregoing, it can be said that appropriate and valuable lessons need to be taken from the derived findings of the field observation reports and analyses of the conduct of the elections, and measures taken to remarkably improve INEC’s performance and conduct of future elections in Nigeria. Accordingly, the next sections provide specific, as well as general recommendations for improving the integrity of future elections.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The conduct of the 2019 general elections has been rated highly by observers. Noticeable measures taken by INEC to improve the electoral process have been noted and lauded. However, several challenges were also identified as discussed in the previous section. The following recommendations have been proffered by observers on how to strengthen the process to improve transparency and credibility.

In light of the challenges that many voters encountered in the 2019 general elections, including low voter turnout, a high number of invalid votes and related challenges, INEC and other stakeholders need to engage in greater advocacy and continuing voter education with a special focus on youths and people in the rural areas with low levels of literacy. Rumours circulated that only the index finger should be used in voting further created confusion even after INEC publicly denounced such claims as ‘fake news’. One of the main reasons for many invalid votes was the long list of political parties listed and the difficulty that many voters faced in marking inside the box indicating the party of their choice. The responsibility for voter education should not be left to the government (INEC, NOA) but other stakeholders including political parties, NGOs, CSOs, traditional rulers, faith leaders, etc. Such trainings should cover important topics such as voter turnout, vote-buying. INEC should undertake studies to understand structural, institutional, attitudinal and procedural barriers to voter turnout and devise means to address them in future elections. There is also a need to institutionalize voter and civic education in especially senior secondary schools, to as it were, “catch them early”, so that by the time they become eligible to vote at age 18, they are already familiar with the basic obligations, rights and responsibilities of citizens, as voters, in the political and electoral processes.

Given the challenges observed with regards to the capacity of election officials, proper training and orientation should be provided for the *ad hoc* staff to give them more expertise and confidence in carrying out their electoral duties. Training should focus on improving the proficiency of *ad hoc* staff in the management of the PUs, collation of results and especially in the handling of the SCRs. Capacity development should be extended to security officials (police and Civil Defence Corps) to enhance their conduct while on election duty and ensure credible and free elections devoid of violence. This will ensure that experienced *ad hoc* staff are deployed to conduct future elections. Training and re-training of relevant categories of staff and officials can be done by the Electoral Institute and other similar capacity building agencies such as the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies. INEC should also ensure that both its permanent and *ad hoc* staff are bound by contract to deliver efficient and professional service.

Security training should also target sensitizing officials on human rights issues, standards of professional and neutral policing during elections and a general overview of the election process as well as details of acts that constitute a breach of electoral laws. Both the Police personnel and Civil Defence corps must continuously undergo training to appreciate democratic norms and imbibe the appropriate values of democratic engagement in the electoral process. ICCES should add to its remit developing training modules and organizing/conducting training for security engagements elections.

Likewise, a database of *ad hoc* staff could be developed from which subsequent elections can draw. This will ensure that *ad hoc* staff with cumulative experience are deployed in future elections. INEC should consider the possibility of deploying officials with some proficiency in the local language to reduce communication barriers faced in some states between the election officials and voters/party agents. Often, non-literate voters, especially in rural areas depend on officials for guidance.

The National Assembly and the Executive should pay adequate attention to the need to undertake reviews and amendments of the legal framework and undertake other necessary reforms, which would add value to the integrity of the electoral process, in good time. Many of the challenges faced in the general elections can only be effectively addressed through review and reform of the Electoral Act. Since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has shown a willingness to strengthen the electoral process through consistent reform of electoral laws. The 8th Assembly has made further amendments as part of the Fourth Constitutional Alteration and the Bill is awaiting presidential assent. Some of the areas for reform recommended include the introduction of early voting, diaspora voting and electronic voting. This will deal with the situation where millions of officials involved in election duties (INEC staff, *ad hoc* staff, observers, security officials, etc.) are unable to vote. Secondly, diaspora voting will make it possible for all Nigerians living outside Nigeria to exercise their rights to vote. Finally, electronic voting not only increases citizen interest and participation in elections but also allow Nigerians to vote from anywhere without having to travel to a restricted voting location as currently obtains.

