

Institutional Autonomy, Strategic Innovations, and Administration of Credible Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

The effects of strategic innovations on the credibility of an election is gaining the attention in comparative politics. Using the conduct of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, preliminary findings indicated an autonomous commission that empowered Nigerian citizens and provided an opportunity for each to decide on who shall govern their affairs. Contestants – candidates and political parties – enjoyed an open field and an equal opportunity as the commission demonstrated a reasonable political neutrality, administrative efficiency, and public accountability in the administration of the elections. Indeed, it made bold decisions that established genuine procedures for the registration and validation of prospective voters, nomination and selection of prospective candidates, and harmonized the entire conduct of the elections. The use of micro-chipped Permanent Voters Card (PVC) and card reader machine were among the initiatives that guaranteed individual's right of participation and enhanced competition.

Keywords: Election, Electoral Commission, Electoral Management Body, Autonomous Electoral Commission.

Introduction

Election is an important component of democratisation debates. It is argued that repetitive elections, either good or bad, have some democratic self-reinforcing powers (Lindberg, 2006; 2009), stimulating civic activism and actions (Bratton, 2013: p.38). Others contend that only high-quality elections could lead to democratisation (Bogaards, 2013; Bratton, 2013; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Both arguments, while relevant, do not examine the significance of the capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs) in improving electoral integrity, particularly in Africa. Moreover, commonly observed electoral irregularities, in Africa and beyond, are tied to logistical, administrative challenges, and inefficiencies of electoral bodies (Birch, 2008; Bogaaards, 2013; Gazibo, 2006; Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002; Norris, 2014). Amidst these challenges, the INEC in Nigeria, with its generational failures (Junaidu, 2011), conducted an election which almost all stakeholders – partisan and nonpartisan – applauded as credible. What explains INEC's monumental success and improved the integrity of the elections is the concern of this paper.

TA possible explanation is INEC's ability to make reliable arrangements which offered a level playing field for all contestants. Both the incumbent and opposition canvassed freely for peoples' vote and the electorate freely expressed their choices. Evidences support the view that the effectiveness of the 2015 elections was tied to the commitment of the Commission which validated the national voter list and produced a microchipped Permanent Voters Card (PVC) that is authenticated by a Card Reader machine. The combination of these initiatives helped voter accreditation, reduced electoral frauds and safeguarded voters' preferences.

The paper adopts, in the first section, a conceptual typology formation developed by Robert Adcock and David Collier (2001) in their seminal article: 'Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research', and highlights various analytical typologies of autonomous electoral management bodies. The second section focuses on the strategies adopted in undertaking the research. The third section examines the strategic role of INEC in the three basic periods: before, during, and after election. The penultimate section is a discussion of the different ways in which the 2015 election is an exception compared to other elections conducted in the country in the recent past.

Typology Formation

To analyse the importance of autonomy of electoral commission on the integrity of the 2015 elections in Nigeria, Table 1 provides a theoretical model of an independent electoral commission. The table shows, at the initial stage (Level one), that the main concern is that of presenting how different scholars and organisations define an autonomous electoral commission. The aim is to provide a broader collection of postulations of an impartial electoral management body. Level two operationalises the concept, collapsing different viewpoints into a concise definition – what Adcock and Collier describe as Systematise Concept. The level that follows creates different indicators and/or typologies for easy application (Level Three).



Table 1: Conceptual Model

Levels	Tasks	Activities
Level one	Conceptualisation	Presenting the broader meanings and understandings of the concept under study
Level two	Operationalisation	Creating a concise meaning of the concept using ideas from the various constellation of definitions of the background concept
Level three	Indicator/typologies	Developing measures of the operationalised concept which could be either scoring or classifications
Level four	Scoring cases	Application of the developed framework for effective analysis

Source: Adcock & Collier (2001, pp. 530-31)

The last level is that of applying the scores/measures on the case under study. In this manner, argued Adcock and Collier, a researcher has the advantage of refining his concept indicators and operationalising it in tune with observed data (Adcock and Collier, 2001, p. 530).

