

Conflict Mitigation in Nigeria's 2015 Elections: Lessons in Democratic Development

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Abstract

The 2015 general elections represent a positive step towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The peaceful and positive outcome of the elections came to many as a surprise considering the difficult political and security environment under which the elections were conducted. Factors which nearly impeded the smooth conduct of the elections include the grave security threat posed by Boko Haram insurgency, the competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians, a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages, and serious gaps in electoral preparations. Against the backdrop of these challenges, this paper examines the measures taken by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other election stakeholders to tackle the challenges, and explains why logistical lapses, electoral irregularities, and outbreak of violence were not completely avoided despite the concerted efforts of the Commission. The paper contends that elections in Nigeria cannot be entirely hitch-free unless the exogenous and endogenous factors that obstruct the smooth conduct of elections in the country are significantly addressed. These factors include ineffective electoral governance, weak national bureaucracy, poor state of national infrastructure, deteriorating standards of public education, fierce contest for power, worsening state of insecurity across the country. In conclusion, the paper draws some lessons for electoral governance and peace-building in Nigeria based on the role of INEC and other stakeholders during the 2015 elections.

Introduction

The 2015 general elections were the fifth consecutive general elections in Nigeria since the country returned to democracy in 1999. Four major factors made the polls critical to the country's democratic development. Firstly, the elections were the first where a united and strong opposition challenged the ruling party in Nigeria.¹ Secondly, there were fears that a relatively balanced presidential race which squares up Southern/Christian and Northern/Muslim candidates could provoke sectarian violence (ICG 2014, Okolo 2014). Thirdly, the elections were seen as critical in shaping the Nigerian government's long-term response to the Boko Haram insurgency (Adibe 2014). Finally, the elections were seen as a critical opportunity for Nigerians to democratically choose their leader. Nigerian democracy

¹ Observers see the opposition challenge as a positive step in Nigeria's democratic development and suggest that it would leave a lasting legacy on the country's party politics, see Nkwachukwu Orji, #NigeriaDecides 2015: What Does the Emerging Opposition Challenge Mean for Democracy? <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2015/03/18/nigeriadesides-2015-what-does-the-emerging-opposition-challenge-mean-for-democracy/> (accessed 20.03.2015)

has reeled under a single party dominance for nearly two decades, leaving the electorates with very limited options (Obi 2008).

Nigerian elections are usually characterized by fierce competition and disputed results. The 2015 race was fiercer than most, prompting concerns about the likelihood of a destabilising outcome (Orji 2014). Many people stockpiled food, the affluent and many expatriate workers left the country, and Nigerians in regions of the country distant from their birthplaces sent their families home in expectation of election-related violence (Fleming 2015, Akwagyiram 2015). Yet, in the end, the actual conduct and outcome of the elections defied expectations. Not only was the elections adjudged the most credible and transparent elections since independence, they represent a major step towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria in that they enabled the country to achieve inter-party alternation of the presidency for the first time in its history² (EU EOM 2015a; TMG 2015).

Why was large scale conflict averted during the 2015 Nigerian elections and what lessons can be drawn from the country's experience? This paper argues that two interconnected factors helped Nigeria avoid widely expected conflict. First, a series of innovations introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) helped improve the credibility of the elections making it less likely to dispute the outcome. Second, national actors and the international community supported the electoral process with strong conflict mitigation measures including risk analysis, preventive mediation and peace messaging. The pervasive "peace narrative" that emerged together with a plethora of monitoring and early-warning mechanisms delegitimized election protests and political activity seen to encourage instability.

The Nigerian experience is instructive for wider debates about electoral governance and democratization, because it demonstrates the value of integrating peace building in the electoral process. The literature on electoral governance emphasizes the importance of formal institutions, including a clearly established legal framework for electoral competition and voting, an independent and effective Electoral Management Body (EMB), and an active and impartial judiciary, in bestowing legitimacy and credibility on the electoral processes (Mozaffar and Schedler 2002; Mozaffar 2002; Eisenstadt 2002; Elklit and Reynolds 2002; Birch 2008; Hartlyn, McCoy and Mustillo 2008). The assumption is that if these institutions function effectively, they would help to insulate the electoral process from political meddling and ensure a free and fair electoral competition with a widely acceptable outcome.

