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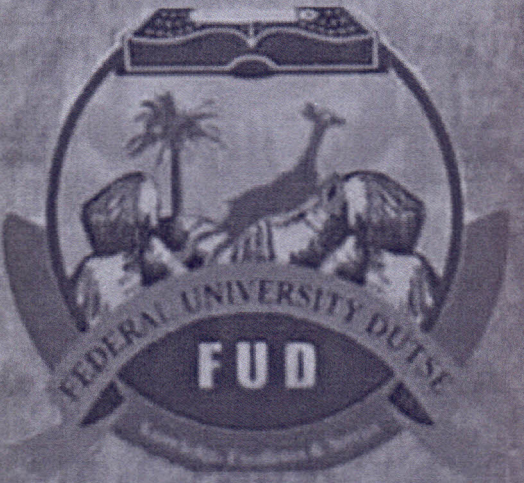

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Federal University Dutse,
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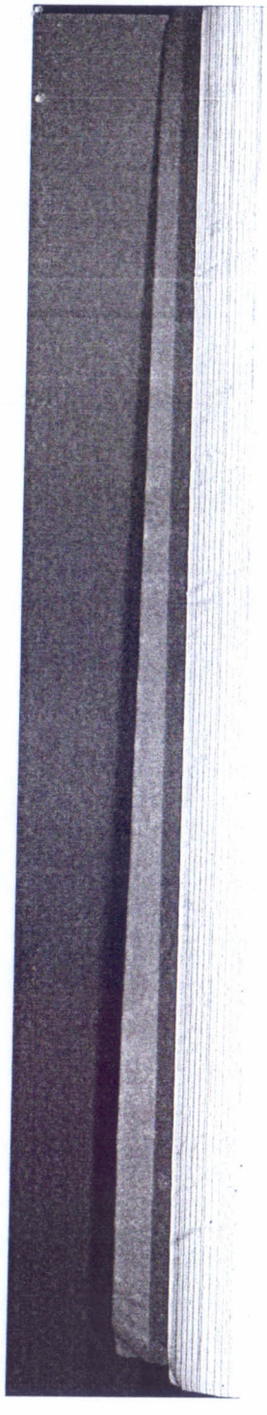

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Elections and Democratization in Nigeria: Some thoughts on the 2015 General Elections

[1]Hassan A. Saliu, PhD

[2]Solomon I. Ifejika*
&
[3]Fatima O. Aliu

[1,2&3]Department of Political Science,
University of Ilorin
PMB 1515, Ilorin, Nigeria
solomonifejika@yahoo.com

Abstract

Elections in Nigeria since the advent of the Fourth Republic have been unique and remarkable. However, the 2015 general elections unarguably remain the most prominent in the history of elections and election management in Nigeria owing to the highly significant changes it brought into the country's electoral system and politics in general. This paper examines the 2015 general elections with a focus on the changes brought in their wake with respect to the processes and the impacts of their outcomes on the country's democracy. The paper finds that while certain common elements that have characterized Nigeria's electoral process and system since independence, such as lack of credible party primaries, electoral violence, electoral malpractices among others, resurfaced in the 2015 elections, the country's electoral and political space witnessed major transformations including technological innovation, improved funding for INEC, signing of peace accord by major political parties, and the acceptance of defeat by the incumbent candidate, all of which speak volume about improved transparency of the entire process and relative success of the polls. In light of this, the paper argues that Nigeria needs to consolidate on the gains brought about by those changes as a way of bracing-up for future elections and further strengthening her democracy. Expectedly, the paper recommends among others, the integration of peace accord in to Nigeria's electoral laws.

Key Words: Democratization, Elections, 2015 General Elections, Continuity and Change, Political Parties.

Introduction

Elections are the cardinal features of modern democracy. Indeed, elections lie at the heart of representative democracy and serve as gauge of the people's understanding and appreciation of democratic values (Egwu, 2013). Suffice it to

state that elections constitute the foundations upon which every democratic government is built. It is impossible to speak about, or have a true liberal democracy without a formal framework that guarantees periodic elections for successful transfer of power or change of government. It is through periodic, free and fair elections that legitimacy of authority is conferred on government in every democracy. In other words, "government in a democracy drives its life from the people and that sacred nexus is made manifest in the electoral system. It is from this people-propelled transfer of power that democracy as a form of government evolved" (NBA, 2007:2). Thus, the periods of elections are decisive moments in democracy; they offer citizens the opportunity to collectively determine or select those who will steer their affairs for a stipulated period of time. Succinctly, elections perform various popular functions in democracy: they serve as instrument for galvanizing accountability from the elected officials by the electorates or voters; they provide platform for political recruitment; they provide opportunity for citizens to make enlightened choices; and they accord moral authority on political leadership. Based on the last function of election, it is conceived as a "legitimizing institution, functioning to give elected leaders the wherewithal to govern" Schlozman and Verba, (1987:3).

It is pertinent, however, to assert that the democratic character of a government is not measured only by the extent to which leaders are chosen through free and fair elections, but also by the quality of voting and the sanctity of votes. Thus, lack of credibility in elections, questions the legitimacy of the government (Egwu, 2013). Good governance and people-centered leadership must stem from fair electoral process which is made manifest in the people's collective expression through the ballots, and any attempt to manipulate the procedure is an abuse of the collective will of the people (NBA, 2007). Nigeria has had a chaotic and restless political history. Since independence in 1960, the country has experienced various corrupt, high-handed and incompetent military and civilian governments. The country is currently in its Fourth Republic, following the restoration of democracy in May, 1999. Aside the 1998-1999 transition elections, the country has witnessed other four general elections namely, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015 elections, which were each, characterized by notable trends that have remained common features of elections since the country's history. Nevertheless, the 2015 general elections were characteristically peculiar as the electoral process and its management witnessed dramatic changes.

This paper examines the Nigerian 2015 general elections with emphasis on the changes introduced to the processes and the effects of their outcomes on the democratic practice in the country. To realize this objective, the paper is composed of six different but interconnected sections with introduction as the first section. The second section deals with the concepts of elections, democracy and democratic government. The third section articulates the continuing

characteristics elements in Nigeria's elections. The fourth section of the paper consists of the major issues and changes experienced in the Nigerian 2015 general elections. The fifth section offers strategies on how Nigeria can consolidate the gains brought about by the changes and to brace-up the lapses for future elections. The sixth section of the paper is conclusion.

Elections, Democracy, and Democratic Governance

The concepts of elections and democracy are intrinsically interconnected and interrelated. Election in its simplest meaning refers to the process by which the public or citizenry in a political system make choice of leaders or those who will govern them for a given period of time. For most people, elections have meaning only in democracy because they provide opportunity for the majority of the citizens to make choice of decision-makers. Therefore, elections and democracy are inextricably linked (Ibrahim, 2009). Competitive elections serve as a precondition for other dividends a democratic political system may bestow on the citizens and they are useful parameters for differentiating democracy from other systems of government (Olayode, 2015). According to Diamond et al (1989), democracy is a governance system that meets three basic conditions: competition among individuals and political groups (political parties); inclusive system of leadership recruitment; and existence of a regime of civil-political rights. By these criteria, elections serve both as the source of government legitimacy and as a guarantor of citizen's participation in public governance (Animashaun, 2010). To this end, elections are the first necessary step towards democracy, and there can be no democracy without a free and fair election based on mass participation by qualified citizens in any country (Molutsi and Singh, 2003).