Types of Autonomous Electoral Commissions

There are different attempts to explain what constitutes an independent electoral commission (Table 2). Scholars show that growing attention to better election led to the rise of several conceptions of an autonomous electoral commission. In fact, from 1999 when Pastor published his seminal article on the role of electoral administration on democratic transition, the autonomy of electoral commissions continues to attract intellectual and policy attention. Each of these attempts differ on the fundamentals of an autonomous commission.

An autonomous electoral commission is classified into three types. The first defines the autonomy of an electoral commission based on its location within the formal setup of government. Thus, an electoral commission is autonomous when it is institutionally placed outside the formal structure of government independent of the executive, and/or not accountable to either the legislature or judiciary (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [IDEA], 2006; López-Pintor, 2000; Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002; Pastor, 1999). For others, an autonomous electoral commission is composed of members that are either sovereign, with the executive usually being nonpartisan experts, or partisan representatives of all political parties but accountable to legislature (Birch, 2008; Carter & Farrell, 2010; Hartlyn, McCoy & Mustillo, 2008).

Autonomy in such a situation is, however, problematic. First, nonpartisan experts or partisan members of extant parties could be amiable to a strong incumbent. Moreover, it is easy for authoritarian leaders to sway electoral officials in societies where clientele politics¹⁴ is well pronounced.

Table 2: Types of Autonomous Electoral Commissions

Author(s)	Typology		
	Autonomous	Semi-autonomous	Non-autonomous
Pastor (1999: 12-13)	Manned by experts & accountable to parliament or put under the government & supervised by judicial body	Composed of representatives of parties or individuals selected from a list submitted by the president and the legislature	Placed under government
López-Pintor (2000)	A commission independent of the executive	An electoral commission placed within the executive but subject and supervised by an independent body	A commission situated within the government
Mozaffar (2002: 90-91)	When placed outside the formal structure of government	Placed within the formal structure of government	Placed within the executive branch of government
Hartlyn, McCoy, & Mustillo (2008: 79)	Profession, experts or civil society representation	Partisan, mix of either a balance of party representation or sufficient representation of all relevant stakeholders - none could dominate decision making	Single party dominated (incumbent party) representation
IDEA (2006: 6-10)	Institutionally placed, independent of the executive branch of government	Institutionally placed under the directives of a department of state but independent of the executive	Placed and managed directly under the executive branch
Birch (2008: 308 & 2011: 115-118 & Carter & Farrell (2010: 41-42)	Independent of the executive composed of nonpartisan experts or representatives of parties and accountable to legislature	A commission that combines the mixture of autonomous and non-autonomous model	All elections are conducted by the executive branch of government

Source: Authors' compilation

14. This is a political practice in which personal relations, with clear elements of economic gains, characterised politics as against merits and expertise (for theoretical and empirical expositions see Sani, I. (2013). Political Parties and Governance in Nigeria: Explaining the misfortune of the Fourth Republic. *Mambayya Journal of Democratic Studies*, 4. Pp.23-46).

Equally, a legislative house dominated by a single party or sycophant politicians could easily be a centre for exerting party dominance. First, the legislative house might be too weak to undertake its role of checkmating executive excesses. Second, the appointment or selection of the governing board of an electoral commission could explain its level of independence. Accordingly, an electoral body composed of members selected or appointed from a presidential and/or parliamentary list vetted by participating political parties and civil society groups is seen as semi-autonomous. The understanding is that individuals, regardless of their initial partisanship, once appointed, shall act with a high level of impartiality (Hartlyn, McCoy & Mustillo, 2008, p. 79). But an incumbent could appoint people that are party loyalists.