² Democratic theorists see alternation of power as a crucial stride in the democratisation process, see Przeworski et al. 2000 and Huntington 1991.

However, the Nigerian case suggests while making efforts to improve democratic institutions, countries can establish innovative structures of conflict mitigation to ensure the survival of their electoral processes. One lesson that can be drawn from the Nigerian experience is the need for actors to expand opportunities for peace making by engaging in consultations, interactions and mediation outside the framework set by formal institutions. This is especially so because formal institutions are often restrictive. For instance, the formal election rule adjudication mechanism is centred on the electoral commission and the judiciary, and adopts a remedial rather than pre-emptive approach. By creating conflict mitigation structures outside the formal rule adjudication framework, election stakeholders in Nigeria introduced an innovation to electoral governance.

The success of Nigeria's 2015 elections supports the argument by Staffan Lindberg (2006) that the repeated holding of elections, even if they are not fully free and fair, promotes democratization. The widespread condemnation that trailed the 2007 elections has been followed by extensive lesson learning and vigorous reforms. These processes provide the basis for the consistent progress in electoral governance in Nigeria. The positive outcome of the 2015 elections has solidified the electoral reforms in Nigeria and set the country on a trajectory towards democratic consolidation.

The political landscape

The context for Nigeria's 2015 elections was defined by the emergence of a strong national opposition party. In February 2013, four major opposition parties in Nigeria, namely the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), merged into a new party known as the All Progressives Congress (APC) (Latinwo 2013). Between November 2013 and January 2014, an internal crisis in the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) led to the defection of five state governors, 11 senators, 37 members of the House of Representatives, and several other notable politicians to the APC³. The mass defection left the PDP without a majority in the House of Representatives for the first time since 1999. The failure of the PDP to address questions around the breakdown of its zoning arrangement, the lack of democratic process within the ruling party, and poor governance by the Jonathan administration strengthened the nascent APC.

³ "In Political Earthquake, 5 PDP Govs Defect to APC." *This Day Live*, 27 November 2013, <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/in-political-earthquake-5-pdp-govs-defect-to-apc/165332/>; "Nigerian PDP governors defect to opposition APC." *BBC News*, 26 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25109513>.

However, during the first half of 2014, President Jonathan and the PDP leadership had some success in stemming the adverse political tide. The PDP was able to prevent any more high level defections and even managed to contrive some defections to its direction. In August 2014 it pulled off a major political coup by persuading the prominent politician and anti-corruption campaigner, Nuhu Ribadu, to abandon the APC, which was by now experiencing growing internal divisions of its own, for the PDP⁴. PDP also co-opted other prominent APC members, including Tom Ikimi, Ibrahim Shekarau, and Ali Modu Sheriff. In addition, the PDP allegedly instigated moves to impeach a number of APC governors; it succeeded in Adamawa State, where it retained considerable influence. The defeat of the APC in the Ekiti State gubernatorial election of June 2014 marked a major breakthrough for the PDP and a low point for the opposition party.

In August 2014, the APC managed to steady the ship in Osun State, one of its strongholds in the south-west, where it defeated the PDP in elections for state governor. In late October, the APC was boosted further by the defection of the PDP's speaker of the House of Representatives, Aminu Tambuwal⁵. The opposition challenge to the PDP intensified following vicious attacks by the Islamist group Boko Haram. The APC criticised the PDP's approach to the Islamist insurgency as complacent, and highlighted the economic decline that followed the fall in global oil prices as further indication of PDP's ineffectiveness and poor performance.

