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NEW TECHNOLOGY, ELECTORAL PROCESS AND ELECTIONS CREDIBILITY IN AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM NIGERIA'S 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The conduct of credible elections in Nigeria over the years has been a major challenge. Elections held in the Fourth Republic have attracted criticisms and have precipitated violence due to perceived non-credible electoral processes. This paper examines the effects of new technology on the electoral processes and credibility of elections in Africa's democracies with particular reference to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. To this end, the paper examines the impact of the adoption of technological innovations on the conduct of elections, the credibility of election outcome and regime legitimacy in Nigeria drawing insights from the 2015 general elections. Through an examination of data derived largely from secondary sources which includes journal articles, textbooks, reports of Independent National Electoral Commission's on elections as well as reports of national and International Election Observer Missions, Nigerian newspapers and news magazines and using the content analysis for analysing same, this paper found out that the adoption and application of technological innovations particularly the Electronic Card Reader Machine (ECRM) and Permanent Voters' Card (PVC) aided the transparency of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria and boosted the legitimacy of the government formed in its aftermath.

Keywords: Election Credibility, Electoral Process, Electronic Card Reader Machine, Nigeria, Regime legitimacy.

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the 'third wave' of democratization in the 1990's (Huntington, 1991) elections have become a common element of democratic practice in Sub-Sahara Africa. With the increase in the number of countries practicing democracy and conducting elections on periodic bases, elections have enhanced the emergence of democratic regimes across Africa (Freedom House, 2010). Although the conduct of periodic, free, fair and credible elections do not form the whole essence of democracy, however, it remains one of the most essential and crucial indicators of democracy. The ability to consolidate a democratic system is largely a function of how free, fair, credible and competitive the elections are. However, credible and competitive elections are

important not only for choosing leaders but also for strengthening the electoral process and legitimizing the government that is formed in their aftermath.

Much as elections are crucial to democracy, their conduct particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa has become a source of worry for stakeholders within and outside the continent. Rather than serve as a veritable tool of changing and/or retaining governments, elections have become a source of anguish for citizens in Africa. Election periods in Africa with the exemption of a few are characterized by anxiety and exacerbated election related violence (Omotola, 2008) largely derived from flawed electoral processes tainted with election malpractices and fraud. In the last one decade, exacerbated electoral conflicts in Kenya 2007-2008 and 2017, Zimbabwe 2000 to 2008 and in Ivory Coast 2010-2011 has been responsible for nothing less than four thousand deaths and have rendered hundreds of thousands of people homeless (International Peace Institute, 2011). Unarguably, Nigeria has a history of flawed electoral processes (Aluigba, 2016; Bariledum, et.al. 2016; Uduma and Emerole, 2014; Ajayi, 2007) which principally is responsible for the failure of the country's First and Second Republics. Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to multi-party democracy, elections have been held on regular basis. However, the nature of the conduct of these elections has been particularly worrisome. The 2003 general elections were described as being characterised by large scale fraud (Ezeani, 2005; Enweremadu, 2006). In a similar vein, the 2007 general elections were characterised by all sorts of electoral vices and were seen as the worst to be conducted in the nation's political history (Nwolise, 2007; EUEOM, 2007).

Against the backdrop of the flawed electoral process of 2007, then President elect Musa Yar'Adua observed that the process through which he emerged as the president was faulty (EUEOM, 2007). In view of this, on the 28th of August, 2007 President Musa Yar'Adua inaugurated a 22 member Electoral Reform Committee headed by retired Chief Justice of the Federation, Justice Muhammad Uwais. The Committee was saddled with the task of examining the entire electoral process with the aim of finding ways of improving the standard of general elections in the country (Electoral Reform Committee Report, 2008). The conduct of the 2011 general elections showed marked improvement compared to previous elections. The elections were described as credible (Bekoe, 2011). Similarly, the conduct of the 2015 general elections were also seen as free and fair (EUEOM, 2015). However, one noticeable feature of the conduct of the 2015 elections was the adoption and use of technological innovations essentially the Electronic Card Reader Machine (ECRM) and Voters Smart Cards (VSC) by the country's Election Management Body, the Independent National Electoral Commission. This was the first time such technology will be used in the electoral process of the country. It is on this premise that this paper examines the efficacy of the adoption and use of technological innovation vis-a-vis electoral process and how the deployment of new technological instruments enhanced election credibility in Africa. In doing this, the paper draws insights from the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

The paper adopts the qualitative research approach. Its data was sourced primarily from secondary materials that includes; reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission, reports from national and international election observers' missions, opinion pieces, commentaries, editorial, news articles from Nigeria newspapers and news magazines, published journal articles, books, chapter in books and other published academic materials sourced from the internet. The paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction is a literature review section that dwell a conceptual and theoretical overview of new technology and electoral process in Africa. The third section engaged the discussion on election and electoral process in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The fourth section discusses the Electronic Card Reader (ECR) and the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It also discusses the effects of technology on election credibility and how this has aided regime legitimacy in Africa using Nigeria as a point of reference. The last part concludes and gives policy recommendations.