Elections, therefore, are extremely vital to the processes of democratization and democratic consolidation as they are the most visible benchmark for evaluating citizens' participation in political process (Fagunwa, 2015). While it is plausible to argue that elections are the life blood of democracy and every democratic government, it is to be noted, however, that the conduct of elections itself is even the most important in building a formidable democracy. This is undoubtedly true as elections lacking in credibility may lead to regime change, albeit endangering the stability of the polity. Elections flawed with irregularities harm the peoples' right and preferences and renders government illegitimate and unacceptable to the people. This underscores the widely accepted notion that elections constitute a major factor in democracy, democratization and good governance (INEC and FES, 2011). It is not all elections but only those (elections) that meet the universal standards of being free and fair that actually promote democratic governance values. Nigeria falls under the category of countries in search of credible elections. Since independence in 1960 till date, the character of elections

in Nigeria has explicitly defeated the true notion and real essence of elections in modern liberal democracy.

Continuing Trends in Nigerian Elections

Since return to civil democratic rule in 1999, elections in Nigeria have continued to suffer from certain notable problems such as poorly conducted party primaries, electoral violence, electoral malpractices, ethnic and religious influences, among other set-backs. The Nigerian electoral process and system has undesirably retained some of these attributes right from preceding Republics – First, Second, Third Republics up to the current Fourth Republic, where these elements have also vividly manifested in all elections ever conducted in the country since the return to democratic rule in 1999 including the 2015 general elections. Close monitors and watchers of Nigeria's elections consider some of these issues as the common features of the country's elections. Brief analysis of these issues is necessary to enable us appreciate their effects on the conduct of elections in Nigeria and the development of democracy in the country.

Poorly Conducted Party Primaries: Electoral democracy begins within the political parties involved in popular competition for elective positions. The degree at which the tenets of democracy are applied in the internal management of political parties' impact on the credibility and integrity of elections in broader context, as it is a measure of parties' level of commitment to democracy and general rules guiding electoral politics and contestation. The general approach of dominant Nigerian political parties and politicians to issues of internal democracy in the conduct of parties' affairs, especially in the selection of party flag bearers for popular elections, have remained worrisome over the years in that it showcases their near-zero commitment to electoral democracy. Unarguably, unlike the situation in the First and Second Republics, it can be said that almost all political parties in Nigeria since the beginning of the Fourth Republic lack internal democracy, which promotes monetization of politics and political vagrancy, institutionalized bitterness and violence in a bid to gain and retain political power at all cost (Simbine, 2007: 207-232).

In its simplest form, party internal democracy refers to a democratic process of ensuring accountability and transparency in the conduct of all-party affairs, particularly in selecting party leaders, flag bearers, executives and other party officials in a political party (Ukaeje, 2011:19). In other words, internal democracy presupposes that political parties give their members full freedom for expression and unhindered access to participate in the decision-making process within the parties. Party internal democracy also implies running party affairs in a transparent and open manner in accordance with popular rules, and in a fair and just manner. Internal democracy also refers to the levels and methods of ensuring that party members are included in the decision making and deliberation within

party structure (Kari and Uchenna, 2011:35-36). The result of lack of internal party democracy is evident in the unscrupulous political behaviours being exhibited by parties and politicians in the nation's wider electoral competitions. Liebowitz and Ibrahim observe that:

> Internal democracy in all of Nigeria's political parties is limited. While there are rules on primary and internal party elections, parties often ignore, twist or otherwise subvert the rules to arrive at candidates through processes of selection, negotiation, or manipulation. The principle of zoning, in terms of providing equal opportunities by geographical area, sometimes serves to disenfranchise candidates who might otherwise contest (Liebowitz and Ibrahim, 2013: online).

Similarly, the Uwais Committee (Election Reform Committee) cited in Ibeanu (2013:5) comment thus about political parties in relation to the issues of ideology and internal democracy:

> One of the most crucial and yet least developed democratic institutions in the country is the political party system. There are currently 50(which rose to over 63 but now scaled down to 25 in 2013) registered political parties in the country, most of which are an assemblage of people who share the same level of determination to use the party platform to get to power. As such, it is usually difficult to identify any party programmes or ideologies. The structure of the political parties is such that internal democracy is virtually absent. The political parties are weak and unable to effectively carry out political mobilization, political education and discipline (cited in Ibeanu (2013:5).

No doubt, the foregoing views rightly capture the awry situation in the Nigerian party system. In an ideal sense, "political parties are a major building block of democracy, but the inability of many political parties in Nigeria to operate in a democratic manner introduces tension and violence in the electoral process" (Nnamani, 2014:90). This is because, as Agbaje contends, "the political parties of the Fourth Republic were bred to be agents of democratic erosion and collapse, rather than strong ramparts for the construction and consolidation of democracy" (Agbaje, 2010:69). Thus, instead of serving as agents of democratic development, Nigerian political parties are themselves the most undemocratic entities (Simbine, 2013).

A major barrier to the growth of internal democracy in Nigerian political parties is the syndrome of "godfathersm". Ultimately, political godfathers exercise unbearable control of parties both at local and national levels (HRW 2007). According to Nnamani (2014:90), "these godfathers select the delegates who

elect party leaders and candidates through control of the delegates; they decide who gets the party's nomination and leadership positions". Nnamani further explains through their activities, these godfathers create so much dissatisfaction in the political process as they neglect formal procedures guiding the nomination of candidates within the parties (Nnamani, 2014:90). This in other words shows that the phenomenon of "godfatherism" is the major bane of the growth of democracy within Nigerian political parties. Based on their controlling power and influence, these "godfathers" undemocratically nominate and impose candidates – their "godsons" on the parties, even against the wishes of majority of party members, creating internal political rancor and conflicts within the parties which most often result into massive defections.

In Nigeria, there are set standards for nomination of candidate by political parties. The amended Electoral Act demands political parties to nominate all aspirants for elective positions through party primaries (NDI, 2012). Political parties are required to conduct primary election for candidates' nomination either through the direct or indirect procedures as provided by the law. The direct procedures for party primaries involve all party members coming to a central location to vote for an aspirant, and it must be on the basis of one-man one-vote. Under the indirect primaries procedure, parties are meant to nominate presidential candidates through a special convention in each of the 36 states of Nigeria and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. The candidates with the highest number of votes are afterwards ratified at national conventions by the parties. The law stipulates that, for other elective positions, similar constituency-level congresses are also mandatory (NDI, 2012). Political parties are required to notify INEC at least 21 days in advance of holding a primary, and INEC is mandated to attend, monitor and report on these internal polls. For instance, in 2011 elections, INEC set January 15 as the deadline for the conduct of all party primaries. Parties following this were required to submit to INEC their final lists of candidates at least 60 days before the day of election. Also, political parties were given 45 days before the election date as the deadline for withdrawal or substitution of candidates. It is regrettable, however, that despite these minimum standards, procedures for selecting candidates for office in all the parties were rendered opaque by party elites and leaders (NDI, 2012).

Notwithstanding that political parties' primaries in 2011 primaries were generally considered better conducted than previous ones, reports from INEC officials, the media, civil society and party members indicates that many of the parties did not conduct their primaries in accordance with the law. The major political parties held their national conventions without major problems, but numerous allegations of misconduct and a number of violent incidents trailed party primaries at the state-level. For example, there was a reported case of killing of rival party members in Edo and Oyo states. Several parties

acknowledged this widespread anomaly in the conduct of their primaries (NDI, 2012). This concretizes Akubo and Yakubu (2014:98)'s claim that "most political parties do not practice internal democracy because their leaders hardly emerged democratically hence the rising culture of political violence and assassinations especially in some sections of the country". This unwholesome trend is the obvious effect of the politically-unethical tendencies and undemocratic acts being orchestrated by party elites who often impose their whims and caprices on the parties in order to galvanize their selfish desires.