Obstacles to peaceful elections

As the 2015 elections approached, the grave security threat posed by Boko Haram insurgency constituted the greatest obstacle to the smooth conduct of the elections. Other issues, such as the competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians, and gaps in electoral preparations, caused equally serious concerns. During the electioneering, a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages became a major source of concern. The threats posed by the Boko Haram insurgency raised doubts about the possibility of holding the 2015 elections. In late 2014, the question of whether the security situation will permit the conduct of elections was the top political topic of the day. INEC had initially expressed concerns that it would not be possible to hold elections in the northeast, especially in Borno and Yobe states, where the insurgents are hampering its work (Agbakwuru and

⁴ Nigeria former anti-graft tsar defects to scandal-hit, ruling PDP, *Reuters*, 19 August 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/19/uk-nigeria-politics-idUSKBN0GJ1P020140819>.

⁵ Tambuwal defects to APC, *This Day Live*, 28 October 2014, <http://www.thisdaylive.com/articles/tambuwal-defects-to-apc/192510/>.

Erunke 2013). Later, the commission changed its outlook, affirming that elections will be held in the region. A few months before the elections were to hold, however, it was clear that securing polling stations would be an uphill task, especially if Boko Haram or any other militant group decides to escalate attacks. There were also concerns that the deep contentions that traditionally go along with elections in Nigeria will further politicize and entrench existing security challenge in the country (Orji 2014). But failure to conduct elections in the northeast would badly dent the legitimacy of the polls and raise serious constitutional questions.

In Nigeria, the entire federation is treated as a single constituency for the presidential election and the successful candidate must win “not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the states in the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja”⁶. Informed analysts argued that not holding elections in some states could lead to fierce legal battles over the results, and in a worst-case scenario, create political chaos and a rejection of the final results (Orji 2014: 126). The leadership of the opposition APC, which largely controlled Borno and Yobe states, expressed its suspicion that the ruling PDP and President Jonathan were trying to keep people away from voting in the region (ICG 2014: 39).

There was also talk of postponing the 2015 general elections entirely. This view received attention when Senate President David Mark declared on the floor of the Senate that “there is no question of election, it is not even on the table. We are in a state of war” (Hassan 2014). Opposition politicians immediately condemned the statement, arguing that Mark was suggesting a possible tenure extension for the Jonathan administration. Concerns about his comments re-emerged in January 2015 when the prospect of postponing the 2015 elections became real.

The competing claims to the presidency by northern and southern politicians further threatened the smooth conduct of the 2015 polls. The fierce struggle by northern and southern politicians for Nigerian presidency, which was the underlying cause of the 2011 post-election violence, reached a high up level in 2015. The election of President Jonathan in 2011 led to a breakdown of Nigeria’s informal power sharing arrangement, under which the presidency would alternate between southern and northern politicians. The failure of the North to control Nigerian presidency for a full four-year term since 1999 fuelled demands by politicians from the region for a power shift.

⁶ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 134, Subsection 1(b).

President Jonathan's insistence on standing for the 2015 elections produced a deep consternation among northern politicians who feel that their "turn" of leadership had seemingly been usurped by the southern Christian Jonathan (Hoffmann 2014). From mid-2013 when it became apparent that President Jonathan will seek a second term, a substantial number of senior PDP members from the North began to withdraw from the party, leading to a significant weakening of the ruling party's support base in northern Nigeria. The PDP defectors joined opponents of President Jonathan in the southern states to establish a formidable national opposition party – the All Progressives Congress (APC). The emergence of APC further divided Nigerians regionally and religiously. To boost its appeal to northern Muslims, the party nominated Muhammadu Buhari, former military leader from the north-western state of Katsina to challenge PDP's candidate President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian from the Niger Delta region. By so doing, a race between northern and southern candidates was set up – such a race is typically volatile in Nigeria, and the 2015 presidential contest was certainly not an exception (Orji 2010, Post and Vickers 1973).