Lastly, a non-autonomous electoral commission is one that is placed either under the complete supervision of the executive or dominated by incumbent party representation. Almost all scholars examined agreed to this classification (last column Table 2). This consensus, probably, explains Sara Birch's classification of electoral commission models into ombudsman and checks-and-balances. The former is an institutional design based on a professional, permanent, and autonomous body made up of individuals chosen for their professional and expert credentials, such as judges. The latter refers to a model that placed emphasis on a balanced partisan representation among existing political interests, such that each has representation and contributes to the management of the electoral processes (Birch, 2011, pp. 118-119).

The autonomy of electoral commissions, however, is beyond formal institutional arrangements of locations and composition. Moreover, electoral commission could be modelled with all the prerequisites of formal autonomy but denied of the basic requirements of impartiality. Ottaway rightly points out that incumbents not committed to democratic ideals could narrow the space, power, and capacity of electoral commissions to put in place strategic procedures for credible elections (Ottaway, 2003: 22-23; cf. Birch, 2011, p. 118).

To understand the independence of an electoral commission requires going beyond its institutional arrangement. In particular, there is the need to consider the administrative and operational strategies of electoral management bodies. Besides, scholars of comparative politics have long appreciated the value of the political institutions to political elites in pursuing political goals (Bogaards 2007; Carter and Farrell, 2010; Elklit and Reynolds 2002; Elklit and Reynolds 2005; Gandhi, and Lust-Okar 2009; March and Olsen, 1984). Indeed, in the making, reforming, and/or running of electoral institutions, politicians know that they are actually in the game of winning or losing (Lijphart, 1994; Lijphart, 2006; Lijphart & Grofman, 1984). Each strives to protect their interests, and electoral commissions are not an exception. Thus, we argued that while professionalism, composition, and location are important in explaining the autonomy of an electoral commission, it is imperative to pay attention to the administrative and operational strategies of election management.

Autonomous Electoral Commission

The meaning of autonomous electoral commission is often equated with its institutional location. The autonomy of electoral body, however, can be viewed from three broad perspectives: i) institutional setup; ii) operational powers and capacity; and iii) financial muscles. Given these arrangements, the autonomy of an electoral management body is much more than just its positioning in the scheme of government. Moreover, the autonomy of an electoral commission is an embodiment of institutional structures, political practices, and technical procedures. We, therefore, consider it necessary to carry out a similar procedure of segmentation of the concept of autonomous electoral commission into categories of analysis. Accordingly, as a model of analysis, we agreed that the autonomy of INEC in the conduct of the 2015 presidential elections is best looked at from its institutional setup. The issue at stake is who appoints, what is the criterion for the appointment, and how long is the tenure of all electoral commissioners (Table 3 column 2). Note, however, that this aspect has been extensively handled by qualified hands (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2009; 2010) and giving it much attention will amount to repetition of efforts.

Secondly, the commission's operational power is better understood by looking at its ability to make and implement decisions independent of outside influence, its openness to all political contestants and other nonpartisan interests, and its operational efficiency in terms of electoral logistics (Table 3 column 3). In other words, autonomy is in the capacity of an organisation to enforce its rules (Gazibo, 2006).

Table 3: Operationalising Autonomous Electoral Commission

	Institutional Autonomy	Operational Autonomy	Financial Autonomy
Autonomous Electoral commission	Who appoints	The ability of EMB to make and implement its decisions	Availability of funds
	What is the criteria for appointment	Openness of the EMB to partisan and nonpartisan actors	Uninterrupted source of funds
	Appointment requirement	Procedural and logistical efficiency	Relative or no excessive use of bureaucratic or regulatory fiscal policies
	Tenure of office		Late release of approved funds

Source: Authors' compilation

Finally, no electoral commission can be regarded as autonomous if it has to go cup in hand looking for executive assistance to finance its operations. Thus, we expect to find the financial autonomy of a commission to manifest in the availability of funds for it to conduct its activities and absence of excessive bureaucratic or fiscal regulatory requirement, and late release of funds (Table 3 column 4).