Even, in some cases, the godfathers overturn the result of primary elections just like Olu Agunloye was replaced as candidate for Ondo State senatorial seats by the party leadership for the 2011 general elections. As a result, he defected from Labour Party to the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) (Nnamani, 2014). In Kano, Mohammed Abacha's victory in CPC gubernatorial primary for Kano State was also subverted by the party's leaders and he was replaced with Lawal Ja'afaru Isa notwithstanding that the case was already in court (ICG, 2011). There are so many ways the political godfathers eliminate popular aspirants during party primaries. These include declaring a candidate as a "consensus candidate" and compelling those entitled to vote to support the candidate while forcing other aspirants to withdraw; using zoning to exclude unwanted candidates by moving the party zone for a particular position to an area where the excluded candidate is not a local; using violence by employing thugs or security personnel to harass and intimidate candidates and their supporters'- candidates who oppose the godfathers; using money to bribe officials and voters to support particular candidates; and application of results by declaration, an aspirant wins a nomination, but polling officials disregard the results and declare the loser the winner (Ibrahim, 2007: 5).

In the 2011 elections, the PDP was the worst-hit by the incident of misconducted party primaries. As the National Democratic Institute (NDI) notes;

> The most contentious primaries were related to the selection of PDP candidates, but other parties also experienced internal disputes and public protest. Aggrieved aspirants turned to courts and submitted complaints to INEC, often continuing to campaign while awaiting the final verdict. In a number of states, several individuals campaigned for the same position on the same party ticket, which created confusion among the electorate. For example, two different CPC candidates contested the gubernatorial election in Kano and three in Taraba. Other candidates who received their party's nomination without controversy were able to conduct political campaigns well in advance of the elections (NDI, 2012:31).

At the root of this lies the godfather syndrome. The fact more that results are sometimes declared even with clear evidence that voting did not actually take place, is the role of godfather politics. Godfatherism plays electoral politics with little or no respect for the set-out rules and shows no sense of moral restraint in terms of appropriate behavior in a democratic political order. This constitutes the main reason why elections results are often contested by the losers within the parties and in general elections (Abutudu, 2013:10-11). The pre-determination of party primaries by Godfathers has been the trend in virtually all the political parties in Nigeria since 1999. The godfathers have the final say in the selection of both party leaders and candidates (Simbine, 2013:15). Not just in presidential elections alone but virtually in all elections for elective positions. Deep-seated bitterness, divisions, violence, and massive decamping of aggrieved party members occasioned by the unbearable influence of undemocratic party leaders rocked most of the key political parties in Nigeria during party primaries in 2014 in preparation for the 2015 general elections.

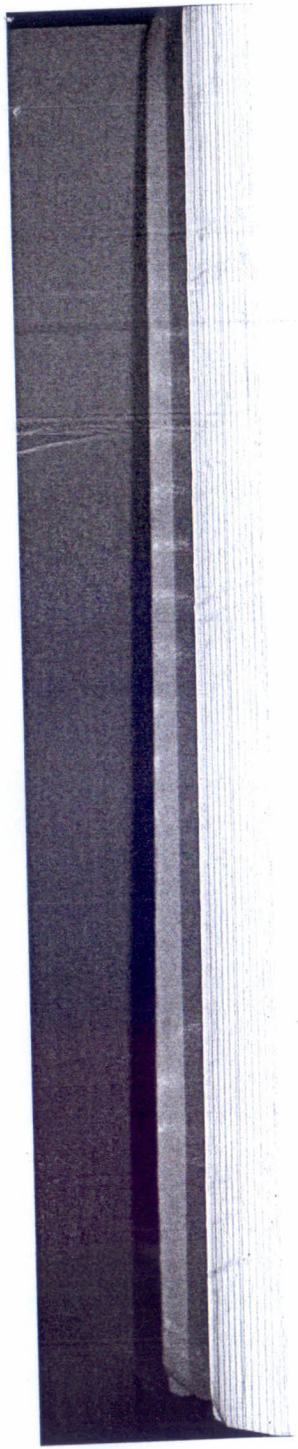
For example, Mr. Adebayo Shittu, an APC governorship aspirant, defected from the party on the ground of alleged irregularities during the party's primaries. Still in Oyo State, and for the same reason, a PDP governorship aspirant, Mr. Seyi Makinde, defected to Socialist Democratic Party (SDP). Alhaji Umar Abdullahi, a PDP governorship aspirant in Katsina State also left the party for APGA in order to obtain the party's governorship ticket to contest (Ukoh, 2015). In Ogun State, some APC members of the Ogun State House of Assembly were aggrieved as a result of lack of cohesion and transparency in the conduct of the party primary, and thus they defected to the PDP and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) respectively (Ogunshola, 2015). This trend of defection attended all party primaries in the run-up to 2015 general elections as the processes that led to the nomination of candidates in most of the political parties were opaque. Thus, rampant subversion of the principles of internal democracy during parties' primaries for the 2015 general elections brought about serious intra-party crises across key political parties, causing divisions, violence conflicts, high rate of litigations, and reckless defection by politicians. The "godfather" syndrome has continued to retard instead of promoting the growth of democratic culture within the party system.

Electoral Violence: Electoral violence is more or less one of the integral features of Nigeria's elections and has contributed to the stunted growth of democratic norms and good governance practices in the country. In Nigeria's history, beside the elections that were organized by the colonial government and the military, other elections particularly those of 1964, 1983, 2003 and 2007 were marred by violence and crises (Ikelegbe, 2014). The absence of violence in the elections organized by the military can be attributed to the general

recognition of the threat of military retribution for breakdown of law and order and the possibility for the extension of the transition project, and not due to the internalization of culture of tolerance (Kurfi, 1983). Howbeit, the phenomenon of electoral violence has become a recurring decimal in Nigeria, adamantly rearing its ugly head even in the present democratic dispensation – the Fourth Republic. Unarguably, from 1999 till date, elections in Nigeria have not ceased to recycle in a vicious violence and unimaginable manipulation mainly by the political elites, and this has drawn local and international attention (Onu, 2005; Suberu, 2007). Although the transition elections that ushered Nigeria into the Fourth Republic did not witness violence and serious contestation over election results, the 2003 general elections suffered a different fate (Animashaun, 2010).

Since 2003, elections in Nigeria have been attended by massive irregularities and violence including theft and snatching of election materials, killings, arson, abductions, assault, intimidation, destruction of properties and election materials, rioting, looting, violence and protests, mayhem and chaos (Ikelegbe, 2014:326). Incidents of electoral violence also included assault on electoral officials and voters, hijack and seizure of election materials attacks on security operatives and violent clashes between rival thug groups and political parties' supporters (Nweke, 2005 in Ikelegbe, 2014:326). In 2003 and 2007 general elections, about 105 and over 300 deaths respectively, were recorded in violence related to elections (Unom and Ojo, 2010). It is noteworthy that "the 2007 elections, in a profound manner, deepened electoral crisis in Nigeria" (Animashaun, 2010:8). The 2007 elections saw numerous cases of election related violence in many states including Anambra, Bauchi, Borno, Edo, kano, Kogi, Ekiti and Rivers between supporters of political parties (Ikelegbe, 2014).

For example, in Kogi State, as Egwu (2009) observes, there was a balance of terror based on the use of thugs and violence between the PDP and the ANPP. In 2011 elections, the language of political campaign virtually portrayed warfare, being abusive, intimidating, intolerant, divisive, sentimental and contemptuous, disparing and denigrating of identity feelings (Emordi and Unumen, 2011). There was also an explicit abuse of the power of incumbency in such a way that for instance, the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) was allegedly denied access to use the Mapo Hall in Ibadan for campaign, while the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) was not allowed to use the Ape Aku Stadium in Markurdi for the same purpose (Emordi and Unumen, 2011:31). The 2011 polls witnessed the worst violence since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, leading to the death of over 800 persons in the violence that followed the presidential election. The violence is attributable to the internal politics of the ruling PDP and the regional, ethnic and religious dimensions of the electioneering cycle. The violent incidents created fears and anxiety and brought the unity of the country to question (Ugbudian, 2015).