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND ELECTORAL PROCESS IN AFRICA: A CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The importance election has gained in democratic societies cannot be underestimated. Elections have indeed become one of the most popular democratic practices. As a concept, election has been described as a method of selecting people for certain task (Ojo, 2008). It has also been defined as a formal expression of preference by the governed that are translated into a mutual decision about who holds public office (Ojo, 2008). Shively (1997) conceptualized election as a complex process that involves a choice between candidates or a choice whether or not a particular policy is to be followed. He further went on to describe it as a formal decision making process by which a population chooses an individual or set of individuals to hold public offices as well as to decide the course of action and decision on certain issues of great importance to the society. This conceptualization of election can be explained within the context of liberal democracy (Nohlen, 1996). In the view of Lindberg (2004) contemporary discourse of representative democracy entails the notion of elections as the primary means of selecting political decision makers.

Closely related to the concept of election is electoral process. Electoral process as a concept can be defined as the overall activities that are involved in the process of an election. Thus, electoral process covers the period leading to an election, Election Day and post-election activities. Such activities include: formulation of laws and rules guiding elections, procurement and distribution of election materials, actual voting, collation and announcement of results (Elekwa, 2008). INEC (2006) noted that an electoral process comprises of deferent phases of different activities. These include: delimitation of electoral constituencies, registration of voters, notice of elections, nomination of candidates, election campaigns, elections, announcement of results and completing tribunal sittings, participation of other organizations, resolution of electoral conflicts from the participation and other organizations or groups.

Electoral process is a complex process by which the end product of an election is accomplished. Nnamani (2104) noted within the Nigerian context that electoral process is a cumbersome process that involves the good intentions and undesirable outcomes of election administration. This is so in developing democracies where elections are often characterized by electoral malpractices and fraud. However, the introduction of new technology to electoral processes of African states has been found to aid the conduct of free and credible elections.

In the discussion of technology and its application in democratic process, Diamond (2010) provides a valuable conceptualization when he notes that technology is any form of Information and Communication Technology, ICT that can expand political, social, and economic freedom. This form of communication provides citizens with the ability to report news, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom (Laverty, 2011). As a concept ICT is wide and can be said to include any device including the traditional methods of information dissemination such as the radio, television and analogue telephones and the modern means of disseminating information such as the internet inclusive of social media platforms and mobile phones (Laverty, 2011). These forms of information dissemination whether traditional or modern have and continue to play considerable role in the conduct of elections and consolidation of democracy (Laverty, 2011).

The application of technological innovations and ICT to electoral processes is gaining ascendancy in many states in Africa. As observed by Collins (2017), the use of ICT in electoral process is becoming a phenomenon of great interest to both the electorate and the political stakeholders. Collins (2017) reiterated that new technological ideas which include office automation to more complex data processing machines are brought into the market on daily basis with the objective of enhancing the quality of the electoral processes. While new technology has aided the conduct of fair and credible elections (Agbu, 2016; Makama and Mohammed, 2015), ICT comprising of various social media platforms have been found effective in the dissemination of political information such as campaign and sensitization messages (O'Morain, 2016; Tenhunen and Karvelyte, 2015). Though the advent of the use of technological innovations and social media platforms in elections is a new phenomenon particular in developing democracies of Africa, a litany of literature exists on the subject matter. The bulk of the literature however, dwells on the efficacy and effects of such innovations on the electoral process.

For instance, Agbu (2016) noted that technological innovations, the Smart Card Reader in this instance, prevented election rigging and manipulation during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Agbu (2016) averred that unlike what was obtainable in previous elections where rigging, manipulation, and subversion of the electoral process was the order of the day, the 2015 general election witnessed a drastic decrease in the tendency to

rig elections. The impact of the use of the Smart Card Reader was felt beyond the voting period. Agbu (2016) noted that through the use of Smart Card Reader, deliberate tampering with election figures to favour a particular candidate was difficult and as such duplication of Permanent Voters Card (PVCs) was made impossible because of the security features embedded in the PVCs (Agbu, 2016). While the study presented a good account of the impact of the adoption of technological innovations in elections with Nigeria's 2015 elections as reference, it failed to state the effects of the use of such innovations on the larger democratic project in the country.