When electioneering eventually commenced in late 2014, a keenly contested campaign smeared by inflammatory messages raised fears that the electoral process could derail and plunge Nigeria into violence. The intense contest between the two leading political parties, aggravated by ethno-regional and religious claims of entitlement to the presidency, created a volatile electoral environment in which smear campaign and hate speech were widely used. In the most dramatic incident, the First Lady, Patience Jonathan, stated that anyone who says "change", the campaign slogan of the opposition APC, should be stoned.⁷ Worried by this development, civil society groups promptly invited the International Criminal Court (ICC) to focus special attention to political developments in Nigeria. The ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, visited Nigeria and subsequently released a statement in which she reiterated her "Office's resolve to prosecute individuals responsible for the commission of ICC crimes".⁸

Finally, gaps in INEC's electoral preparations threatened the smooth conduct of the 2015 elections. Although the Commission adopted wide-range of reforms prior to the 2015 elections and made strong pronouncements on its readiness to conduct elections (Bolaji 2014, INEC 2014), several gaps were evident in electoral preparations. Challenges relating to

⁷ Patience Jonathan made the speech at a rally in Calabar on 4 March 2015, captured in a video (available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG4RgPuXCXE>).

⁸ See Statement by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, ahead of elections in Nigeria: "I reiterate my call to refrain from violence", 16.03.2015, http://www.icc-cpi.int/en_menus/icc/press%20and%20media/press%20releases/Pages/otp_stat_150316.aspx.

voting arrangements for internally displaced persons (IDPs), voter registration, and reorganisation of constituency and polling arrangements were the most prominent.

Although the Nigerian Constitution requires the INEC to review electoral boundaries at least once every ten years,⁹ the last review took place in 1996. Given the huge population expansion and the migration of citizens across the country since 1996, there was a consensus that a new constituency-delimitation exercise was necessary before the 2015 general elections (INEC 2014). On 16 November 2011, the INEC convened the Technical Committee on the Review of Electoral Districts and Constituencies (TCRED&C) to review past constituency-delimitation efforts and suggest measures that would improve future demarcation undertakings. Based on the committee's report, the INEC formulated a four-phase work plan for constituency delimitation. But the commission could not proceed beyond the first stage of the plan due to poor coordination and failure to secure the consensus required to implement the exercise. In September 2014, the INEC suspended its constituency delimitation plan and introduced a scheme to create 30,000 new polling units to relieve pressure on the approximately 120,000 units in existence (Jega 2014). The INEC's polling-unit reorganisation plan was similarly abandoned after it was severely criticised for allegedly favouring northern constituencies (Ndiribe et al. 2014; Olorok 2014). The inability of the INEC to manage its constituency and polling-unit reorganisation programme called into question the commission's planning and technical capacity.

The INEC's professional capacity was further questioned by the manner in which it managed the distribution of permanent voter cards (PVCs). Following the compilation of the biometric voter registry in 2011, the INEC proposed issuing PVCs to duly registered voters before the 2015 elections. The PVCs replaced the temporary voter cards (TVCs) handed out to registrants immediately after their enrolment. Unlike the TVCs, PVCs have a microchip containing machine-readable biometric data of each voter. The INEC planned to deploy card-reading machines to authenticate the cards they issued and verify the identity of the voters through their fingerprints. This is expected to help prevent multiple voting, reduce incidents of card theft, and control vote-buying. From November 2014 when the PVC distribution exercise began, the Nigerian press buzzed with stories of tardy INEC officials, protesting registrants, insufficient PVCs, stolen cards, and other irregularities (Mordi 2015; Haruna and Ismail 2015). By 14 February 2015, the date originally scheduled for elections, only 76 per cent of registered voters had received their PVCs. The postponement of elections allowed

9 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 73.

more time for registrants to obtain their PVCs, resulting in approximately 82 per cent of PVCs having been collected by 21 March (EU EOM 2015a: 6).