In 2015, due to the belief that the culture of electoral violence has firmly been institutionalized, there was a prediction by some US experts that Nigeria was likely going to disintegrate into some banana republics in the aftermath of the 2015 polls (Yoroms, 2015). Events in the run up to the elections tended to align with this prediction as violence characterized the period. For instance, in its report dated February 14 2015 titled "A Pre-Election Report and Advisory on Violence in Nigeria's 2015 General Elections", the Nigeria National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) reported that 58 people were killed in violence that took place in 22 states of the Federation in the pre-election periods (Yoroms, 2015). As Yoroms (2015:40) poignantly states, "there have been manifestations of drumbeat of electoral war in the North and South-South where Buhari and Jonathan come from respectively". He observed that rumours of war commonly trumped-up in the streets, taxis, motor parks and market places (Yoroms, 2015). Nigerians residing in different parts of the country hasted to return to their home-states for fear of the unknown. While the elections were underway, there was a record of serial killing in South-South, especially in River state of APC members. There were also serious threats to life of APC members in Akwa-Ibom and Delta state among others. Threat to life spread across the country such that Nigerians doubted the possibility of adequate protection from the police (Yoroms, 2015). The polity in fact was heated-up. But it was surprising, however, that amidst strong indications in the pre-election period of the certainty of serious violence breaking-out during the elections and post-election periods, the relative transparency injected in the conduct of the elections and the announcement of results coupled with the then President Goodluck Jonathan's acceptance of defeat, aided the negation of the fulfillment of the predictions of the United States and imaginations of most Nigerians. The 2015 elections experienced low rate of violence incidents than the 2011 general elections.

Electoral Malpractices: Since 1999, elections in Nigeria have been characterized by flaws (Egwu, 2013). Undeniably, there has been continued massive manipulation of electoral processes in Nigeria, and this is due to the unguarded desperation by Nigerian politicians and political parties to grab power at all cost. The dominant political parties often exhibit certain behavioural traits which colour their involvement in election and define the character of elections in the country. The control of 'moneybags', for instance, was apparently seen right from the 1999 elections (Abututu, 2014). This phenomenon was pervasive in the PDP and the APP to the extent that civil society organizations lamented on the manner in which "influential political figures and business men" donated huge sums to political parties (Adetula, 2009:23). This increased the major parties' tendencies towards buying of votes. Of course, there were widespread allegations of bribery of voters by political parties and their candidates which was the end effect of the reckless donations. Parties and politicians see electoral victory as ability to meticulously plan and deploy corruption and violence at

every stage of the electoral process. The godfathers make special election budgetary provisions for state institutions and officials responsible for the conduct of elections, including the security forces in order to ensure that election outcomes are manipulated in their party's favour regardless of the preference of the electorates (Abututu, 2014). They hire thugs to snatch ballot boxes and ballot papers in the presence of security forces and electoral officials, who in most cases may have been compromised or thoroughly intimidated.

In some cases, elections results are determined or written even before votes are cast. Also, safe houses are provided where ballot boxes snatched are stuffed with hijacked ballot papers, and results of elections are falsified. The 'godfather' ensures that these are integrated into official electoral channels and announced as official results. Thus, through the manipulation process, output is generated even before any input is made into the official materials (Agbaje, 2010:62). Even when there is no evidence that elections actually took place, election results are sometimes declared. No wonder elections results at all levels are often contested and challenged in the courts of law by parties and politicians on the basis of perceived or obvious manipulation of procedures (Abututu, 2014). These flaws were more rampant in 2003 elections and worsened in the 2007 elections (Egwu, 2013). As a matter of fact, both domestic and international observers aptly reported high level of misconduct or malpractice as being the major characteristic of the 2003 elections (Ibrahim, 2007 in Egwu, 2013; Ibrahim and Egwu, 2005). Nigeria's key domestic observer, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) voiced that the voters were eager to vote and have their votes count in determining the outcome of the elections, but the political class had a different agenda as it opted to manipulate the process in order to rig itself into elective posts (TMG, 2003). The same fate befell the 2007 elections as parties and politicians indulged in massive malpractices.

Registration of voters was marred by irregularities and voter registers were not displayed at the right time according to the law. The role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in determining the eligibility of candidates in terms of its ability to provide a level playing field eroded the confidence of the masses and the opposition parties (Ibrahim and Egwu, 2007). There were glaring widespread malpractices and pitfalls in the 2007 elections, such as poor logistics by INEC, mainly in the area of delivery of voting materials, late commencement of polls in most of the states, ballot-box stuffing, vote allocation where elections never took place, votes falsification, intentional denial of perceived strong-holds of the opposition of adequate supply of election materials, among others. Moreover, the basic infrastructures for ensuring efficient transmission and collation of elections results, for the purpose of which enormous amount of funds were allocated were not also provided by INEC. There were a few cases where elections were said to have held and the outcomes

perceived to have reflected the peoples' wishes such as Lagos and Bauchi, but even at that, there is need for proper assessment to conclude that elections in these states were credible (Egwu, 2014:10-11). Despite that the 2011 elections were rated as the best under the Fourth Republic, some issues of alleged malpractices brought their credibility and integrity to question. Take, for instance, the National Assembly elections. Soon after the end of the 2011 elections, the presidential results were announced, but INEC failed to make available the compiled results of the National Assembly election until early June 2011.

Against this backdrop, many legislative contestants alleged electoral malpractices and publicly rejected the election results (National Democratic Institute, 2012). This shows that there were perceived irregularities in the 2011elections despite the fact that they were acclaimed free and fair. Traits of misconduct also followed the recent 2015 elections in many states. For instance, in Anambra State, numerous cases of falsification of election results and violence against adhoc staff who refused to compromise were reported. Specifically, in Anaocha Local Government Area of the state, the collation officers were said not to be available at the collation centre while several polling officers had to wait with their results until Sunday, March 29 before the collation officers could appear (Obianyo and Emesibe, 2015). Cases of vote rigging, snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, and falsification of results were also rampant and notable in the Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Imo and Abia and Anambra states (Guardian March 29, 2015; Premium Times April 11, 2015). This shows that electoral discipline and morality are yet to be instilled in Nigerian politicians and their parties. As Obianyo and Emesibe (2015:33) states, "the paradox of the 2015 election conduct is that the machinery to make the election rig proof was designed by INEC but the effort to sabotage the rig proof mechanism is also crafted by INEC staff in conjunction with the political class". No doubt, as it has been from the dawn of the Fourth Republic, INEC staffs have remained contributory to the persistence of the incident of election malpractices. No elections have come and gone in the current political space without the news of allegations of collusion by INEC staffs including the ad hoc staffs with politicians to sabotage efforts at guaranteeing credibility of polls and their outcomes. What this means is that the INEC undeniably has some bad eggs among its staff who prioritize personal interest over the Commission's goals and objectives.

Ethnic and Religious Sentiments: Ethnicity and religion are also known to be among the key defining factors of elections and elections outcomes in Nigeria from time immemorial. Politicians take advantage of the ethnic and religious configuration of the country, and deploy religion and ethnicity as instrument for mobilizing support and canvassing for votes. As Akinyele states, "the plurality

of the Nigerian state is what has set the stage for the politicization of ethnicity and religion" (Akinyele, 2002:25). These two factors have continued to play decisive roles in elections in Nigeria from the 1959 elections, and even more pro-actively under the Fourth Republic. Olayode supports this view by arguing that;

> "Ethnic and regional politics had been nurtured since colonial era with new trends and dimensions taking place in the contemporary era. Political parties and candidates are easily perceived as representatives of a particular ethnic or religious group and voting pattern in Nigeria largely mirrors the various cleavages in the country – North-South, Christian-Muslim, among others" (Olayode, 2015:4).

