

**CARD READERS AND ELECTION CREDIBILITY IN NIGERIA (A STUDY OF 2015
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS)**

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Abstract

Nigerian voters have become highly doubtful and reluctant about voting because they don't believe that their votes count in terms of the results and who emerges as the winners. The effects of this development include: pre-election, election and post-election violence that happens to be the political trends in Nigeria elections. The study adopted Documentary Method. The data/ information for this study were generated from secondary sources such as books and other literatures like articles in reputable journals, periodicals and newspapers, magazines, and other internet sources were consulted. In the same vein, the official documents from Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as well as reports from other relevant bodies were carefully examined and necessary information was extracted for the purpose of the study. The findings from the study through various reviews revealed the effectiveness of card readers for the 2015, general elections in Nigeria. The study made the this recommendation amongst others Nigerian citizens should accept the use of smart card readers in the conduct of election at all levels and other electronic devices such as Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BIVAS) for election result transmission.

Introduction

Over the years, Nigeria has faced the lingering problem of election rigging and manipulation by politicians, election handlers and public officers. This has led to a situation where the credibility of elections has been called to question. A high number of voters has become highly doubtful because voters now believe that their votes no longer count. The effects of this development include: pre-election, election and post-election violence.

The introduction of Card Reader in the process of election in Nigeria was intended to address the problem of election manipulation and electoral fraud. However, the adoption of Card Reader has The use of Card Reader has however, generated serious interest among stakeholders has engendered a measure of confidence on the part of Nigerian electorates (INEC, 2015).

Election is a democratic process in which electorates choose leaders to occupy government positions through voting. An electorate refer to a class of citizens entitled by law to vote in an election, by whatever procedure (Santon, 1983). Election provides for a bare minimum of political participation, perhaps the only act of participation for the vast majority of the governed, and therefore create a feeling of belonging and a degree of responsibility for government decision. Election in Nigeria though seen as a means of controlling the government; within the context of electorates, participation reveals a rather disturbing 'state' that has called for serious concern.

Duru (2002) noted that, the Nigerian electoral process since independence has gained an unenviable reputation for fraudulent practices. This situation has forced many to see elections in Nigeria as a mirage or mere selection; selection in the sense that the electorates are left out of the entire system. In most cases without their full participation (low level of voter education on electoral process). The organization of elections in Nigeria has often been carried out without due involvement of the people. The system operates in a way that suggests a total disregard and misapplication of democratic ethos. Thus, the outcome has always been manipulated in favour of candidates of the powerful few. It is in the light of this and other factors that the Independent Electoral Commission decided to introduce the smart card reader in the electoral processes to reduce the high level of mal-practice, (Tarfa,2015).

The 2015 General election in Nigeria differs from the previous elections of the fourth Republic (1999-Date) because it recorded some significant improvement in the conduct and outcome of the election as adjudged by local and international observers. It has been adjudged a credible election because of the manner and procedure in which it was conducted (Nwachukwu, 2015). Elections in Nigeria have been bedeviled with irregularities such as violence, corruption, rigging, ballot box snatching, and stealing, ballot stuffing, vote buying, manipulation of results and ethno-religious politics (Isma'ila& Othman, 2015).

The general election in Nigeria was conducted in an atmosphere of intense fear, insecurity, political alliance and re-alliance. The campaigns were dominated by issues of national concern such as: insecurity, corruption, unemployment and poverty as observed by many scholars. These scholars also stressed that the Boko Haram insurgency, corruption, poverty, unemployment, and poor economic policies made it imperative for the campaign process to be on matters of national interest and that has made a significant impact on the outcome of the election (Centre for Public Policy Alternative 2015, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2015, Ewi 2015, Orji 2015, Ayanda &Odunayo 2015, Chukwudi 2015, International Republican Institute 2015, Omiusi 2015, Ahar 2015; Oji 2015).

There are many factors that made the 2015 Presidential Election appear credible; among them is the use of smart card reader which was believed to have drastically curbed rigging. Another factor was the merger of major opposition parties to form an alliance which successfully challenged the ruling party. The burning national issues of poverty, corruption, insecurity and unemployment also made the electorates to become determined for change (Nigerian Civil Society Room, 2015). The above are some of the successfactors that made scholars to conclude that the election appeared somewhat credible.

The use of card reader for the 2015 general election in Nigeria has infused some level of transparency and credibility into Nigeria's electoral process (Okonji,2015). It was observed that when the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) first announced its plan to introduce card reader machine for 28thMarch and 11thApril, 2015 general elections, many Nigerians, especially, vehemently opposed it. They felt the country has not developed to a level where such technology can be employed for elections. Beside, they felt the use of card reader would disrupt the entire electoral process.

The public outcry that greeted the planned introduction of card reader machine was enough to discourage INEC from introducing it. However, because of INEC's confidence in the efficacy of the modern technologies in achieving quick results, coupled with its vision to transform the country electoral process from its old norms that was characterized by ballot box snatching and multiplicity of ballot tomb-printing, INEC went ahead and introduced the technology against all odds (Vanguard, 2015).

The 2015 Presidential election was the closest electoral contest since the 1999 transition to multi- party democracy (International Republican Institute, 2015). Huge resources were used for the elections including 120 billion Naira expended by INEC, 750,000 ad-hoc election staff, over 360,000 security personnel including the use of card reader to ensure credibility and transparency. The Presidential election was contested by fourteen candidates from different political parties. However, the candidates of the PDP (Dr.