The inability of the INEC to make sufficient arrangements for the electoral participation of about 3.3 million IDPs also points to poor preparedness (IDMC 2014: 7). The fact that displacement occurred mostly in the North-East, where the opposition party draws a sizeable support, raised political concerns.¹⁰ Opposition politicians and activists relied on the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention) ratified by Nigeria in 2012 to canvass for the participation of IDPs in elections. However, INEC could not demonstrate the capacity to transfer of IDPs' voter registration from their areas of origin to their areas of displacement or to address the need for the widespread replacement of IDPs' voting cards lost during their flight. But after a consultative process, the Commission introduced a special arrangement whereby IDPs in the three north-eastern states most affected by Boko Haram insurgency could vote in IDP camps within their state of origin. All other IDPs who left their state of origin and were unable to produce their PVCs were disenfranchised, unless they had managed to apply for a transfer of voter registration through the regular channel.

Conflict mitigation: what went right?

The generally peaceful conduct of the Nigeria's 2015 general elections was not entirely an accident. Rather, it was a product of decisions and actions of individuals, groups and institutions within and outside Nigeria. The specific factor that led to peaceful elections in Nigeria is the convergence of election credibility enhancing measures adopted by INEC and peace building programmes implemented by the international community and national actors.

Election credibility enhancing measures

Four innovations by INEC improved the credibility of the 2015 elections. These include the use of biometric technology for voter accreditation, public display of results at the polling units, increased deployment of party agents at polling units, and establishment of an expanded feedback channels by INEC. For the 2015 elections, INEC implemented a voting system in which all potential voters would first be accredited as a group, then all accredited individuals would vote as a group; and finally everyone who had voted would be invited to

¹⁰ The IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix Round II Report - February 2015 puts the total number of IDPs in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States at 1,028,683. The total number of registered voters in these three states is 4,593,061.

remain at the polling unit to witness counting and announcement of results. The intention of this system is to ensure that all voters would spend the entire day at their assigned polling unit in order to prevent multiple voting and enhance public confidence in the accuracy of the results announced at the polling units.

This voting system was capped by additional innovations - a two step voter accreditation process based on biometric technology and public display of results at the polling units. Following the compilation of biometric voter register in 2011, INEC introduced Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and electronic card readers for the two step voter accreditation process involving, first, the verification of INEC issued voter cards, and then, authentication of the voters through their fingerprints. Biometric accreditation system and display of official results at polling units served as additional measures to prevent multiple voting and enhance public confidence in the electoral process.

INEC laid special emphasis on deployment of political party agents at the polling units as a confidence building measure during the 2015 elections. Party agents represent the interest of political parties at polling units. They also serve to inform their respective parties about the conduct of the process and the official results. When a party does not have an agent present it has no way of knowing what happened at the polling units or the announced results. In 2011 elections, in which four major parties contested,¹¹ up to eight per cent of the polling units reportedly had only one party agent; in South East and South South zones 30 per cent and 20 per cent of the polling units, respectively, had only one party agent.¹² Interestingly, the two zones produced the most disputed results in 2011.

In the build up to the 2015 elections, INEC encouraged parties to prioritize the deployment of agents to polling units. The Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) reported an improvement in deployment of party agents in 2015, with APC and PDP deploying agents in 94 per cent and 95 per cent of all polling units, respectively. The greater presence of party agents in polling units increased the parties' access to information and the improved the transparency of the electoral process.

Access to information was further enhanced by the establishment of INEC's Citizens Contact Centre (CCC) responsible for direct, real-time reception of feedback from citizens. The ICC was designed as a modified Situation Room to work as a channel of continuous communication and exchange of information with the electorate and other stakeholders.

¹¹ Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Congress Progressive Change (CPC), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), and All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP).

¹² TMG, Systematic Observation Data, Percentage of Polling Units with only One Party Agent, <http://www.tmgowards2015.org/national.html#be>.

Members of the public could contact the CCC with questions or complaints and receive responses from INEC officials.

Peace building efforts

The concerted pleas, warnings, and pressure from national and international actors were critical measures that helped Nigeria avoid the larger scale violence that many had feared. These interventions ranged from entreaties to the candidates and parties to vigilant monitoring of the entire electoral process by domestic and international observers. Numerous civic groups undertook campaigns to complement voter education and peace messaging initiatives by INEC and NOA. On 27 March 2015, Nigeria's major television and radio stations successfully organized a Nigeria Media Peace Day – the first ever such initiative – under the leadership of the Broadcasting Organizations of Nigeria. Media networks in the country broadcast strong, positive nationwide messages in support of peaceful elections and political participation.