In a related work, Ajayi and Adesote (2015) studied the effects of Information Communication Technology on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. In their study, Ajayi and Adesote (2015:56) found out that the social media irrespective of its challenges remains a significant source of instituting political change by incorporating citizens into the belief system that is a pre-requisite for democratic citizenship and promotion of democratic ideals and practices. They contended that the near universal use of various social media platforms by political stakeholders and citizens is positively related to participatory (electoral) democracy. They further posited that taking into cognizance the advantages derived from the use of the social media platforms such as the participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature of the new media, these platforms have turned out to be significant tools for the deepening of democratic principles and processes particularly in terms of 'reduction of tension and anxieties associated with elections, ensuring and even enforcing transparency and accountability to a large extent' (Ajayi and Adesote, 2015: 47). While the study explained the effects of technology and ICT on consolidating democracy, it lacked statistical and empirical validation.

Studies have also shown that the adoption of technology can eradicate the burden of casting votes manually and can go a long way to reduce the cost of conducting elections. In a study on the adoption and challenges of electronic voting carried out in the South African town of Cape Town, Achieng and Ruhode (2013) using a sample size of 180 admissible survey responses discovered that: 'e-voting technologies would make voting fast and easy therefore reducing the long queues at polling stations and that e-voting technology reduces the amount of money used for conducting elections. It was also discovered that electronic voting could be of great significance to the electoral process most especially when it has to do with counting of votes (Achieng and Ruhode, 2013). Informed by the perception of the respondents the study recommends the use of electronic voting. This position was premised on a number of factors of which the convenience of access, time saving, reduction of cost and efforts of voting are important. The study's respondents also favoured electronic voting because they believe that electronic voting system has the capacity of reducing human error in the electoral process and enhancing transparent and credible election (Achieng and Ruhode, 2013).

Electronic voting can prevent electoral fraud and malpractices particularly as it relates to inflating and doctoring of election results. Additionally, since votes can be cast easily without having to spend much time at the polling booths, electorates will be much more inclined to exercise their franchise which thus, increases voter turnout. However, while the study drew inferences from statistical analysis of responses gathered from primary sources the findings of the study are limited to a single town which may not be representative of the population of the study. Thus, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to reflect the South African context. In addition to this, the study only considered those who had access to the internet thereby disregarding those who do not have access to the internet and may have valuable and diverse perception on the use of electronic voting system in the country.

While it has been demonstrated that the use of technology contributes to the integrity of electoral process, the manner by which such technological devices are handled to a large extent determines the success or failure of an electoral process. The aftermath of the 2013 general elections in Kenya witnessed accusations of improper functioning of the technological device used during the elections (Bowman and Longwe, 2013). The European Commission noted that the conduct of the election was good and that the results largely reflected the will of the voters' despite the fact that electronic technology largely failed (Bowman and Longwe, 2013). On the basis of the failed device, Raila Odinga, who was the main opponent of Uhuru Kenyatta in the 2013 presidential election challenged the result at the Kenya's Supreme Court seeking the nullification of the election and the conduct of a fresh poll. Odinga's major weapon was that the technology employed for the election process failed on Election Day. Despite the use of electronic devices the counting of votes was tainted by technical hitches. Consequently, the Kenya's Election Body the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission resulted to manual counting of votes (Mosoku and Obala, 2013).

Similar crisis manifested in the conduct of the 2017 elections in the country resulting in the cancellation of the Presidential election by the Kenyan Supreme Court. The decision of the court was premised on the allegation by the main opposition candidate, Raila Odinga as contained in his petition that the electronic transmission of the results of the presidential poll was severely flawed and that errors introduced through the transmission process cheated them out of victory. The Supreme Court through a majority votes of Four-Two supported the three petition points raised by the opposition movement as contained in the petition paper before the court. To that effect, the Supreme Court decision was to the effect that, 'the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, which was in charge of the vote, "failed, neglected, or refused to conduct the presidential election in a manner consistent with the dictates of the Constitution" (de Freytas-Tamura, 2017; Mbaku, 2017).