Although there are other factors such as political culture, who appoints key electoral officials, criteria for appointing electoral officials, and their tenure in office, which impede the proper functioning of electoral commissions in Nigeria and Africa, empirical evidence indicates that the last two are the most pertinent. In fact, successive electoral commissions in the country expressed their concern over such obstacles. For example, in its 2003 elections report, INEC mentioned that from the year 2000 funding has been the basic challenge facing the commission (Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC], 2004: 69-70). Also, the Electoral Reform Committee Report (ERC) set up by the Nigerian government in August 2007 indicated that the nation's electoral bodies have been poorly funded (Electoral Reform Committee Report [ERC], 2008). Similarly, a former chair of the commission revealed that the commission is constrained by the 1999 constitution to properly discharge its functions (Jega, Interview 8, 2013).

Methods and Strategies

We set out to examine the possible effects of the autonomy of electoral management body on the achieved quality of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Specifically, we are interested in addressing the question of how has INEC, despite serious challenges that characterised the country, achieved the monumental successes recorded in the 2015 general elections. Studies on electoral credibility in Nigeria have used more of qualitative case study analysis of the country's specificities on the achievements or failures of INEC in facilitating free and fair elections (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2009 & 2010). While acknowledging the contributions of these efforts, we believe that the actual events involved in an electoral cycle were neglected. In fact, it was reported as the last component of the agreed areas of assessments.

To adequately address the question, we designed a qualitative case study which relied squarely on information generated from primary sources. Although qualitative in nature, our primary data included, among others, a quantitative data of five rounds of election results - 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, and 2015 – conducted in the country by the commission. For an empirical and well-grounded discussion, we monitored, for six consecutive months, happenings in the build-up and after the conduct of the 2015 elections (i.e. from January to May 2015). We collected relevant newspaper reportage of the electoral events in the country. This provided us with on the spot clean picture of what is at stake. To ensure reliability and fairness of the data, two national dailies were used – one north based paper (Daily trust) and the other, a south based – (This Day). This was further triangulated with two more online news houses – Sahara Reporters and Premiums Time Nigeria. In addition, information from channels TV and National Television Authority (NTA) were recorded for further clarifications. Other sources utilised include some personal interviews

conducted by one of us between 2013 and 2014 with the key officials of the commission, the commission's press releases and reports of nonpartisan election monitors.

To construct a solid interpretation, an iterative method of analysis – qualitative process tracing – was used. This is a research method for tracing possible causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in actual case (George & Bernnet, 2005; Bernnet & Elman, 2007). Using this strategy, we were able to highlight the possible linkages that existed between what transpired in the country before the 2015 elections and what was recorded during and after the election proper.

Election Integrity: Beyond Institutional Effects

Before the Elections

The 2015 electoral terrain and its unfolding reality portray INEC as an autonomous electoral institution and this has contributed in enhancing the quality of the elections. Before the 2011 elections the overarching narrative among commentators, partisan and nonpartisan electoral stakeholders, pollsters and academics, was that Nigeria did not seem capable of hosting acceptable elections. The country has had some of the worst elections conducted in Africa. In particular, the 2007 polls were so bad that both domestic and international election observers rejected the elections, concluding that it did not deserve to be called elections at all (Akhaine, 2011; European Union Election Observation Mission [EOM], 2007; National Democratic Institute for International Affairs [NDI], 2008; Transition Monitoring Group [TMG], 2007).

Before the 2015 elections, the electoral atmosphere was hazy and people were somewhat sceptical, thinking it was going to be business as usual. The Vice-Presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), in the 2011 presidential elections expressed his misgiving, believing that while efforts to appropriately manage the pre-election logistics exist, '... tales of woes that have trailed the Permanent Voters' Card collection exercise have raised a lot of questions as to the level of preparedness of the Commission with many Nigerians fearing disenfranchisement (Bakare, 2015). Also, the national distribution and collection of voter cards was not encouraging. In fact, more than 75% of the PVCs in rural areas of Lagos were left uncollected. The situation remained the same in Edo State as there were reports of PVCs been stolen. In Abia State, it was recorded that less than 50% collection was achieved (Vanguard, 2014). Perhaps explaining the apprehension with which the public approached the elections.