Efforts of national actors were complemented by high profile peace messaging by international actors. On 25 January 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Lagos to urge peaceful elections and warn that the United States would apply visa restrictions against Nigerians who foment electoral violence. The visit was followed by calls between U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and the two main presidential candidates, a joint op-ed by John Kerry and the U.K. Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond encouraging peaceful and fair process; video message from U.S. President Barack Obama to the Nigerian people; and public calls for free and fair polls by U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, former South African President Thabo Mbeki, and former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Kofi Annan and former Commonwealth Secretary-General, Emeka Anyaoku, facilitated the signing of an agreement, the “Abuja Accord”, by all 14 presidential candidates in which they pledged to conduct issue based campaigns, peacefully accept the election results, refrain from using inflammatory language and denounce acts of violence or incitement to violence during the election campaigns. On 26 March 2015, the two leading presidential candidates renewed their commitments to the Abuja Accord by co-signing a joint pledge for peaceful elections and calling on all Nigerians and party supporters to refrain from violence. The signing of the agreement was facilitated by the National Peace Committee composed of, among others, highly respected religious leaders of both the Christian and Muslim faiths, and chaired by former head of state, General Abdulsalami Abubakar. These proactive

interventions sent deterrent messages to potential troublemakers and helped to calm tensions before, during and after the polls.

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Lessons from the 2015 elections

There are eight core lessons relating to electoral governance in Nigeria that can be drawn from the experience of the 2015 elections.

▶ *Adopt a multi-pronged approach to electoral governance:* the success of elections in Nigeria depends on the adoption of a multi-pronged approach to electoral governance. It is worth restating that elections are not just about voting. In Nigeria this notion is particularly imperative considering the diversity of factors that affect the electoral process. It was very positive that election stakeholders in Nigeria understood the obstacles to the smooth conduct of the 2015 elections, and therefore, began early to implement conflict mitigation measures alongside innovations aimed at improving the credibility of the elections. These two approaches to electoral governance combined to produce the positive outcome of the 2015 polls.

▶ *Prepare early and engage in preventive rather than remedial peace making:* the 2015 elections demonstrated the utility of early preparations and well thought out groundwork for election management. Preparations for the 2011 elections were largely last minute, and the approach to peace building was rather remedial than preventive. For the 2015 elections, INEC and other stakeholders had relatively early preparations. In addition, the peace building strategy for the elections focused largely on conflict mitigation. Early preparation provides opportunities for extensive planning, and extensive planning is essential in a volatile political environment like the one in Nigeria. To conduct a successful election in Nigeria, one needs

more than just plan A and B – extensive planning and scenario building is absolutely necessary.

▶ *Effective coordination is essential:* the success of elections depends heavily on complex network and interaction of tasks, individuals and organizations. As such, the development of strong coordination mechanisms is essential if the collective goal of successful election is to be achieved. INEC is the body with the statutory powers to coordinate election related activities and stakeholders. The commission was generally effective in consolidating and expanding the coordination mechanisms it developed in previous elections. For the 2015 elections, INEC built on the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES) it established in December 2010 (INEC 2014: 18). INEC replicated the inter-agency consultative framework to other areas of its work such as civic and voter education, establishing the National Interagency Committee on Voter Education (NICVEP) to harmonize the activities of all the agencies involved in that strand of work.

▶ *Use of technology in the electoral process is crucial:* considering that the level of political distrust in Nigeria is very high, the use of technology to enhance electoral credibility has become indispensable. Through the adoption of biometric technology in voter accreditation, INEC introduced essential safeguards to multiple voting and other forms of irregularities. Based on the positive experience with the use of biometric cards for voter accreditation, the use of technology in the electoral process could be extended to other critical areas of electoral governance such as election-day logistics and operations.