The unwieldy number of registered political parties has led to discussions on possible ways to streamline these parties and stop the proliferation of small and ‘unviable’ political parties. This will reduce the cost of elections (e.g. costs accruing even from printing ballot papers) and curb the number of invalid votes. An amendment to Section 222 of the 1999 Constitution is recommended to make the conditions for registering national political parties more stringent. At the moment the conditions include registering the names and addresses of offices (with

headquarters in Abuja) as well as a copy of its constitution with INEC. Legal amendments should be effected to minimize the number of parties that can be on the governorship and presidential ballots. Not all registered political parties should necessarily be on the ballot. We should learn from other countries, in which certain criteria and thresholds need to be met before a party can be on the governorship or presidential ballot.

Furthermore, it has been noted that INEC is overstretched particularly relating to the multitude of constitutional roles it is saddled with. to perform all its constitutional mandate is grossly inadequate. At the moment, the Commission is tasked with the registration of voters, production and distribution of PVCs, registration and regulation of political parties and monitoring of political party primary elections and conventions, production of electoral materials, logistics before and during elections, security of electoral officers, materials and the electorate, conducting elections, checking malpractices and all forms of electoral offences, handling disputes and facing charges in courts of law, etc. This has led to the call for INEC to be divested of some of these functions to allow the body to focus more on core election matters.

Additionally, deriving from the obvious challenges electorate are facing in recognizing party symbols because of their number, it is high time the electoral law system in Nigeria is revised, especially regarding the aspects of political parties' formation to trim down the number of political parties in the country. To my mind, the number of political parties in the country should not be more than six.

Given the disproportionality observed in some of the PUs, there may be a need to undertake a delimitation of constituencies to deal with the challenge of overcrowding reported in some states. INEC had, in 2015, started the process of delimitation of constituencies which involves adjusting or demarcating boundaries of electoral constituencies to create a fair balance of the voting population. Prior to that, a similar exercise was undertaken by the Commission in 2010 leading to the creation of 120,000 polling booths in the country. INEC should endeavour to delimit constituencies and create additional polling units to decongest existing ones, long before the next general elections in 2023. Nigerian electoral process should not be predicated on constituencies delimited since 1996, and PUs created since 1987 when the constitution expressly states that Constituencies should be delimited every ten years and/or after every census, especially given rapid demographic shifts and to meet the globally accepted standards of equitable representation and appropriate size of constituencies. What is significant is that appropriate and valuable lessons need to be taken from the observation and analyses of the conduct of the elections, and measures taken to remarkably improve INEC's performance and conduct of future elections in Nigeria. Accordingly, the next section details specific, as well as general recommendations for improving the integrity of future elections.

It is equally important that the law be strengthened to enable effective monitoring of party and campaign finances by INEC to ensure that it is within permissible limits. 2019 general election was generally characterised by heavy use of money. Other administrative reforms are also recommended including a review of INEC's policy and guidelines on voter registration and how permanent voters' cards (PVC) are obtained.

INEC has had to deal with problems of election logistics for close to two (2) decades. Several elections have been postponed as a result of challenges relating to logistics, including late deployment and arrival of materials, etc. In 2019, the situation did not change as INEC had to postpone the general elections on the morning of the elections due to its inability to effectively and timeously distribute sensitive election materials. Some of the major challenges observed in the 2019 general elections as reported in the preceding section on findings relate to logistics and deployment of materials and personnel. INEC does not seem to have improved in this respect since 2015. The frustration of Nigerians with delays in the deployment of personnel and materials, late opening of polling units and inadequacy of sensitive election materials, such as ballot papers, or mix up in the distribution of such materials, has been continuous if not perpetual. Its combined effect may make voters apathetic with reduced participation in the process. Failures in logistics and timely deployment create significant negative perceptions about the integrity of the electoral process and may even mar otherwise good elections.

This underscores the need for INEC to take a more systematic approach to election planning by deploying technology where needed to ensure safety and timely delivery of election materials. This is important given Nigeria's complex, varied and often challenging geography. The use of technical and operations experts, as well as advanced planning and risk assessment, were strongly recommended to address the perennial logistics challenges. Moreover, INEC can explore possibilities of collaborating with credible logistics companies and other experienced actors in the private sector. Secondly, transportation arrangements could be made in advance and a binding contract with penalties. A situation in which provisions of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between INEC and the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) are disregarded by individual drivers, thereby negatively affecting the deployment of personnel and materials for the election, without any consequences on the violators does not auger well for the efficient and effective conduct of elections with integrity. Alternative plans (plan 'B') also need to be put in place to avoid a complete breakdown of the process should the

original plan fail. This was observed to be the case in the recently concluded elections and needs to be addressed if a better success rate is to be achieved in future elections.