Thus, the influential role of ethnicity in Nigerian democratic and partisan politics and the competition for political power reflects in the results of all previous elections from the First Republic to the recent 2015 general elections. Ethno-regional cleavages are major determinant of electoral outcome and issues related to the general political life of Nigeria with accompanying implications for democratization and nation building (Olayode, 2015). In particular, ethnicity has been synonymous with Nigerian politics starting from the previous democratic attempts of the First and Second Republics. During the First Republic, political parties identified and operated more on ethnic and regional orientation and hence did not retain genuine national character (Aluaigba, 2009). Consequently, Kurfi (1983:91) avers that, "the voting pattern that emerged was tribal or ethnic". Also, important to mention is the fact that virtually all the crises that eventually contributed to the total collapse of the First Republic had ethnocentric connotations. The ethnic nature of the politics of the First Republic also showed vividly in class character of the Nigerian politics, as the ruling class laid the foundation for ethnic conflict in their understanding of national issues causing the masses to pay with their lives (Aluaigba, 2009). This informed Kalu (1987:4) statement that "whenever the bourgeoisie overfeed, their supporters suffer constipation".

The Second Republic politics did not differ from that of the First Republic as evident in the ethnic character of political parties and alliance base system. Despite the strict and apparent provision of the Electoral Act, FEDECO's mechanism and the rules by the Federal Military Government in 1979 elections, the ethnic factor still reared its ugly head. To lend credence, an advertisement by the NPP Publicity Secretary in the Daily Star of August 1979 read thus (Aluiagba, 2009):

> The Yorubas are not fools to have voted for Awolowo. The Kanuris are not fools to have voted for Waziri. The Kano people are no fools to have voted for Aminu Kano.

> Anambra and Imo should be wise enough to vote en-masse for Dr Azikiwe.

This shows how embedded ethnic sentiment has eaten deep into the socio-political fabrics of the country. To be sure, all candidates that contested won elections only in their home states, and particularly in their own constituencies (Aluaigba, 2009). In the current Fourth Republic, ethnic coloration has also reared its ugly head. For instance, the ANPP is generally regarded as a party for the Hausa/Fulani, while the AD is seen as a direct successor to Chief Obafemi Awolowo's Action group and Unity Party of Nigeria. Until 2003 when it lost all the states except Lagos, the AD dominated the six Yoruba speaking states of Lagos, Ekiti, Ogun, Ondo Osun and Oyo. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) is the only party seen to have deviated a bit from the ethno-religious pattern of party politics of the past as its membership is drawn across various cleavages in Nigeria (Olayode, 2015). Ethnic and religious politics also manifest during the 2011 general elections. Following the death of Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'adua, most Northerners did not want power to shift to the south, and as such they kicked against the presidency of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.

The new political parties are also seen from ethnic perspective. The APGA, for instance, is seen as Igbo party; ACN as a re-incarnation of A.G. or UPN which is Yoruba based, CPC and ANPP are seen as the party of Hausa/Fulani affiliations. The PDP, to some extent, appears to have national outlook, but the insistence of the Northerners to produce the 2011 presidency demonstrated that ethno-regional cleavages have continued to bedevil the political development and unity of Nigeria as a sovereign state. The analysis of results of the 2015 presidential election also displays the dominant role of ethno-regional factor in the voting patterns of Nigerians. For instance, ethno-regional identity accounted for about 90 per cent of votes received by the president and vice president elect. The large amount of votes received by the then incumbent president also came from his ethno-regional zone (Olayode, 2015). The implications of the overarching influences of ethnic and religious forces for Nigeria's political development are enormous. Although it is obviously difficult to accurately measure their effects on the country's politics and governance, as well as on the big questions of nation building, it is indisputable that ethnic and religious factors constitute, among others, the main reasons why Nigeria's democracy and partisan politics in general has refused to develop. The leadership "myopism" that has plagued Nigeria from independence is also a direct consequence of the ethnic and religious patterned politics and political life of the country.

The Phenomenon of Male Dominance over Female: At all levels - federal, states and local, politics and the competition for elective positions in Nigeria is apparently dominated by men. Like other factors, this trend has also

accompanied Nigeria's political and electoral systems and processes right from independence. Although there is no such thing as a deliberate act to keep women away from politics and the electoral process, men's dominance over women in Nigerian politics is a function of the general notion of politics and the character of the country's electoral and party systems. Generally, politics in Nigeria is mainly regarded as men's affair because it is more or less 'a dangerous game' played by the rascals. Unarguably, the pattern of politics and political life in Nigeria is such that ordinarily discourages women involvement. The Nigerian political culture and environment can, in short, be rightly described as 'anti-women'.

The types of politics being played in the country scares women away from the political arena; not that there is a conscious consensus by men not to allow women to take active part in governance and politics of the nation. After all, men and women have equal rights and obligations just as they are equal before the law of the land. To lend support, Nigeria's constitution overtly frowns at every forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination. Also, Nigeria is a signatory to many legal instruments upholding the principles of gender equity, including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The country also ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). At the domestic front, the National Gender Policy which was signed into law in 2007 is a legal instrument aimed at upholding the rights of women in the country (National Democratic Institute, 2012).

Despite Nigeria's legal commitment to gender equality and efforts at stimulating increased women's participation in politics, women are still being marginalized politically. According to Akpan (n. d), for instance, women constitute only three percent of elected officials in 2013; in 2007 they made up seven percent and about five percent in 2011. This signifies that the female folk are still left behind in active political and electoral processes in Nigeria. This is as a result of the numerous challenges women face in the political sphere. The National Democratic Institute captures the women predicaments in Nigerian political space in a proper perspective by arguing as follows:

> Women continue to face numerous barriers participating in the election process as electoral officials, candidates, campaigners, party agents, observers and voters. Social, cultural and religious factors contributed to their under-representation in these roles. Data shows that only about 8.33 percent (200 out of 2400) women ran for the House of Representatives and about 11.1 percent (80 out of 720) women ran for the Senate (National Democratic Institute, 2012:45).

Stating further reasons for women's poor performance in politics, for instance, in the 2011 elections, the national Democratic Institute goes on to allude that:

> High levels of competition, the often-violent nature of Nigerian politics and deeply held prejudices against female politicians often dissuade women from running. Even those who ran were less likely to win because they contested in difficult to win constituencies, or were unable to run effective campaigns due to lack of funding and insufficient party support. Some women reported that they were pressured to withdraw their candidacies, including harassment and physical attacks (National Democratic Institute, 2012: 45).

Among the 20 presidential candidates for the 2011 election, only 1 was a female and merely about eight percent of candidates for the National Assembly and other elected positions were women (National Democratic Institute, 2012). In 2015, similar trend play-out with regard to presidential position as there was only one female out of 14 candidates that contested for the post of presidency – Prof. Comfort Oluremi Sonaiya of the KOWA Party (Pulse, 13 January 2015; The Guardian, 2015). The number of women that were elected as members of House of Representative was only 14, while 7 were elected as senators – according to the data provided in INEC website, and they include Binta Masi Garba, Uche Ekwunife, Stella Oduah, Rose Oko, Fatimat Raji-Rasaki, Oluremi Tinubu and Monsurat Sunmonu (Vangaurd, May 2, 2015). No woman has ever been elected as president in the history of Nigeria. Due to the hostile political dynamics and power structure within the political parties, women are not often regarded by party godfathers and leaders as worthy flag bearers. As such, women find it difficult to secure party tickets to run for elective positions at all levels. Thus, the Nigerian political sphere still remains highly lopsided gender-wise; and this is due to the innate inadequacies of the political and electoral system. So long as women continue to be under-represented in politics and governance, great danger awaits the future of democracy in Nigeria as the phenomenon would likely produce a condition of total disenchantment and abstinence from the political process by the womenfolk in time to come.