Elections and electoral process in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Nigeria's electoral history dates back to the pre-colonial era (Saliu, 2012; Jibrin and Garuba, 2010; Nwolise, 2007; Iyayi, 2006). The history of elections in Nigeria however is laced with election related violence which unarguably occurs as consequence of flawed electoral process. Nigeria's flawed electoral processes (Aluigba, 2016; Bariledum, et.al. 2016; Uduma and Emerole, 2014; Ajayi, 2007) manifests through election brigandage, fraud and malpractices. It is important to note that the country's First and Second Republics were cut-short by the failure of the election management bodies and the political elites to manage the chaotic fallout of the First and Second Republic elections (Ojo and Adebayo, 2012; Ige, 1992). The manner in which the elections were conducted and managed generated election related violence, the consequence of which was the first seizure of power by the military in the country. One therefore, need not be amazed when Ojo and Adebayo (2012) commented that elections in Nigeria right from independence were designed to be fiascos. They argued that elections in Nigeria have failed to meet minimum internationally standards which, no doubt, have been the bane of democratic consolidation (Ojo and Adebayo, 2012:17).

Since returning to multi-party democracy in 1999 elections have been conducted on regular basis. From 1999 till date five (5) general elections have been held. These include: the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections. While these elections were conducted on regular basis, their conduct and management have remained worrisome (Nwolise, 2007; Ajayi, 2007). The transitional elections of 1999 were reasonably free and credible and devoid of violence. While the elections were not perfect, it was observed that the electoral process was credible. There were also adherence to electoral rules and regulations as spelled out by the Independent National Electoral Commission (National Democratic Institute, 1999). The credibility of the elections can be attributed to two reasons: one, after a long spell of military interregnum there was renewed agitation for institutionalization of electoral democracy. Two, the elections were conducted under the supervision of the then military government.

The 2003 general elections were significant for the fact that it was the country's first transitional second elections that did not result to military take-over of power. The elections however, set the pace for electoral misconduct in the Fourth Republic. The overall electoral process was marred by fraud and violence (Transition Monitoring Group, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2004). It was reported that between April and May 2003, not less than 100 hundred people were killed while many were injured during the Federal and State elections (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The abuse and breach of the rules governing the electoral process were said to have been perpetrated by members of the then ruling party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (Human Rights Watch, 2004). It was further observed that election did not take place in many places. This was as a result of intimidation of voters by armed thugs who carried out the orders of preferred candidates

and political parties. This scenario gave room for widespread electoral fraud and malpractices (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The electoral malfeasance perpetrated during the elections was so severe that the general elections were described as 'outright fraud' (International Republican Institute, 2003). Despite the extent of the fraud and malfeasance which characterized the 2003 general elections, the then incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo in his appraisal of the electoral process described the elections as 'free, fair and credible' (Human Rights Watch, 2004:1).

Following the flawed electoral process of 2003 and the consequent unsatisfactory outcome of the elections, Nigerians and political stakeholders both within the country and outside looked forward to an improved election in 2007 (Nwolise, 2007). The 2007 general elections however, were remarkably special. First, the elections followed the nation's eight years of democratic experiment, being the longest since the country's attainment of independence. In addition to this, it was the first elections to be conducted in the electoral history of the country that enabled a civilian-to-civilian change of power (Ojo, 2007). With the stage set for the conduct of elections that was to redeem the country's image from the disappointing conduct of the 2003 elections, the 2007 general elections were seen as an important measurement of the country's interest and commitment to institutionalized ideas and principles of democracy and democratic reforms (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

The high hopes and expectations expressed before the conduct of the elections were dashed following the fallout of the elections. The biased and poor conduct and management of the elections on the part of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) coupled with the attendant occurrence of pre-election and post-election violence in different parts of the country came as a disappointment to many political stakeholders. It was observed that:

The state was grossly irresponsible during the 2007 elections, with the presidency promoting violence. INEC in collusion with the ruling PDP and the Presidency with the help of the police, rigged elections for the PDP and favoured candidates. The president, governors, commissioners and ministers were personally involved in generating electoral violence (Nwolise, 2007:165).

Apart from the fact that all the stages of the elections were characterised by electoral fraud and malpractices ranging from ballot box snatching, inflation of election results, deliberate tampering with election materials and intentional delay of commencement of voting, the elections at all stages were tainted by all forms of violence. This however, was to be expected of an election that was earlier described to be 'a-do-or-die-affair' for the ruling party by no other than the incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo on whose

watch the elections were conducted (Obasanjo, 2007). The inability of INEC to conduct a transparent and credible election manifested in the problematic voter register used for the elections. The International crisis Group (2007) maintained that the voter registration exercise raised more questions than answers over INEC's ability and willingness to conduct credible elections. The logistics challenges coupled with the lack of proper information on the location of registration centres, bad practices and lack of transparency in the procurement of the Direct Data Capture Machines used in registering voters clearly indicated INEC's complicity in the rigged elections (International crisis Group, 2007).

