

## **ASSESSING THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH CORPS MEMBERS IN THE 2015 ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

**BY:**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The democratisation process in Africa has in many instances been marred by controversy, instability and frequent military interventions. The hitches experienced in the process in African countries are not peculiar to the continent; Jega (2013) asserted that “democratization in all societies is neither a sniff nor smooth sailing experience. Some scholars argued that it's a long and tortuous process that takes place in incremental waves.” (Jega:2013).

The Nigerian scenario may provide the best description of democratization in Africa and other parts of the developing world. Rightly or wrongly, election umpires have for the most part been blamed for the violence and recriminations. The perception among the citizenry is always that the umpire has not been impartial. Even though the election management bodies cannot be solely blamed for the periodic violence, recriminations and bitter litigation that ensue, the primary goal of any election management body is to organize free, fair and credible elections with an outcome that is acceptable by all stakeholders. Kwaja (2008). Until 1999, Nigeria's experience at democratization was marred by fits and starts; characterised by military interventions. Jega (2013)

Elections are essential ingredients in any participatory democracy. The electoral process is a way of making choices which gives each member of the electorate reasonable hope of having his alternative elected. Faluyi, (2002). In effect, for any democracy to be worth the name, it must be a product of credible elections whose processes must have a measure of integrity. Kwaja (2008) opines that the electoral process is an ideal and integral part of democratic process whether in a developed or developing society.

Election management bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria occupy a significant and strategic position in the electoral process, and, by implication, the consolidation of electoral democracy. As Kwaja (2008) puts it, the primary goal of any election management body is to organize free, fair and credible elections with an outcome that is acceptable by all stakeholders. (Kwaja 2008).

Notwithstanding its perceived inadequacies, INEC has over the years brought about improvements and innovations in the conduct of elections in Nigeria to make the process more acceptable. These improvements and innovations have further consolidated the gains achieved in organising credible elections so far. The involvement of youth corps members in the electoral processes is one of such innovations.

This paper examines the engagement of corps members as officials in the 2015 elections which was made possible as a result of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between INEC and the NYSC. The paper concludes that while it may be safe to assert that the partnership has improved the electoral process in Nigeria, more needs to

be done in areas such as logistics, security, as well as the mode of recruitment of Corps members. Recommendations on how to enrich the partnership will also be made. The paper will adopt the system theory as espoused by David Easton who argues that every decision-making process involves the interaction of two or more variables to attain set objectives. In Easton's definition, a system is "a mechanism that has different component parts with all the component parts working towards the achievement of one common goal" Harris (2004).

### **THE INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION (INEC)**

The Independent National Electoral Commission was established by the provision of section 153 (1)(f) of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The functions of the body as spelt out in the Electoral Act (2010) includes but not limited to registration of political parties, organizing elections, registration of voters and monitoring political parties Kwaja (2008).

The origin of the electoral body can be traced to those electoral bodies which existed before and after Independence. Musa (2002). The defunct Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) was the precursor of all electoral bodies in the country. The Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) was established at independence in 1960. This umpire conducted the 1964 and 1965 elections. In 1978, the Military government under then Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo established the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) which oversaw the military-civilian transition elections in 1979 and the general elections of 1983 which were conducted under the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari; winner of the 1979 elections.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) which conducted elections in 1987, 1990, 1991 and 1993 was set up by the Babangida administration in 1987. The Abacha Administration which succeeded the Babangida administration established the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON). The Abdulsalami Abubakar government, successor to the Abacha administration established the present Independent National Electoral Commission in 1998. The most recent of the activities of the Independent National Electoral Commission was the conduct of the 2015 general elections in the country which was widely acclaimed to be free and fair. Guobadia (2005)

### **THE NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE CORPS (NYSC)**

The National Youth Service Corps scheme was established by Decree 24 of 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1973 as a deliberate effort to ensure the realization of the Federal Government's policy of Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction introduced by the Federal Government after the Nigerian Civil War. It also aims to raise a new crop of disciplined, patriotic and detribalized Nigerians by allowing the youths to undergo national service in communities other than their own for the purpose of national development and integration. The Scheme was established with the view to promoting peace and encouraging mutual understanding of the common ties among Nigerian youths thereby fostering national unity.