Major Issues and Changes in the Nigerian 2015 General Elections

Some of the major changing patterns and developments that were experienced in the Nigerian electoral system in the 2015 general elections include technological innovation, the triumph of opposition and acceptance of defeat by incumbent Candidate, good external rating and commendations, the signing of Abuja Peace Accord, improved funding for the INEC, among others. The paper concisely considers the foregoing one after the other.

Technological Innovation: The most widely acknowledged change that attended Nigeria's electoral system and process in the 2015 elections was and still remains the introduction of technologies. The acquisition and use of modern technologies - Direct Data Capturing machine (DDC) for voters registration and the production of Permanent Voters Cards through biometric data (PVC), and Card Reader (CR) for voter verification and authentication exercise in the 2015 elections, was particularly innovative in the political and electoral landscape of Nigeria as it improved the credibility of the elections and added glamour to the entire processes, and was warmly welcomed by majority of Nigerians. As popularly known, irregularities and discrepancies in voter registration and voter register had always been the major bane of previous elections in Nigeria including the 2011 general elections, bringing their integrity and genuineness to question (Oyekanmi, 2015). Thus, the INEC opted for the use of hi-tech modern gadgets for voter registration and verification exercises to ensure that the 2015 elections did not suffer the same fate as preceding elections, that is, to guarantee their relative credibility and integrity.

Although, the technological innovation had some shortcomings as witnessed during the period including the delay in the production and distribution of the PVCs prior to the elections as well as Card Readers malfunctioning, its impacts on the overall process and outcome were unarguably impressive and widely noticeable. As a matter of fact, it reduced the incident of electoral fraud to the barest minimum and increased the acceptability of the final results of the elections (Aiyede, 2015). Concurring with this view, Obianyo and Emesibe opine that:

> INEC's greatest achievement was the production and distribution of high tech- permanent voters' card (PVC) with biometric data capable of serving the system for a longtime and thus puts to rest the onerous task of always embarking on new registration exercise during tenure of a new INEC Chief Executive. This achievement does not in any way preclude the usual exercise of updating the register. Apart from saving the nation the high cost of constantly embarking on new registration exercise, the PVC and associated Card Reader (CR) infused a lot of credibility to the voting process given the malfeasance associated with the voting process in previous elections especially that of 2003 and 2007 (Obianyo and Emesibe, 2015: 23-23).

Hence, given that the benefits that accompanied the change in electoral procedure – introduction and use of technology are unarguably more significant than its shortcomings, the initiative obviously marks a major shift in the history

of elections organization and administration in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic, and there are prospects for further improvements.

Triumph of Opposition and Acceptance of Defeat by Incumbent Candidate: Another important development that made the 2015 elections remarkably historic was and/or is that it was the first time since the end of military rule and the return of democracy in 1999, that a presidential candidate of an opposition party (APC) defeated an incumbent presidential candidate of the then ruling party (PDP), and with the incumbent - Goodluck Jonathan, conceding defeat and thus paving the way for a peaceful handover of power (European External Action Service, 2015). That singular act of accepting defeat by the incumbent presidential candidate was generally described as both heroic and historic in that it calmed down the tension that had already built-up during the election and before the announcement of the final result for the presidential election. It saved Nigeria of a perceived large-scale post-election violence that would have broken-out, especially in the Northern parts.

The North was the major support base for the opposition candidate, Mummadu Buhari and where he hails from. If there had been any attempt by the incumbent to rig the election or manipulate the result in his own favour or refused to accept election results as they were, and thus refuse to leave office, the security of Nigeria would have been seriously threatened. The spirit of sportsmanship demonstrated by the then President and presidential candidate of PDP, Goodluck Jonathan is believed to have been borne out of the incumbent's genuine respect for the rule of law and interest in the unity and peace of the Nigerian state. The act of conceding defeat by Goodluck Jonathan could also be said to have stemmed from his desire to keep to his promise to Nigerians, prior to the polls that the elections would be free and fair. A statement by the then incumbent presidential candidate, after the announcement of the results reads thus: "I promised the country free and fair elections. I have kept my word" (BBC News, April 1, 2015: Online). Of course, it can be rightly mentioned that there was no open and direct influence on the activities of INEC by the incumbent to alter the procedures as had been the case in previous elections. The election umpire was given relative freedom to do its job. Jonathan further said he had conveyed his "best wishes" to Mr Buhari, and urged "those who may feel aggrieved to follow due process... in seeking redress" (BBC News, April 1, 2015: Online).

Jonathan was generally praised by majority of Nigerians owing to his disposition after the election result was publicly declared, which many described as exceptionally unique in the country's political history. Even a spokesman for Gen Buhari's All Progressives Congress (APC) party praised Jonathan, saying: "He will remain a hero for this move. The tension will go down dramatically" (BBC News, April 1, 2015: Online). Muhammadu Buhari's victory signaled a

significant moment in Nigeria's turbulent history, as never before has a sitting president lost an election in the country. Since independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria has witnessed numerous coups and most elections in the country have been rigged or even annulled by the military. No doubt, many voters may not be pleased with the outcome of the 2015 presidential election, but the whole process is a sign that Nigeria's democracy has prospect for growth, and to be deepened and strengthened. As evident during the period, the poll brought to the fore the precarious religious and regional differences in the country and there was a strong threat of violence, but the part played by Goodluck Jonathan hugely contributed in averting the danger (BBC News, April 1, 2015: Online).

External Commendations: Before now, Nigeria's 2011 general elections were described by both international and local observers as a milestone improvement upon all previous elections ever conducted in the Fourth Republic, particularly the 2007 polls. The elections were generally dubbed free and fair due to the increased level of transparency and relatively significant improvement on the performance of INEC compared with other elections that were witnessed before the elections of 2011. However, the 2015 elections, by far, have come to show that Nigeria in near future time will arrive at the point of conducting near-credibly perfect elections. By all parameters, the 2015 can indisputably be described to be more transparent, freer and fairer than the 2011 polls. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) gives a summary of the opinions of most of the observer groups in the Nigeria's 2015 general elections. As its states:

> Domestic and international election observer groups were generally very positive about the conduct of the 2015 general elections. While various groups noted challenges on Election Day, including the late opening of many polling units, failure in some cases of the electronic card readers and fingerprint verification, and isolated violent incidents, they applauded INEC for its impartiality and professionalism, Nigeria's security forces on the largely peaceful conduct of the elections, and Nigerians themselves for their enthusiastic participation in the process. Most observer reports noted that there is room for improvement in some areas, including Election Day logistics and use of the electronic card readers, however, the elections were generally seen as credible with their outcome reflecting the will of the Nigerian people (IFES, 2015: Online).

To further buttress the foregoing views, with respect to the presidential and federal legislative elections, the ECOWAS Elections Observation Mission

(EOM) states unequivocally that notwithstanding pockets of incidents and logical challenges, the Nigeria's March 28, 2015 elections apparently met the criteria of being free and fair (ECOWAS, 2015).

On the observed pitfalls of the elections, the 250-member Mission of Long-term and short-term observers headed by former Ghanaian President John Kufur said in its five-page Preliminary Declaration on Sunday 29 March 2015, that the "shortcomings" require remedial action by the Authorities to further enhance the credibility of the electoral process (ECOWAS, 2015: Online). The ECOWAS Mission however noted in the 22 point-Declaration that, "notwithstanding these shortcomings, the organization of the election can be considered as generally acceptable" (Reliefweb, March 30, 2015: Online). Furthermore, "it commended the enthusiasm, maturity, patience and sense of civic responsibility demonstrated by the electorate, and expressed the hope that the same spirit of respect for order and discipline will characterize the rest of the electoral process" (Reliefweb, March 30, 2015: Online). Indeed, Nigerian voters generally displayed a higher sense of eagerness to participate in, and were more coordinated at the 2015 polls.