With the biased manner in which the elections were conducted and supervised, Mohammed (2007:14) stated that 'Nigeria is yet to achieve a credible transfer of power from one elected leader to another, since what transpired under Maurice Iwu led INEC could not be described as an election.' He further claimed that 'President Obasanjo only succeeded in redefining the concept of elections to mean brigandage, daylight robbery, and a do-or-die affair' (Mohammed, 2007:14). To buttress this, the EUEOM (2007:1) stated in an encompassing summary that

The elections were marred by poor organization, lack of essential transparency, widespread procedural irregularities, significant evidence of fraud particularly during the result collation process, voter disenfranchisement at different stages of the process, lack of equal conditions for contestants and numerous incidents of violence (EUEOM, 2007:1).

Thus, the elections failed to meet the optimism and aspirations of the Nigerian people and fell short of minimum International standards for credible elections (EUEOM, 2007). In the view of many observers the 2007 general elections were described as a total fiasco and were trailed by widespread condemnation from both local and international observers (EUEOM, 2007; TMG, 2007; IRI, 2007; NDI, 2007; ICG, 2007). What however, could be described as the turning point in the condemnation of the process was the declaration by the then President elect Musa Yar'Adua that the process through which he emerged as winner was not credible enough (EUEOM, 2007). He acknowledged in his inaugural speech that the electoral process was full of lapses and shortcomings and promised reforms of the country's electoral process and system so as to be able to meet international standards in the conduct of future elections in the country particularly then forthcoming 2011 general elections.

Following the blemish inflicted on the country's image through the disappointing conduct and management of the 2007 general elections and the Report of the Electoral Reform Committee, President Goodluck Jonathan who served in acting capacity from February to May, 2010 and eventually sworn-in on 6th May, 2010 as President had the

conduct of a credible election in 2011 as one of his regime's outmost priorities. Aware of the role of INEC in the flawed elections of 2007, Goodluck Jonathan deemed it fit that the first step towards conducting a credible election was to change the leadership of the body. In view of this, he appointed Professor Attahiru Jega, a political scientist as the Chairman of INEC.

To ensure credible elections the Commission under Jega's leadership embarked on a fresh voter registration for the elections doing away with the initial voters' register used in conducting the 2007 general elections. Each registered voter was issued with a Temporary Voter's Card (TVC) which was used to cast vote. All these measures according to the then INEC boss were to ensure the conduct of credible elections. He opined that:

We tried to bring greater transparency and accountability in voting and result quantification procedures by minimizing the role of INEC staff in the quantification and announcement of result. This had been a major area of allegations of fraudulent conduct on the part of the staff of INEC and we tried to address those issues and concerns (Jega, 2012:2).

With the sanity injected into the electoral process by the leadership of INEC coupled with partial implementation of the recommendations of the Electoral Reform Committee, the 2011 general elections were described as reasonably credible compared with what was obtained in previous elections (EUEOM, 2011; European Parliament, 2011; Bekoe, 2011). Mindful of some noticeable shortcomings the EUEOM (2011:1) stated that:

The 2011 General Elections marked an important step towards strengthening democratic elections in Nigeria. Overall, the legal framework for the 2011 General Elections provided an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections in accordance with international principles and with the international instruments ratified by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (EUEOM, 2011:1).

The European Parliament (2011:12) in its commendation 'praised INEC on the generally transparent and efficient manner in which the elections were conducted and the security forces for their professional and non-intrusive conduct'. It further commended the members of the National Youth Service Corps for their contribution to the fair electoral process The (European Parliament, 2011:12). Bekoe (2011) also noted that the elections were widely perceived as credible compared with the universally discredited elections of 2007. She however, attributed the success to the credible and accurate voter register, adequate training and fielding of election observers and the parallel vote tabulation used by domestic observers to serve as check on the official results (Bekoe, 2011).