Decree 24 was replaced by Decree 51 of 16<sup>th</sup> June 1993. With the adoption of the 1999 constitution which ushered in democratic rule, the enabling document establishing the NYSC is now referred to as "**the NYSC Act CAP N84, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004**". NYSC (2015).

## **INVOLVEMENT OF CORPS MEMBERS IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES**

The Independent National Electoral Commission has since its inception in 1960 employed adhoc staff to perform various functions during elections. The partnership between INEC and NYSC was as a result of INEC's request to the NYSC for the services of corps members in elections in February 2007. It was this request that formed the basis of the memorandum of understanding signed between the two bodies in 2010. This agreement was reviewed and formalised in 2013. NYSC (2014). Corps members are not under any compulsion to partake in the elections. The involvement of the youth corps members in actual elections began with their participation as polling clerks in the conduct of Kogi State Governorship re-run election held on Saturday, 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2008. NYSC (2015). The success of this first involvement led to further engagement of corps members in the conduct of bye- elections, re-run and supplementary elections "which were also adjudged satisfactory". MoU (2013)

The following is the statistics of the participation of corps members in elections since 2009.

<b>DATE</b>	<b>PLACE/TYPE OF ELECTION</b>	<b>NO OF CORPS MEMBERS INVOLVED</b>
29 <sup>TH</sup> , March, 2008	Govenorship Re-run, Kogi state	5, 851
29 <sup>th</sup> April, 2008	Governorship Re-run, Adamawa state	5, 727
19 <sup>th</sup> April, 2008	Bye Election Maru North, Zamfara state	177
24 <sup>th</sup> May, 2008	Governorship Bye Election, Sokoto state	3,035

24 <sup>th</sup> May, 2008	Governorship Bye Election, Bayelsa state	1,805
7 <sup>th</sup> June, 2008	Bye Elections into Lafia/Obi Federal Constituency, Nasarawa state	447
23 <sup>rd</sup> August, 2008	Governorship Bye Election Cross River state	2265
24 <sup>th</sup> January, 2009	Anambra South Senatorial Re-run	1619
28 <sup>th</sup> February, 2009	Guma South Constituency, Benue state	160
7 <sup>th</sup> March, 2009	Wampang South Constituency, Rerun, Plateau state	124
14 <sup>th</sup> March, 2009	Batsari Constituency Re run	173
25 <sup>th</sup> June, 2009	Governorship Rerun, Ekiti state	806
20 <sup>th</sup> June, 2009	Malumfashi State Constituency Bye Election, Katsina	21
15 <sup>th</sup> August, 2009	Ekiti North Senatorial Bye Election, Ekiti state	714
17 <sup>th</sup> October, 2009	Gamawa State Constituency Bye Election, Bauchi state	177
5 <sup>th</sup> December, 2009	Osun East Senatorial Bye Election, Osun state	1217
19 <sup>th</sup> December, 2009	Kebbi Central Senatorial Bye Election, Kebbi state	892
5 <sup>th</sup> February, 2010	Governorship Election, Anambra state	4658
10 <sup>th</sup> April, 2010	FCT Area Council Election, Abuja	2400
15 <sup>th</sup> January-5 <sup>th</sup> February, 2011	2011 Elections Voters' Registration and April 2011	
April 2011	General Elections	185, 000
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>217,268</b>

Source: NYSC

A careful look at this table shows that from a mere five (5,000) thousand participants, the collaboration is now boasting of well over one hundred and eighty thousand (180,000) in just less than ten years. This is an indication of the success of the collaboration.

## **REASONS FOR THE INVOLVEMENT OF NYSC IN ELECTIONS**

Some of the reasons why INEC thought it appropriate to involve corps members to play vital roles in elections include:

- a) Intellectual capacity of corps members. Being graduates of higher institutions, corps members are easily trainable which makes them assets to partner with.
- b) The deployment of corps members to all the nooks and crannies of the country makes the youth corps members particularly suitable for election duties. The geographical spread in the posting policy of the scheme makes for corps members to be posted evenly.
- c) Since corps members are posted outside their states and geo-political zones, there is the likelihood that they would be neutral and nonpartisan. Similarly, the nationalistic outlook infused in the corps members during Orientation course makes them ready for this type of engagement.
- d) Internal disciplinary mechanism as enshrined in the NYSC bye-laws makes sanctioning of corps members involved in electoral fraud easy. The NYSC bye-laws section 4(i) prohibits corps

members from taking part in partisan politics. NYSC bye-laws (2001)

The youth service has earned for itself, a place in the hearts and minds of the generality of the citizenry. The scheme and the youths engaged in it are generally trusted by the scheme's beneficiary communities. This goodwill has rubbed off on all elections corps members participated in.

