Adoption of E-voting System in Nigeria: A Prospect for Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract: *This study examines the factors that influences the idea of E-voting System (EVS) from the viewpoint of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Nigerian citizen and the potentials of the Card Reader (CR) and Permanent Voters Card (PVC) to alleviate poverty in Nigeria. The study adopts the content analysis approach, using survey literature to generate relevant information on the justifications for adopting Card Reader Machine in the 2015 election as a preliminary experiment for the e-voting system in Nigeria. The result shows that the introduction of CR and PVC has minimized election frauds in the 2015 general election, hence, indicating the chances for adopting e-voting technology in the subsequent elections. The study also revealed that since non-performing leaders were voted out during the election, it is an indication that the incumbent leaders and prospective candidates would be committed to desirable programs to alleviate poverty. Undue interference with INEC activities and malfunction of CR machines are common challenges encountered during the 2015 general elections. The study therefore, recommend an intensive practical training for the ad-hoc personnel, and enactment of laws with severe penalties to allow INEC discharge its duties as an independent institution to curtail unnecessary intrusion.*

Keywords: E- Voting, Card Reader, System, Poverty Alleviation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and indeed the largest among the black nations of the world with a projected population of 180 million (NPC, 2013). Nigeria is a wealthy state and naturally endowed with oil, agriculture, mineral fossils, innovative and resilient human capital (Chindo, Naibbi, & Abdullahi, 2014). Yet, Nigeria is classified among the stragglers and ranked as the third country with the largest population of poor in the world, despite its rich resources (Olaleye, Edun, Bello., & Taiwo, 2014).

Succeeding governments have channelled substantial resources into various programs to combat the high rate of poverty and to bridge the gap between economic growth and prosperity of the citizens. Prominent among them are: National Agricultural and Cooperative Bank (NACB), Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Agricultural Development Project (ADP), Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), National Directorate of Employment (NDE), Community Bank or Micro Finance, National Poverty Eradication Program, (NAPEP) among others (Dugguh, 2014; Ogwumike, 2002).

Studies revealed that bad governance, lack of political will, corruption, lack of an apparent defined policy agenda for poverty alleviation, continuity syndrome, political deception and horrible looting are major factors that causes poverty in Nigeria (Kanayo, 2014). Despite all policy measures adopted to address these problems, poverty still prevail in Nigeria (Abinbola, 2012)

Electronic voting (E-Voting) is an electrical system of voting introduced by advanced countries of the world to improve election processes. Literatures have revealed that as a result of technological advancement coupled with the myriad problems of manual voting, USA, Australia, Brazil, Canada, India, France, Japan, United Arab Emirates and others have established different methods of e-voting projects. Namibia was the first African country to

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adopt the e-voting technology, followed by South Africa. However, the idea was initially opposed by the opposition parties on the ground that the policy was aimed at election manipulations (Obradovic, Hoover, Ikonomakis, & Poulos, 2006).

E-voting allow eligible voters cast their votes and to be counted. It is a procedure that is auditable, transparent, secured with minimal human error. For large countries like India, Brazil and Philippine, electronic voting and electronic counting facilitate the release of election results within short period of time. The system enables voters to elect credible candidate without any unjustifiable influence; defend the secrecy of their votes at each phase of the voting process; assured accessibility of all voters. Hence, the electorates build trust and confidence in the electoral institutions (Obradovic et al., 2006).

This study precisely examines the factors that influences the idea of e-voting system from the viewpoint of INEC, Nigerian citizens and the possibilities of PVC and CR to alleviate poverty in Nigeria. Therefore, it will serve as a lesson to the incumbent leaders and prospective candidates that they can only be voted if they rendered satisfactory services to the masses and not their wealth or election manipulations as experienced in the past. The study also demonstrates the reliability of CR and PVC as an instruments to determine credible leaders of choice.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, elections in Nigeria were conducted manually since independence. This ranges from voter's registration, ballot papers and voting procedures. Thus, the credibility of free and fair elections through this processes have been criticized as a result of series of anomalies perfected therein (Ishaq, Osman, & Jaleelkehinde, 2012).