While the conduct of the elections received widespread commendation amid noticeable shortfalls, the 2011 general elections have gone down in history as the most violent (Human Rights Watch, 2011, Bekoe, 2011). The period leading to the elections and the Election Day were characterised by incessant occurrences of election related violence (Daily Trust, Sept. 13 2010; The Punch Newspaper, March 2011). It was reported that post-election violence which occurred mainly in the North killed 800 people within a spate of three days, rendered 65,000 people homeless and destroyed properties worth millions of naira (Human Rights Watch, 2011). Such violence occurred as a result of mutual suspicion by political parties of intentions to rig the elections in favour of their preferred candidates and the 'crisis of expectation'. Professor Jega averred that the crisis of expectation was largely responsible for the occurrence of post-election violence which occurred in various parts of Northern Nigeria (The Sun Newspaper, June 2011).

New technology and the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria

Following the commendable manner in which the conduct of the 2011 general elections was handled which signified an improvement over and above the management of the 2007 general elections, Nigerians, political stakeholders, local and international as well as international organizations watched with curiosity and expected an improved election in 2015. The 2015 general elections were the fifth to be conducted in the series of elections in the Fourth Republic. The elections were however unique for two cogent reasons. Firstly, it marked the first time technological gadgets will be deployed in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. Secondly, the Presidential election was the first to be conducted in which the incumbent President was defeated and thus resulted in regime turn-over. These two features make the elections an outstanding one. It is however, important to note that the Nigerian 2015 general elections were more contentious than before (ICG, 2014).

The 2015 general elections were initially scheduled to take place on the 14th of February, 2015 with the presidential and National Assembly elections and the governorship and State Houses of Assembly elections slated for February 28, 2015 (INEC, 2015). However, due to security challenges the elections were postponed and ultimately held on the 28th of March 2015 and 11th of April 2015 for the Presidential and National Assembly elections and the Gubernatorial and State Houses of Assembly elections respectively (INEC, 2015). In the Presidential elections the All Progressive Congress, APC Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari won by polling 15,424,921 votes, while his major opponent, the then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party, PDP polled 12,853,162. The APC also won most of the states in the gubernatorial election and secured the majority of the seats in the National Assembly comprising the House of Representatives and Senate (EUEOM, 2015).

One major factor which distinguished the 2015 general elections from other elections was the introduction of new technology notably the Permanent Voters' Card (PVC) and the Electronic Card Reader Machine (ECRM). The PVC contains biological and statistical data of voters embedded in an electronic microchip (IFES, 2013). Unlike the

2011 when the Temporary Voters' Card was used to cast votes, voters who do not possess the PVC were not allowed to vote in the course of the 2015 general elections. The Electronic Card Reader Machine also known as the IVAS (INEC Voters Authentication System) is an electronic device exclusively created to electronically authenticate voters on the Election Day. The card reader works with a highly codified covert technology that has the same features with devices that are used in performing some secure and personal transactions such as the Automated Teller Machine card at paying terminals. It has ultra-low power consumption, with a single core frequency of 1.2GHz and an Android 4.2.2 Operating System (INEC, 2015:35). INEC ensured that a card reader machine was available at each polling unit during the elections in all the states of the federation inclusive of the federal capital territory, Abuja. One extra card reader however, was made available at each unit to make up for unforeseen circumstances (INEC, 2015).

The objectives of introducing the new technology was to guarantee better voter identification system during accreditation, faster voting, more dependable and accurate counting and transmission of election results and improved accountability and transparency of the entire electoral process (INEC, 2015). It was however, specifically stated that the introduction of the card reader machine to the electoral process was to eliminate or drastically reduce multiple voting and to give credibility to the electoral process (Jega, 2015). The use of the new technology has great advantages. According to Jega (2015) after the ECRM has been fully configured it can only read and authenticate PVCs that are issued only by INEC. This prevented the cloning of voters card. Secondly, by reading the embedded microchip on the PVC and by cross matching the voters' finger print with the one already on the chip, only original card owners can be duly screened and allowed to cast vote, thereby preventing multiple voting and impersonation. In addition to this, the ECRM maintain counts of all the cards that are verified and authenticated with all the corresponding details. Furthermore, the data can be transmitted to a central sever through Short Messaging Service (SMS). Again, the data kept on the server could make it possible for INEC and polling officials to check and audit results and carry out a variety of statistical assessment and examination. Therefore, polling officers can use the data to check and audit polling unit results sheets and check whether accreditation figures have been tampered with (Jega, 2015).