### **ROLES OF CORPS MEMBERS IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTOINS**

In view of their background as mentioned in the earlier part of this paper, corps members are strategically positioned to conduct credible elections. In line with the provision of the memorandum of understanding between INEC and NYSC, the commission opened a website for interested corps members to apply for Adhoc jobs towards the 2015 general elections. Interested corps members applied and at the close of registration, one hundred and eighty six thousand (186,000) corps members applied.

After the recruitment exercise, a training programme was organized for the corps members on their expected roles and responsibilities. Their roles in the electoral process in 2015 include:

- (a) Registration of Voters for elections.
- (b) Issuance of voters cards before election.
- (c) Responsible for setting up and managing the polling station.
- (d) Participating as Presiding Officers during elections.
- (e) Operating card readers.
- (f) Issuing signed ballot paper to voters.
- (g) Ensure that voters place ballot paper in the ballot boxes.

- (h) Verify existence of Voters on Voters' list.
- (i) Sort out ballot papers.
- (j) Verify valid votes and invalid votes.
- (k) Count both valid and invalid votes.
- (l) Count and open number of votes cast on political party basis.
- (m) Complete the result sheets and paste the result at the polling unit.
- (n) Fill the necessary forms and make returns to the collation centre.

Corp members alongside other citizens participated in the March 28<sup>th</sup> Presidential and National Assembly elections and April 11<sup>th</sup> Governorship and house of assembly elections.

The 2015 general election was adjudged credible notwithstanding observed lapses which, as stated inter alia, are common with every election in the world. Corps members deployed a lot of initiatives in addition to what INEC has provided to see to the success of the assignment. Some of these initiatives include maintaining orderliness at polling units even in the absence of security personnel and the seamless handling of the card reader despite some initial hitches.

Notwithstanding the plethora of methods to dissuade them from taking part in the electoral processes through blackmail, threats and sometimes outright molestation, corps members put up a brave front in defense of democracy. The outcome of the election result which led to losers conceding defeat is a pointer to the credibility of the elections. This is in addition to the gross reduction in the number of litigation against the outcome of the election and INEC. The 2015 general elections recorded a

little above four hundred (400) cases of litigation as against the over six hundred (600) recorded in 2011. (Anonymous)

## **CHALLENGES**

The following are some of the challenges that the collaboration between the INEC and the NYSC in elections faced. These challenges are not limited to the 2015 elections as they seem to recur:

- i. **Public Perception:** Public perception of the collaboration between INEC and NYSC has expectedly been rather mixed. While some view the collaboration as successful, others are cynical. Many of the latter blame corps members for any hitch or failure in the elections just like they do other ad hoc staff of the commission notwithstanding whether or not the ad hoc staff are actually responsible for the hitch or failure. This sentiment, a bad omen for the collaboration, has been existent from the onset of the collaboration. The failure of card readers during the 2015 general elections in some polling booths, for example, was blamed on the ad hoc staff. Even more frightening, this perception has led to instances of molestation, sometimes with fatality. Unfortunately, views and institutional opinion in both INEC and NYSC, sometimes publicly expressed, fuel the poor opinion the public has of the collaboration. For instance, in 2011 when the Independent National Electoral Commission introduced the use of Direct Data Capture machine (DDC), a National Commissioner in INEC was reported as saying "*We assumed that corps members should know how to operate simple machine like the DDC machine in*

*addition to the training they had but unfortunately, they disappointed us".* Soyebi (2011)

ii. **Electoral violence as a disincentive to corps members:-**

Electoral violence, especially the death of eleven (11) corps members in the 2011 elections played a significant role in discouraging corps members from officiating in elections. Where corps members are willing to participate they are often discouraged by their more circumspect parents and guardians. The tragic incidence in 2011 forced the youths scheme to review the participation of corps members in the electoral process. Thenceforth corps members serve as election officials only on their own volition. This impinges on the spirit of the collaboration as it reduces the number willing to participate in the process. For instance, out of about two hundred and fifty thousand (250,000) corps members, one hundred and eighty six thousand (186,000) corps members applied to participate in the 2015 general elections. With 120, 000 polling units, the electoral body requires 480,000 ad hoc staff. It could have employed all mobilized corps members as election officials.