There was also significant improvement in voter turn-over for the 2015 elections compare with what obtained in all previous elections. Of course, in this regard;

> The Mission noted the generally high voter turnout, with voters displaying commendable level of patience, discipline and organization, and laudable participation of women and young people, and urged voters to maintain their high sense of responsibility and tolerance during the remaining election period (ECOWAS, 2015: Online).

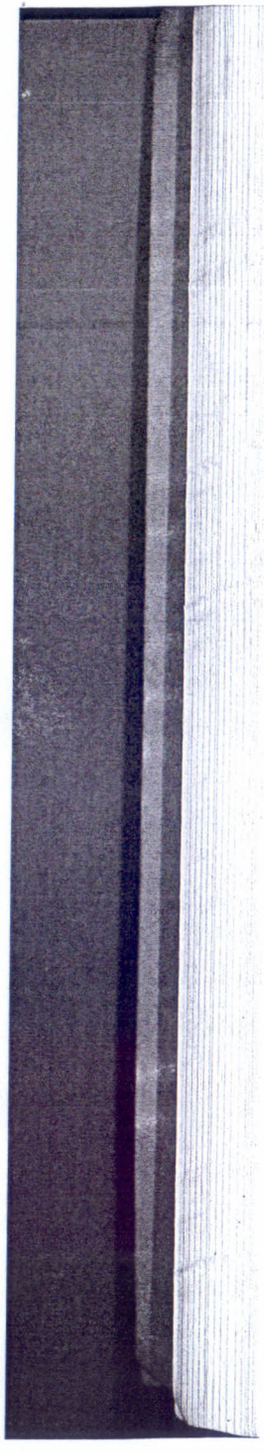
Moreover, "the Mission commended the Federal Government of Nigeria and all other stakeholders for ensuring a peaceful and orderly election, thus making it a historic step for the strengthening of democracy and good governance in Nigeria" (Reliefweb, March 30, 2015: Online). Also, in a special manner, "it congratulated the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for "its leadership and professionalism" and also paid tribute to the security agencies for their impartial and exemplary conduct during the elections" (ECOWAS, 2015: Online). Thus, it is agreeable that the 2015 general elections saw a remarkable improvement in every aspect of the electoral process than other elections conducted since the advent of the Fourth Republic. These improvements show that the electoral process and system in Nigeria is gradually developing, and that there is a renewed hope for the sustenance and consolidation of democracy in the country. Also, as the leader of the Black Race, Nigeria has set the pace and template for credible elections on the African continent. With the observed shortcomings of the 2015 polls adequately guided against in subsequent elections, Nigeria would be sending a very strong signal to the international

community that democracy has really come to stay in the country, and that Nigerians have genuinely accepted the system of governance and are willing to live by it.

The Abuja Peace Accord: Although Nigerian political parties had before the 2015 elections, usually entered into agreements to prescribe the acceptable pattern of behavior for parties involved in electoral contest before, during and after elections. The signing of the "Abuja Peace Accord" by the two major political parties that participated in the 2015 presidential race, PDP and APC, before the elections, was no doubt, profoundly unique in its own way. The Peace Accord was an agreement signed by the presidential candidates of the two key political parties, President Goodluck Jonathan of Peoples' Democratic Party, and General Muhammadu Buhari of All Progressive Congress (APC) along with twelve presidential candidates of other political parties under the watch of two prominent international players, Mr. Kofi Annan and Chief Emeka Anyaoku (Ugbudian, 2015). The idea of the Peace Accord was initiated by Professor Bolaji Akinyemi, a former Minister of External Affairs and elder statesman, who wrote an open letter to the leading presidential candidates calling for a truce and an end to the hate messages that, had characterized party campaigns in the build-up to the 2015 elections (Alabi, 2015). The peace-pact was signed on January 14, 2015, in a sensitization workshop on non-violence elections held in Abuja (Ogunshola, 2015). The Accord was an effort to forestall a recurrence of the violent incident that followed the announcement of the final presidential results of the 2011, which led to the death of over 800 persons and created tensions in the country (Ugbudian, 2015).

The presidential candidates of the 14 political parties participating in the elections, including the candidates of the two dominant parties, APC and PDP, signed the Accord, pledging to shun all sorts of violence before, during and after the elections (Ogunshola, 2015). The workshop at which the peace agreement was signed was organized by the Office of the National Security Adviser and the Special Adviser to the president on Inter-Party Affairs through a financial assistance from donor agencies including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), European Union (EU) and others on the 2015 general elections (Ezea, 2015; Ojo, 2015). The workshop had in attendance the chairmen and presidential candidates of most of the political parties, and the theme was, "2015 General Elections Sensitization Workshop on Non-Violence". It was obvious that the electioneering campaigns for the polls were taking violent dimensions that further increased tensions and insecurity in parts of the country. The Accord was thus an attempt to meddle-down the looming conflict in the political space through reorientation of the leaders of political parties, their candidates and other stakeholders (Ugbudian, 2015).

The Accord read thus:



> We, the undersigned presidential candidates of the underlisted political parties contesting the general election of 2015, desirous of taking proactive measures to prevent electoral violence before, during and after the elections, anxious about the maintenance of a peaceful environment for the 2015 general election, reaffirming our commitment to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, desirous of promoting the unity and corporate existence of Nigeria as an indivisible entity, determined to avoid any conduct or behaviour that will endanger the political stability and national security of Nigeria, determined to place national interest above personal and partisan concern, reaffirming our commitment to fully abide by all rules and regulations as laid down in the legal framework for elections in Nigeria hereby submit ourselves and our parties to the following:
>
> 1. To run issue-based campaigns at national, state and local government levels. In this, we pledge to refrain from campaigns that will involve religious incitement, ethnic or tribal profiling, both by ourselves and by all agents acting in our names.
> 2. To refrain from making or causing to make in our names or that of our party any public statements, pronouncements, declarations or speeches that have the capacity to incite any form of violence, before, during and after the elections.
> 3. To forcefully and publicly speak out against provocative utterances and oppose all acts of electoral violence whether perpetrated by our supporters and/or opponents.
> 4. To commit ourselves and political parties to the monitoring of the adherence to this Accord, if necessary, by a national peace committee made of respected statesmen and women, traditional and religious leaders.
> 5. All the institutions of government including INEC and security agencies must act and be seen to act with impartiality (Ezea, 2015; Ojo, 2015).

Despite that there were later to be seen pockets of violence in some parts of the country, mainly before and during the 2015 elections, the situation was not to be compared with violent incidents that attended the preceding elections, especially that of 2007 that attracted both local and international concerns. The realization by dominant political parties of the implication of indulging in outright desecration of the terms of the peace accord would wrongly project their image to the electorate made them to openly warn and advise their members and supporters to avoid indulging in violent acts during and after the elections. Notwithstanding that the Accord was not legal agreement *per se* but voluntary

and merely placed moral obligation on political parties and their candidates, the initiative contributed immensely to creating the relative peaceful atmosphere under which the 2015 elections were conducted. As the National Democratic Institute notes, "the Accord is widely hailed as an encouraging development that provides civil society, the media and the international community with a yardstick against which to hold candidates and parties accountable for their conduct in violence-free polls" (NDI, 2015:7).