While the use of the PVC and ECRM were highly commended, the use of the ECRM was confronted with some challenges. For instance, there was the challenge of problematic biometric voter identification. This according to the EUEOM (2015) resulted to manual voting which provided avenues for electoral fraud. In some other instances, some card reader machines did not function properly. Even though efforts were made to replace such card reader machines which did function properly the new card reader machines meant for replacement did not get to the units were they were needed in time to meet the purpose of the election. A palpable reason for this was logistics challenge. In addition to this, a large number of the electorate, particularly those living in the remote areas and

rural communities were not acquainted with the use of the electronic card reader. This set of electorate according to Alebiosu (2016) does not have firsthand information about the use of the card reader for the elections. Hence, they saw the card reader for the first time on the Election Day. Again, it was observed that the training given to the corps members who served as election officials at the polling stations were grossly inadequate. It was alleged that the polling officers were not well trained on the technicalities of the card reader machines. This was as a result of the fact that the training venues were not conducive (Alebiosu, 2016).

Despite the challenges faced with the operation of the ECRM the device impacted positively on the electoral process. In commending the electoral process, the Commonwealth Observer Group stated that the 2015 general elections indicated a significant leap forward for democracy in Nigeria. Mindful of technical deficiencies, the group reiterated that the conduct of the Presidential and National Assembly elections were generally peaceful and transparent (Commonwealth Observer Group, 2015). In a similar manner, the African Union Election Observer Mission concluded that the 2015 elections were 'conducted in a peaceful atmosphere within the framework that satisfactorily meets the continental and regional principles of democratic elections' (AUEOM, 2015:8). Unlike previous elections which were characterised by electoral malpractices and fraud, the 2015 general elections were deemed credible owing to the improved and transparent manner in which the elections were conducted. The transparent conduct of the elections was attributed to the use of the PVC and Electronic Card Reader (EUEOM, 2015; AUEOM, 2015).

New technology, election credibility and regime legitimacy in Nigeria

One of the major ways of ensuring regime legitimacy is not only for citizens to exercise their right to vote at elections but for such votes to count. This however, cannot be accomplished without an inclusive, credible, free and fair electoral process. The tale of elections in Nigeria, particularly in the Fourth Republic, has been that of monumental electoral violence orchestrated by brazen electoral malpractices and fraud (Nwolise, 2007; Omotola, 2007; Ibrahim and Ibeanu, 2007). Apart from the founding election of 1999, subsequent elections held in 2003 and 2007 eroded the citizens' interest in democratic practice in Nigeria (Afro Barometer, 2006; EUEOM, 2007). These elections were characterised by massive fraud and malpractices and as a result, have been described as the worst elections to be held in the electoral history of the country (EUEOM, 2007). The negative impact of these elections apart from eroding legitimacy have manifested in low voter turnout in subsequent elections (CPPA, 2015).

The introduction of technological innovations into the country's electoral process has greatly enhanced the legitimacy of the government formed in the aftermath of elections held. The 2011 general elections, though trailed by unprecedented electoral violence were described as credible and as marked improvement on those of previous elections (EUEOM, 2011; AUEOM, 2011). The 2015 general elections marked an even better

improvement on the 2011 election (EUEOM, 2015). The success of the conduct of the elections has been attributed to the use of technology most especially the electronic card reader machine and the permanent voters' card. The 2015 general elections were the first election to witness the introduction of modern election management devices (EUEOM, 2015). These were to ensure credible polls in 2015 having noticed lapses in the 2011 elections. Other measures put in place by INEC include: Election Management System (EMS), Election Project Plan (EPP) and INEC Citizen Contact Centre (ICCC). The technological innovation introduced into the election process through the deployment of machines, the massive use of social media platforms by parties and candidates and other management process that were aided by technology greatly enhance the credibility of the electoral process and thus translate to regime legitimacy especially in the 2015 election and its aftermath.

Contrary to speculations that the 2015 general elections will be volatile and capable of generating violent conflicts (ICG, 2014; AUEOM, 2015) the 2015 general elections were unanimously taken to be peaceful and credible (EUEOM, 2015; AUEOM, 2015; Commonwealth Observer Group, 2015). The transparent conduct and credibility of the elections was attributed to the use of new technology which reduced election malpractices and fraud (Adamu, 2015). The EUEOM observed that the use of card reader machine restrained fraud by requiring genuine PVC for casting of vote (EUEOM, 2015: 6). While there are several ways by which the positive impact of the card reader machine on the 2015 elections can be demonstrated, evidence that the use of the card reader machine impacted positively on the electoral process can also be demonstrated by a comparative analysis of the number of election petitions filed by aggrieved candidates in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections as highlighted in table 1 below by Ike, Adibe and Akpan (2017)

Table 1 : Showing numbers of petitions filed before various courts in the 2007, 2011 and 2015 general elections according to Geo-political Zones