Goodluck Jonathan) and APC (General Muhammadu Buhari) were the major contenders in the election. This paper is therefore, set out to evaluate the impact of card readers on the election credibility in Nigeria. In spite of the confidence of INEC in the use of card readers in the 2015 general elections, the machine came with some challenges even though the elections have been widely adjudged as being successful. For instance, during the March 28, 2015 Presidential and National Assembly election across the country, the card readers malfunctioned in several polling units, a situation that caused undue delay in the accreditation process. It, however, worked perfectly in some other polling units. The challenges ranged from rejection of permanent voter's card (PVC) by the card readers, inability to capture the biometrics from finger tips, to irregular capturing and fast battery drainage. Many INEC officials had to abandon their polling units and took the card reader back to their office for proper configuration. In order to salvage the frustrating situation, INEC ordered the use of manual process for accreditation. Before the order could go round the states and local government areas, some of them have conducted accreditation and actual voting had commenced and this forced INEC to extend the exercise to the next day in the affected areas.

Concerned about the massive electoral fraud witnessed in the past general elections in Nigeria, INEC deployment of the card reader in 2015 general election was to ensure a credible, transparent, free and fair election in order to deepen Nigeria's electoral democracy. However, the use of the electronic device in the 2015 general elections generated debate among election stakeholders before, during and after the elections. This scenario called to question the purported credibility of the 2015 election.

Research Question

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How reliable is the card reader during the electoral process?
2. What effect is the use of card readers on election credibility in Nigeria?

Method

The study adopted Documentary Method. The data/ information for this study were generated from secondary sources such as books and other literatures like articles in reputable journals, periodicals and newspapers, magazines, and other internet sources were consulted. In the same vein, the official documents from Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) as well as reports from other relevant bodies were carefully examined and necessary information was extracted for the purpose of the study. The population of this study is about 200 million representing the total Nigerian's population. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted where the 36 states of the Federation were grouped in to six (6) strata to reflect the six (6) geo-political zone of the country (North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-West and South South). Simple random sampling technique were also adopted where three (3) states (Delta, Oyo and Katsina) were randomly selected as sample for the study.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the study through various reviews revealed the effectiveness of card readers for the 2015, general elections in Nigeria. The work of Ekuwem, 2015, supported the findings that the use of card readers for elections is highly commendable because it has helped to reduce election fraud like multiple registrations and multiple voting. With the card readers, the true identities of card holders were matched with the details contained in their permanent voter's cards (PVCs), during accreditation and the process helped in reducing fraudulent accreditation that marred electoral processes in the past. Though the challenges that confronted the operation of some of the smart card readers during the general election, a significant impact of the device usage was observed after the elections.

The use of the card reader increased and reinforced public confidence and trust in the electoral process. Majority of Nigerians casting their votes in the elections believed that their votes could count and as such their will could be respected in future elections; and this in some ways reinforced the trust of Nigerians in the democratic process. Electoral fraud was reduced. Inflation of the number of voters present and multiple

voting at polling stations were reduced. The device checked the undemocratic attitude of politicians in polling booth electoral malpractices (Amenaghawon, 2015). Election litigations were minimized. There was a departure from the past where every election outcome had been contested at the election tribunal. Most of the candidates that lost in the 2015 general election did not challenge the outcome. In fact, some of the major contenders that did not win in the election embraced and congratulated the winners. For instance, the PDP presidential candidate immediately congratulated the APC presidential candidate, the winner of the presidential election. This was also replicated across many states of the Federation in the Governorship and House of Assembly elections and national assembly elections. In addition, electoral conflicts and violence was very minimal as the election was seen to be transparent and credible due to the use of the card reader. The usually excessive and pointless attack and rancor between the election winners and losers in past electoral contest was significantly reduced. In view of the minimal level of electoral fraud due to the use of the card reader, tensions were reduced among the political gladiators, and as such, electoral conflict and violence was grossly diminished in the 2015 general elections outcome compare to past elections in Nigeria (Ekuwem, 2015).

The proponent of the device according to Peters (2015) believed that the card reader procedure has the capacity to prevent or minimize rigging in the sense that there would not be multiple voting while the opponents believed that in the peculiar circumstances of the Nigerian situation, the card reader is designed to assist a certain political party to win elections. Peters (2015) maintained that the major plank of their argument is that the card reader must have been programmed to assist a pre-determined winner of the election by ensuring that so many persons would discriminately be disenfranchised to deny other parties of favorable votes thereby ensuring the winning of an INEC preferred or pre-determined party. With the use of the SCR, the electoral process has been strengthened and the electorates feel their votes could count in any election. The significant impact of the device despite its challenges during the 2015, general elections cannot be quantified nor overemphasized. The attendant challenges have led to the adoption of an improved electronic device called the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS).

Conclusion

The Nigerian electoral process which has been characterized by electoral fraud prompted the demand for an electoral system that will measure up to the standard of international best practices. This made the National Electoral Commission (INEC) as subset of the larger system. INEC using the authority conferred on them by the constitution introduced the SCR during the 2015 general election.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendation are made:

1. Nigerian citizens should accept the use of smart card readers in the conduct of election at all levels and other electronic devices such as Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for election result transmission.
2. INEC and ad-hoc staff should be properly trained on the use of smart card readers and other electronic devices to eliminate the challenges experienced in the 2015 general elections.
3. The reviewed Electoral Act should be implemented to the letter for implementation of additional rules especially increase on maximum campaign spending limit to provide flexibility for the legal backing of campaign expenditure and also to address the reality of nature of Nigerian money politics.
4. INEC and policymakers should ensure that the use of card reader and other electronic devices is constitutionally infused and deployed effectively for registration, monitoring, accreditation, result display and related electronic deployments to address future challenges disappointment during elections.
5. The Nigerian electorates should cooperate with the electoral umpire and election managers in the process of deployment of electronic devices for all stages of elections

6. The Federal, State and Local Governments should fully support the use of technology at all stages of elections for better transparency, accountability and expediency.

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