Election fraud is a recurrent and devastating obstacle that bedevil Nigeria democracy over the years. Incompetent and weak electoral institution, the fair of being probed for financial misappropriation, poverty on the part of the electorates, party agents, security agents and thugs are factors accountable for election flaws in Nigeria (Awopeju, 2011). Election fraud led to frequent review of electoral acts, change of leadership of the commission and anti-corruption measures. Despite all these actions by preceding governments to ensure credible, free and fair election, the struggle still remains a mirage.

The major factors that influences the introduction of Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) in 2007 is the desire to regain the lost integrity of INEC, enhance the veracity of the election result and the quest for exoneration from the public accuse of colluding with the ruling party to manipulate election results. Another factor is the urge by the citizens to elect credible and committed leaders to infrastructural development and the need to curtail post-election violence that have claimed many innocent lives in the past elections (Adebayo, Ugiomoh, & AbdulMalik, 2013).

However, the idea of EVM was perceived with mix feelings among Nigerians. Albeit, the enthusiasm was high among those who believed that the innovation will minimize the rate of election fraud through the authentication of biometric data and photograph of voters as well as eliminating manifold registration and impersonation. On the other hand, the idea was seen by some group of individuals as an invention to wedge their chances of victory through the usual illicit devices (Duruji & Joshua, 2014).

Consequently, desperate political gladiators who felt the new system will affect their victory mobilized the National Assembly to suspend the proposed EVM in the Electoral Act of 2006. This enfeebled the position of INEC and thus pave way for the usual election frauds in 2007 elections.

In preparing for the 2011 election, INEC procured Direct Data Capture Machine DDCM) to address some challenges encountered during the 2007 election such as multiple registration, the incidence of unimaginable turnouts of voters on the election days. For instance 94%, 96% and even 100% turnout of the electorates (NCSSR, 2015). The idea could not yield fruitful result because the machines were allegedly diverted by saboteurs even before they were delivered to the INEC. This bred series of rumour and confusion across Nigeria and beyond.

Based on the 2011 challenges and previous experiences, INEC, in 2015 introduced Smart Card Readers as a new template for the first time in the history of Nigeria to improve the integrity of the electoral processes (Olumide, 2015). Although, the ruling party moved to undermine the new policy, but INEC as an independent body of the electoral processes resist the attempt (Fabiyi, 2015). Thus, CR was introduced with its immense characteristics which includes:

- ejection of any card that is not configured by the INEC as experienced during the preceding elections in Nigeria, where politicians transfer voters' cards among their supporters (Idowu, 2015; Jega & Hillier, 2012).
- CR reads the embedded chip on the PVC hence, it interacts through the secret code with the PVC; so, it was difficult to falsify the cards. The CR validates the identity of the voters by cross-matching the thumbprints that is stored on the embedded chip. Therefore, making it cumbersome to transfer the voter's card. In order to avert fraudulent practice, the CR is configured to operate only on the Election Days and in particular polling units, thus, it cannot be transferred to another unit without reconfiguration of authorized INEC personnel (Idowu, 2015; Jega & Hillier, 2012).
- CR keeps records of all card, including the particulars of all verified voters as well as those that are yet to be verified, and conveys the collected data to a central INEC server through the Global System for Mobile communication (GSM) data service. Statistics of the voters transmitted to the server will enable INEC to verify results from polling units, and also ensure statistical analysis of the demographics of voting (Idowu, 2015).

Even though the system had some shortcomings such as rejection of fingerprints, malfunction of card readers, unnecessary delay, mismatch of information, pocket of violence among others, There was noticeable improvement as problems experienced with the card reader during the presidential and Senatorial elections dropped almost by half to 27% during the governorship and State Assembly elections (Monitor, 2015). Election Monitor Observers suggests that INEC should maintain the use of card readers in the subsequent elections. This is because the outcome of the 2015 election confirmed that the technology was very efficient and it has the ability to minimize election fraud in Nigeria. Thus, the opposition party won in presidential position, 20 governors out of 29 states where election were conducted. While in the National Assembly, opposition candidates had 63 senators out of 109, 208 members of the House of Representative out of 360 members respectively (Monitor, 2015).