INEC should also consider building security strong rooms in all INEC state offices for the safekeeping of electoral materials both sensitive and non-sensitive materials. This will ease the recurrent issues of the logistic and recent burning of INEC offices and electoral materials. It will also save taxpayers' money. INEC should make provision for lighting in the event the election process extends into the night. Lack of proper and adequate lighting during collation can facilitate electoral irregularities and fraud. The dependency on lighting from the electorate or party agents using their phones is un-wholesome and can compromise the process. There should be adequate provision for generators or a lighting system to INEC Staff in centres where collation of results is likely to be done in the night to guide against manipulations of results under the cover of darkness.

To avoid shifting/postponements of elections, preparations for elections should commence early, especially procurements of sensitive materials. In this regard, sufficient time should also be allowed between the closure of nominations and the conduct of elections to facilitate the printing of sensitive materials devoid of too much time pressure.

Adequate provisions should be made for proper shelter, transportation and accommodation for election officials, essential items (chairs, tables, etc.). some of the logistics (e.g. set up of PUs) can be done the day before the elections. INEC should make standard arrangements for all polling units in open spaces, by providing canopies, chairs and tables for use by *ad hoc* staff for election duty. Failure to do this put them at the mercy of bad weather and the elements, as well as unscrupulous community leaders, most of whom are politicians who would provide these and much more, to incentivise and influence election officials. Indeed, effort should be made to find alternative public facilities to relocate all PUs in open spaces and on streets before the next general elections. Power generators should be provided especially in cases where elections extend into evening/night. INEC should discharge its contractual obligations to the staff, such as payment of transport, feeding allowances and honoraria as and when due

Also, INEC should explore more efficient ways of improving communication with its officials at Polling Units to ensure prompt intervention when and where needed. Similarly, polling units with multiple Voting Points should be given special attention in terms of planning to make it easier for Presiding Officers to collate all VP results for entry onto FormEC8A before leaving the Polling Unit. Also, this would enable Presiding Officers to fill and post the appropriate Form 40G at the PU for the public to confirm the results from the particular PU.

There is also the need for proper identification of Voting Points, particularly in multiple VP Polling Units. These markers would assist voters to easily locate Voting Points within the Polling Unit. This is important in addressing the difficulty faced by voters in locating PUs. Additionally, a copy of the register of voters should be pasted at each polling unit a few days before the election so that voters can search for their names, serial numbers and know where to cast their vote. This will avoid a chaotic situation at the polling units and voting points, on the day of elections as people mill around trying to determine where they are supposed to vote.

In addition, INEC should prepare adequately for the registration, reception, deployment and kitting of election observers. While all efforts need to be made to encourage, host and facilitate the work of national and international election observers, adequate care needs to be taken in identifying credible observers to be registered, to checkmate the increasing unwholesome and partisan activities of some crooked and fraudulent observer groups.

Finally, a post-election review/audit should be conducted by INEC to review the conduct of elections. The cumulative challenges experienced during the elections call for a detailed, systematic and comprehensive post-election review, which includes an inquiry into the cancellation of ballots, an audit of the voter register and a review of the Election security, logistics and operational management systems. Additionally, electoral reforms are necessary, urgent and ever so pertinent. The Justice Uwais Report and its wide-ranging recommendations were made more than 10 years ago. Not all the key recommendations have been accepted and implemented. Many of them now seem necessary. Based on lessons learnt from the 2019 elections, there is a need to make further reforms to improve the integrity of elections in Nigeria. A national conversation should start immediately so that necessary recommended reforms could be identified, recommended and implemented in good time in the electoral cycle, long before the 2023 elections.