S/N	Geo-Political Zones	2007	2011	2015
1.	North-Central	51	24	13
2.	North-East	73	29	23
3.	North-West	57	18	-
4.	South-East	208	124	83
5.	South- South	196	118	95
6.	South- West	204	109	73

Source: Ike, Adibe and Akpan (2017)

It can be observed from the table that election petitions filed since 2007 through 2015 have been on the decline across the six geo-political zones. It can however, be observed that there was a reduction in the number of petitions in 2011 when card readers were not used as against the number of petitions in 2007. What may have informed this is the radical steps taken by the then new leadership of the nation's electoral body. For instance, prior to 2011 staff of INEC and other government ministries, parastatals and public schools were used as electoral officials. The implication of this is that there is a high tendency that such officials will be bias since they are being paid by the government in power. The leadership of Jega in 2011 introduced the use of members of the National Youths Service Corps as electoral officials, an initiative which was widely applauded. The use of the corps members to a reasonable extent brought sanctity into the electoral process.

The polity started experiencing improved electoral process brought about by the effects of technological innovation on the electoral process from 2011 when the Direct Data Capture Machines (DDCMs) were procured for registration of voters. However, with the introduction of the PVC and the ECRM and their deployment in the course of the 2015 general elections, instances of initiation of elections petitions before election tribunals and the appellate courts reduced drastically across the zones. This shows that the electoral process was fairly devoid of fraud and malpractices which are a potent factor which generate disputes and consequently the initiation of petitions before the nation's court system. It was also observed that the number of states which experienced ballot box snatching as one of the major forms of electoral fraud and malpractices have been on the decrease since 2007 (Ike, Adibe and Akpan, 2017). During the 2007 general elections, there were reported cases of ballot box snatching in twenty-eight (28) states. During the 2011 elections there were reported cases of ballot box snatching in eleven (11) states. The figure reduced drastically during the 2015 elections with reported cases of ballot box snatching in just two (2) states (Ike, Adibe and Akpan, 2017).

In contemporary times, the fundamental aim of political regimes is to be legitimate. Such legitimacy is however, derivable from popular consent of the people which is periodically expressed through the exercise of their right to vote (O'Donnell 2007). In this regard, one can deduce that the exercise of the right to vote is based on the ideal of political fairness which is one of the paramount values which confer legitimacy on regimes (Dahl, 2006). This shows that democracy is a game of numbers and as such the majority should have input in the decision making process by making their votes count at elections. One way of ensuring this however, is to ensure that elections are free, fair and credible such that it reflects the choice of the voters. Rothstein (2009) noted that in electoral democracies, elections ensure that citizens' interests are considered in policy issues through the conduct of periodic, free, fair and credible elections.

The nexus between elections and democracy can be located within the context of the importance and functions election performs in an electoral democracy. When elections are conducted in manner that they meet the basic international minimum standards of free and fairness and the principles of representativeness is assured such election exercise will undoubtedly help to confer legitimacy on elected officials (Powell, 2000). In a similar vein, Bratton (1998) noted that elections boost state power and authority by giving the citizens the opportunity to take part in the electoral process which thereby convinces the citizens that government is responsive to their wants which increases legitimacy. In this respect, elections serve as the principal mechanism for translating the consent of the people into government authority (Bratton, 1998). When elections are conducted without recourse to democratic ideals, such elections tend to erode regime legitimacy which is capable of destroying fragile and nascent democratic process (Norris, 2014). To this end, electoral vices such as stuffing of ballot boxes, vote buying can erode peoples' faith in democracy. This can encourages pessimism about the legitimacy of elected public officials, political parties and the regime in power (Norris, 2014).

Conclusion

The conduct of elections in Nigeria has been subjected to widespread criticisms and condemnation and consequently the outburst of election related violence basically because of the perceived non-transparent electoral process under which elections are conducted. Recent trends in the conduct of elections in Africa however, show improvements in the conduct of elections. The conduct of the 2015 general elections was described as a significant step towards consolidation of democracy in Nigeria going by the way and manner in which the elections were managed. While previous elections were marred by widespread electoral malfeasance, the 2015 general elections were to a reasonable extent minimally characterised by electoral fraud and malpractices. The successful conduct of these elections has been attributed to the utilization of technological innovations such as the Electronic Card Reader Machine (ECRM) and the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) in the electoral process. The use of the ECRM and the PVC enhanced the credibility of the electoral process and apparently the legitimacy of the government formed in the aftermath of the elections.

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