▶ *Use of diverse channels of messaging is useful:* communication is central to the success of the electoral process. As such, it is vital to explore and utilize various channels of communication. During the 2015 elections, stakeholders made use of different channels of messaging including traditional and social media. This helped to widen citizens' participation in the electoral process. Each channel of messaging targeted a specific audience, ensuring that most sections of the society were reached with needed information.

▶ *Transparency at the local level is critical:* transparency of the electoral process, especially at the local level, is required to boost voter confidence in elections and democracy. An extensive literature asserts that the way in which the polls were administered can affect citizens' perception of the credibility of elections (Elklit and Reynolds 2002 & 2005; Cain, Donovan and Tolbert 2008). By encouraging the placement of more observers at the polling units as well as public displaying election results at the polling units, INEC sent clear signals that it is not averse to scrutiny. Other measures adopted by INEC, such as the call on voters to

remain at the polling unit to witness counting and announcement of results, widened the scope of citizens' involvement in the electoral process and enabled the electorate to protect their mandate.

▶ *Be mindful of the cost of elections while implementing reforms*: in a bid to check electoral irregularities and violence, Nigeria has adopted several reforms and innovations including the biometric technology. These innovations have improved the credibility of the electoral process; however, they have increased the cost of conducting elections in the country. Nigeria spent about \$800 million to conduct the 2011 voter registration and general elections. It estimated to spend \$627 million in running the 2015 elections. Although INEC reduced its budget for the 2015 elections¹³, the commission should be mindful of the cost of election while adopting further reforms and innovations.

▶ *“Rome was not built in a day”*: a core lesson from the experience of the 2015 elections is that democratic development is a long and gradual process that requires patience and resilience. In spite of early preparations, extensive planning and concerted efforts by stakeholders; logistical and technical lapses, irregularities and violence were not entirely avoided during the 2015 elections. The key lesson here is that obstacles to smooth conduct of elections, including lack of technical capacity, poor infrastructure, poorly educated citizenry, fierce competition for power, deep political distrust, and culture of contention, may not be eliminated as quickly as we expect. The positive point, though, is that progress seems to be incremental. Innovations and measures initiated in previous electoral cycles, such as the compilation of a relatively accurate voters' register, contributed to the success recorded in 2015. This development assures us that with sustained reforms, many of the obstacles to successful elections would eventually be eliminated.

Conclusion: peace as indicator of success

Democratic electoral processes offer genuinely peaceful means of distributing power in a society. But in some emerging democracies, electoral contest is often associated with widespread violence. After years of violent electoral contest – the most recently leading to the death of over 800 people in 2011, it is understandable that the spectre of election violence loomed over the 2015 elections. This forced many Nigerians and non-Nigerians to prioritize peace in the build up to the elections. A wide array of actors promoted peaceful elections in

¹³ The INEC chairman, Attahiru Jega, noted that the commission reduced its budget by about 10 per cent from \$8.8 per voter in 2011 to \$7.9 per voter in 2015.

Nigeria. The strong engagement in conflict mitigation elevated peace as the marker of success of the 2015 elections.

However, the euphoria over Nigeria's peaceful elections should not constrain the possibility of debate over the impact and ways of advancing electoral reform in the country as well as discussions about the several political challenges facing the country. In the immediate post-election period, INEC should strive to logistical and operational gaps that have become a feature of elections in Nigeria. The commission should begin early to prepare for the 2019 elections, including addressing key issues such as constituency and polling unit reorganization. Consolidating the success of the 2015 elections should entail prosecuting electoral offenders to send a clear message of deterrence.

The emphasis on peace during Nigeria's 2015 elections has extended our understanding of electoral governance. Nigeria's experience has shown that a well thought out conflict mitigation programme should be an integral part of electoral governance. Together with the formal rule adjudication mechanisms, electoral governance should involve consultations, interactions and mediation outside the formal complaints and petition processes. This will help fill the gaps in election justice system in emerging democracies like Nigeria.

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