The use of Card Readers significantly improved the conduct and credibility of elections in Nigeria. However, a lot more can be done to perfect the system and reduce the incidents of malfunction or outright machine failure. INEC should find ways and means of eliminating the seeming perpetual dis-functionality of the Smart Card Readers. Given the trust that Nigerian voters place on the SCRs readers, INEC should continue to explore ways and means of sustainability of their usage as well as their effective and seamless functionality. Although the total number and percentage of failed SCRs may be statistically insignificant, given the Nigerian media's predisposition to report

mainly negative news, even a few reported SCRs failure attracts very embarrassing negative press coverage for INEC and undermines voter confidence in the device and the technology. Such reports also engender public perceptions of inefficiency and even loss of faith in the activities of the commission. SCRs have come to stay and they must be made to work and be seen to work.

Given the increasing role of technology in elections in many parts of the world, and indeed against the background of the successes recorded since the introduction of smart card readers in Nigeria, more effort should be directed at utilizing technology to improve aspects of the electoral process including automation of voting procedures (voting, counting of votes and collation of results). This will go a long way in eliminating the manual and very cumbersome approach being used at the moment. Apart from the fact that the use of technology will allow for a faster election process and also bring about more accurate election results, election credibility will also be enhanced if technology is used. Adoption of technology should be done carefully considering potential dangers such as vulnerabilities and potential of intrusion by hackers.

Efforts should be made at ensuring strict compliance to specified election guidelines such as the set-up of PUs, campaign regulations, etc. For instance, there should be a rule that will prevent Journalists from following politicians, influential people and government officials to the point of accreditation and voting, which should also be strictly enforced. They may be asked to wait at about 50 meters to conduct interviews as may be required after they have cast their votes and moved out of the polling unit area.

Urgent enforcement of electoral rules in the country is imperative, more so for electoral officers who deliberately break rules. For instance, those INEC technical officials who ought to operate the card readers on election day but failed to appear on duty, or deliberate sabotage the functionality of the card reader, should be brought to book for others to learn a lesson. Also, the impunity with which high profile individuals commit electorate offences has to be addressed with strict punitive measures and appropriate prosecution. Also, concrete measures should be put in place by INEC to check the recurring problem of underage voting.

Collection of voter cards and registration of voters should be a continuous process by INEC and not restricted to a few months to the election. This will help ensure that eligible voters are registered and have collected their cards before the day of elections. At the moment, the process appears too close to elections. This puts unnecessary pressure on the Commission and creates confusion. Worse still, some voters have claimed a deliberate attempt by INEC to disenfranchise voters. Related to this, there should be continuous use and upgrading of the technology for biometric registration, both hardware and software.

Persons living with disabilities (PWDs) and the elderly are vulnerable groups that are grossly marginalized in elections as a result of the physical exertion the process imposes on an average voter. There is a need to consider dedicated polling booths for this category of voters.

As mentioned above, the security situation and challenges faced in that regard differ considerably from one state to another. Whereas some are more prone to violence and conflict others are not. Early security mapping can assist in streamlining the deployment of security personnel and their activities. More officers should be assigned to areas with greater security risks. Also, more training is needed for security officials, especially the police, on elections and the role of security agencies.

Role of security agencies. Ways and means need to be found to improve the professional role of security agencies in subsequent elections. A situation, in which security agencies act in a partisan manner and/or remain aloof due to partisanship or inducement, profoundly undermines the electoral process. It is recommended that throughout the electoral cycle, Police should receive training about the electoral process and the need for a professional and non-partisan role in elections. Funding for this should be provided in the budget and development partners can also lend support and assistance. Ultimately, the Police need to be allowed to recruit more personnel, not just for electoral duty, but also to meet already pre-existing gaps and shortages.

Whereas funding did not appear to be a specific challenge in the 2019 elections. Three (3) months before the elections, INEC had declared that it had access to sufficient funds to conduct the elections (Isuwa, 2018). The National Assembly had approved the sum of N189.8 billion to be released to INEC for the conduct of the elections. It is recommended that funding to the Commission should be sustained and increased particularly to cater for unforeseen events such as postponement or delays. Also, budgetary releases to the Commission should be timely. INEC budgets should be approved and funds released expeditiously and timeously to speed up the procurement process, as well as remove constraints, which could affect the integrity of elections.

All Procurement of electoral materials should be made early to avoid delays, which may compel postponement and rescheduling of elections. Electoral legal Amendment may be necessary to allow more time between the end

of nominations of candidates and their submission to INEC by political parties and printing of sensitive electoral materials, especially as most if not all sensitive materials have to be printed abroad.

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