Improved Funding for INEC: The relative success of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) at the 2015 polls cannot but be partly attributed to the substantial funds made available to the election umpire for the conduct of the exercise. INEC had always lamented over poor funding of the Commission by government in terms of time of approval and release as well as the amounts in the wake of its preparation for past elections, which it claimed contributed to the comparatively unimpressive performance by the umpire. The case was different in 2015 as the Commission had it financial demands granted both at the appropriate time and in terms of the amount requested for the conduct of the polls. Prof. Attahiru Jega, the then Chairman of the Commission confirmed this while the elections were underway, precisely between 2014 and 2015, at a one-day lecture organized by the African Policy Research Institute (APRI) in Abuja on "Policy as a Tool for Political Inclusion in Nigeria: INEC and the 2015 Elections". Jega states that:

> Funding is always an issue, but I can say that for INEC in terms of our preparation, it is no longer an issue, anybody will always want to have more money but we believe that we have sufficient resources to be able to conduct the 2015 general elections. So, we can say that funding is no longer an issue for us as far as the election is concerned" (The Guardian, January 18, 2015: Online).

Overall, the Federal Government of Nigeria appropriated the sum of N114, 058, 943, 747.48 billion for the 2015 general elections. However, in the run-up to the elections, over N108.9bn was allotted to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for the general elections. Aside this enormous amount, INEC also received the sum of N5.2billlion from development partners, which came through the sponsorship of workshops, seminars, conferences, enlightenment programmes and engagement of consultants (Leadership, October 22, 2015: Online). Therefore, not only that INEC was sufficiently funded for the 2015 elections, the funds were released to the Commission within a time scope that allowed it to properly plan and execute the exercise. This no doubt culminated in the INEC's commendable performance.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the Nigerian 2015 general elections in view of the sustained characteristic features and major changes that attended the country's electoral space and procedures during the elections, as well as their impacts on the democratization process in the polity. The paper agrees with prevailing opinion that the elections were remarkably significant even as they were generally described by both local and international observers as a milestone improvement over all elections in the country since the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999. However, as the paper has demonstrated, certain undesirable elements that marred the credibility of all previous elections held since the post-independence period to the current political dispensation also featured in the 2015 polls. As the paper reveals, some of these issues as evident in the conduct of the 2015 election include the usual problems stemming from undemocratically conducted party primaries, electoral violence, electoral malpractices, ethnic and religious underpinnings, among other factors and issues not captured in the body of the paper. These issues have remained the major barriers to the enthronement of the practice of credible, free and fair elections in Nigeria from time immemorial.

Notwithstanding, the 2015 elections brought about certain positive changes and practices that if properly institutionalized would further advance the attainment of electoral maturity and sanctity, which in-turn would impact on the overall goal of consolidating and sustaining democratic governance practice in the country. Among these improvements were the introduction and use of modern technologies by the INEC - Direct Data Capturing machine (DDC) and the Card Reader (CR), and the production of Permanent Voters Cards through biometric data (PVC); the triumphant victory of the opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari and the conceding of defeat by Goodluck Jonathan, the then incumbent presidential candidate; the signing of the Abuja Peace Accord by key political parties; high rating of the elections and international commendation of the INEC and the Nigerian electorates; and substantial funds made available to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which enhanced its performance unlike the case of previous elections. The paper has suggested some effective measures for consolidating the gains of these lofty changes and how to improve on them in subsequent elections; so as to continue to promote the development of Nigeria's electoral system and procedures and the growth of democratic governance in the country.

Recommendations

There is the need to consolidate the gains of the changes experienced in the 2015 elections and bracing-up the lapses for future elections. Nigeria's 2015 elections have attracted widespread accolade both at home and the international fronts as a result of the transformations that were witnessed in the country's electoral system and process during the period. The *onus* falls on relevant authorities and stakeholders to consolidate and sustain the benefits of the recent developments for further advancement and strengthening of the country's electoral sphere so as to eliminate the shortcomings of the 2015 general elections in future polls. In view of this, this paper puts forth the following recommendations:

INEC has an important duty to prevent the malfunctioning of the Card Reader machines. The Commission should seek technical assistance from experts from abroad to properly train both its permanent and ad hoc staff on the use of the Card Reader (CR), and more especially on the possible causes of, and ways to prevent or reduce the incident of Card Reader failures during voter identification exercise.

INEC should ensure that all registered voters who could not vote in the 2015 elections because of the delay on the Commission's part to produce and distribute the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), get their cards so as not to disfranchise them again in the next elections. Nigerians who have reached 18 years after the 2015 elections as well as those who will be up to the voting age a year before the actual election year should also be registered on time to ensure that the PVCs reach them before the polls.

Nigerian politicians at all levels should emulate Goodluck Jonathan's act of conceding defeat as it is a typical display of democratic discipline and respect for the rule of law, as well as strong commitment to advancing the course of peaceful, free and fair elections in the country's metamorphosing democratic space.

The Peace Accord should be integrated into the country's existing general legal frameworks for elections. This would strengthen the accord and make it a valuable instrument for demanding accountability and holding political parties and their candidates responsible by the Nigerian electorates in case of display of any acts that negates the peace and credibility of elections in future times.

Given the positive impact of the timely release of sufficient fund to INEC on its conduct of the 2015 elections, it is needful that the practice be sustained by the current and subsequent governments during preparation for subsequent elections in the country.

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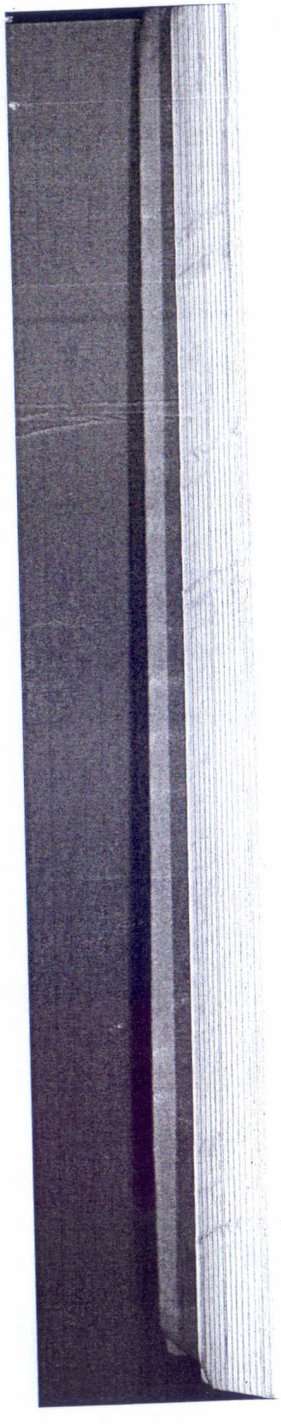

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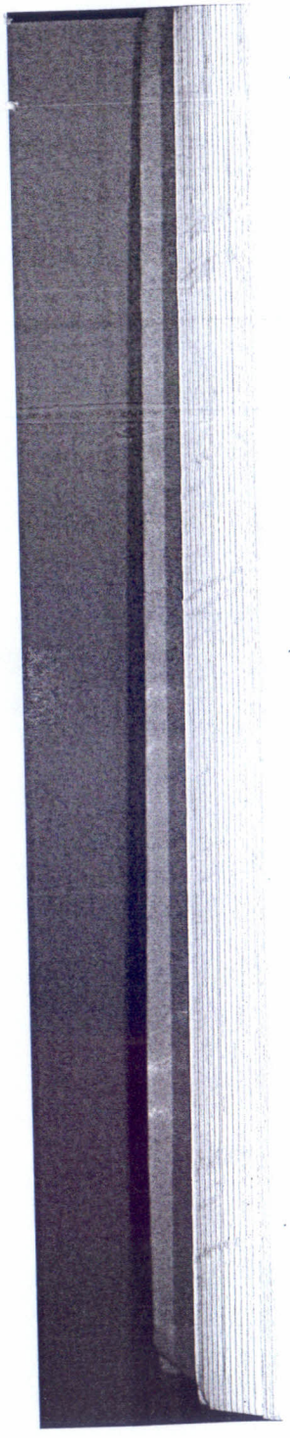

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