The persistent nature of election fraud in Nigeria makes it difficult to have a reliable statistics about the misconducts perpetuated by the politicians. However, the local and international observers as well as the Human Right activists described the 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011 elections as "deeply troubled" and "fallen far short" of international standard (Berg, 2007)The consequences of the election fraud led to the death of over 300 people in 2007 election, over 800 died in 2011 and less than 200 during the 2015 general election (Tayo, 2015). Acknowledging the success of the 2015 general election, the Commonwealth, the AU and ECOWAS observers unanimously agreed that the elections were peaceful, transparent and generally credible. The transparent nature of the 2015 general election convinced the incumbent president and some state governors to conceded defeat (Adamu, 2015).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts the content analysis approach, using survey literature to generate relevant information on the justifications for adopting Smart Card Reader in 2015 general election as a preliminary experiment for e-voting in Nigeria. The sources include journal articles, INEC bulletins and pamphlets, Newspapers, interview conducted with INEC stakeholders, magazines among others.

4.0 E-VOTING AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

The perennial and pervasive problems of poverty in Nigeria were associated with bad governance, lack of political will, corruption, lack of defined policy agenda for poverty alleviation, challenges of continuity in power, political deception and horrible looting (Elumilade, Asaolu, & Adereti, 2006; Kanayo, 2014; Ker, 2012).

Literatures demonstrates that poverty has direct linkage with bad governance and it is more prevalent in developing countries, Nigeria inclusive (Devas, 2012). Since the return of power to a civilian administration in 1999, the government under the auspices of the People Democratic Party (PDP) claimed to have shown commitment to good governance. Good governance calls for improvement of all facets of the society, predetermines human development which is achievable through poverty reduction, especially in productive employment, integration of the poor people in the social activities and policies that directly affect their basic needs (Gul, Sajid, Afzal, Khan, & Mughal, 2012). But in reality, this was merely a lip service as the rate of poverty in Nigeria is becoming more devastating and infrastructural decay still pervades the length and breadth of the country (Omotoso, 2013).

The 16 years of the PDP led government was described as a disaster in Nigeria, because, the country has witnessed the downward trend in all spheres of human endeavour such as insecurity, bad economy, and poor commitment to education facilities, unemployment among the teeming youths and the dearth of industries (Yusuf, 2015). Poverty in Nigeria has substantially risen between 1980 and 2011, and today it is ranked as the third country with a large population of the impoverished.

This persistence hardship necessitate the alliance of Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties: The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), as well as a set of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) to form the new party known as All Progressives Congress (APC) (Agbakwuru, 2013). In order to enhance a hitch free election fraud, the APC was firm about the Card Reader and biometric Permanent Voters Cards introduced by INEC which mainly contributed to the overwhelming victory of the opposition party across the country.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Nigeria elections have been bedevilled by allegations of irregularities and post-election violence. In an attempt to curb this ugly trend, the INEC placed her confidence in technology by adopting Smart Card Reader Machine and Automated Permanent Voters Cards. The preliminary experiment has proven their efficacy in combating election frauds which will also pave way

for the adoption of substantive e-voting machine in Nigeria.

Considering the overwhelming acceptance of these new innovations (PVC and CR) among the citizens which led to the defeat of the incumbent political leaders, one can deduce that prospective candidates will be committed to developmental projects and programs that would have impact on the masses. The transparent nature of the e-voting will minimize post-election violence and encouraged defeated contestants to concede defeat as epitomized by PDP presidential candidate in 2015 general elections.

In addition to the card readers, the track record of the presidential candidate of the opposition party (APC), goodwill and support of patriotic power brokers across the country, the roles of the National Peace Committee, the presence of International organizations during the elections contributed to hitch free election. This also expedites the first ever victory of the opposition party in the history of Nigeria.

Finally, severe laws, penalties should be enacted to allow INEC perform their duties without excessive interference. The outcome of 2015 general elections has demonstrated that, the masses can determine their leadership, and it goes along to confirm that non-performance leaders can easily be voted out of power, therefore, all leaders must be committed to improving the wellbeing of the masses, hence, an indicator to poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

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