iii. **Lack of synergy between the two institutions:** - In the 2015 elections some of the staff in the institutions worked at cross-purposes to the spirit of the MOU. A number of instances abound to support this position. For instance, while the MOU clearly states that NYSC State Coordinators are members of the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCESS), in some states, Resident Electoral Commissioners (RECs) blatantly refused to allow them function in that capacity until after the

intervention of INEC Headquarters. Corps members interested in participating in the elections as officials were required to register online. However, the electoral body failed to involve the NYSC in the recruitment or posting of corps members. There was therefore no way to verify the identity of all applicants posing as corps members online. As a result there was the “mixing stones with beans syndrome” as the all comers registration of adhoc staff is aptly described by Gen. MI Tsiga (Rtd), a former Director General of the scheme. This incident makes assessing the performance of corps members difficult.

- iv. **Non implementation of the provisions of the MOU:** - As part of the agreement reached between INEC and NYSC “Registration Area Centers” (RACs) were set up to the ease movement of corps members and materials during elections. Corps members were gathered at these centers where they received election materials before proceeding to polling units. It was agreed that INEC will provide basic accommodation and sanitation facilities at the centers. However most of the RACs lacked these. In addition the electoral body failed to make arrangements to transport corps members either to or from the training centers, the RACS or the polling units.
- v. **Poor remuneration of Adhoc staff:** - The amount paid for election work done was grossly inadequate. This damped corps members’ morale and made them susceptible to inducement. The silence of INEC on the amount to pay corps members from the onset of the process gave rise to speculations. In some quarters, it was speculated that corps members would receive a minimum of

fifty thousand (50,000) naira as payment. It took a press statement from the NYSC to douse the tension this speculation generated among corps members.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**(i) Review of the existing MoU and implementation of its content by the two organizations.**

One of the best ways of sustaining the collaboration between the two organizations is to review the MOU to take care of some sections that are vague. Issues such as the definition of welfare should be addressed in the MOU to make for clarity and avoidance of administrative overlap. Provisions such as security of corps members and their general welfare must be included in the MOU. Participation of corps members may then be made compulsory.

Similarly, the two organizations need to track their activities to ensure that their officers in the field implement the content of the MoU to the later.

**(ii) Improved welfare package.**

INEC can explore the possibility of improving payment due to corps members engaged in electoral duties. INEC can also make adequate arrangement for transportation of men and materials to and from their duty posts. One of the major complaints of corps members is that they are left stranded after elections with the attendant security risks. Once results are collated corps members are left to their own devices.

**(iii) Involvement of NYSC from preparatory stage of elections.**

INEC should involve the NYSC and corps members during the voter education, registration exercise, distribution and updating of voters register which ought to commence immediately after the conclusion of any election. Corps members can be mobilized by the Department of Voter Education at INEC to educate communities during the corps weekly community development service (CDS) program. The continuous voters register can be incorporated in the CDS. Corps members have effectively taken part in awareness and sensitization programs on HIV/AIDS scourge and in MDG programs in the last decade. This could be replicated in INEC activities.

**(iv) Effective budgetary provision for NYSC's involvement in elections.**

NYSC budget does not capture the participation of its staff and corps members in elections. The NYSC has to draw funds from its overhead to enable its staff monitor corps members and address their needs to the detriment of its other statutory activities. Otherwise it begs INEC for funding its role in elections. It is therefore strongly recommended that the scheme takes cognizance of this and henceforth make necessary budgetary provision either in tandem with the electoral body or as a separate vote of charge. The budget should cover requirements for participation of corps members and NYSC staff in elections.

**(v) Test running an electronic voting system.**

Corps members' weekly community development services could be used to train corps members in handling the electronic voting

system and deploy same for the purpose of voters registration exercise, distribution and actual voting.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper examined the participation of corps members in the 2015 general elections and the innovations of both INEC and NYSC in ensuring the success of the elections. The outcome of the elections is a clear justification for the involvement of this class of Nigerians.

While the participation of corps members boosted the credibility of elections in Nigeria and restored a lot of confidence on the umpire, the collaboration is still far from being perfect. The two organizations must get back to the drawing board and address areas such as provision of security cover for corps members, voters' education and bringing synergy in their activities.

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