Responding to this, the Commission reiterated its commitment toward hitch-free elections, promising that adequate arrangements were made to ensure that each prospective voter and contestant exercised all constitutional voting rights. The commission's chairperson highlighted that,

People are saying we have disenfranchised them because we are not distributing, but we say no. You cannot begin to determine who is disenfranchised until the day of election. If today is [14th] February and there are a number of people out there who have registered,

but INEC has not produced their cards, then you can say they have been disenfranchised. On the other hand, if we have produced the cards and people refuse or for some reasons do not go and collect those cards, they cannot say INEC has disenfranchised them (*Aminu, Tahir, Alhassan, A, & Bivan, 2015*).

While both positions seem reliable, evidences from independent sources corroborated the commission's stance. For instance, while there were teething challenges in some states,¹⁵ the commission had recorded about 81.22% of national distribution and collection as at 14th March (Channels TV, 2015). This suggests some form of overstating the shortcomings. Besides, there were mixed feelings about possible executive interference with the appointment and confirmation of some key strategic poll officials (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2010; Junaidu, 2011).¹⁶

In addition, before the elections INEC looked more effective and appeared to be a reliable institution in its reactions to critical situations. For instance, when the country's Security Chiefs, including the Presidential Security Adviser, warned the Commission on the security situation of the country, INEC postponed the elections for six weeks. The Commission explained that it did so in consideration of the country's security threat and as it cannot guarantee the protection of the lives of voters, electoral personnel, and materials during elections. It reiterated that,

[u]nder such circumstances, few EMBs across the world, if any, would contemplate proceeding with the elections as scheduled. No matter the extent of INEC's preparedness, therefore, if the security of personnel, voters, election observers and election materials cannot be guaranteed, the life of innocent young men and women as well the prospects of free, fair, credible and peaceful elections would be greatly jeopardised (Jega, 2015).

In situations where people and institutions that are constitutionally mandated to ensure security are expressing doubts, INEC has to accept to shift the elections. This could have been the reason behind a position well supported by almost all electoral stakeholders in the country including the oppositions.

INEC made giant strides towards ensuring a transparent electoral process. The Commission deployed and redeployed qualified staff to man the electoral processes. It set ground rules for an inclusive party engagement. Equally, it made provisions for the country's Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to cast their votes. In addition, an inclusive voter education strategy was designed so as to get people to value their votes. An important issue that deserves special mention is the use of Permanent Voters Card (PVC). The card has an inbuilt microchip containing biodata of individual eligible voters including finger prints. This information is used to screen, verify and

15. According to the Channels TV in its nationwide news on the 14 March 2015 as at 23.05 hours reported that INEC was able to achieve less than half of PVC collection (49.45%) in Ogun state.

16. The president remains the ultimate person in the appointment of INEC key strategic governing and field officers, including the National Chairperson of the commission

authenticate a voter who appears at the polling booth on Election Day. The process is done using a card reader machine – a machine that crossmatches the biodata of the card presented by a prospective voter and the voter’s finger prints. Initially, politicians appeared to be sceptical about its usage, but INEC insisted that this would help in reducing various electoral misconducts, such as impersonation, proxy-voting, and double or multiple voting.

The above measures enhanced the credibility of the elections in many ways. Several forms of electoral rigging were reduced. Some accrued benefits include reduction of under-age, multiple and proxy voting, and falsification of elections results. To give some testimonies, James Schneider, observed that ‘it seems likely that the introduction of the PVCs reduced fraud and the artificial inflation of voter numbers, especially in some states’ (New Nigeria, 2015). An editorial of Premiums Time Nigeria, highlighted that the 2015 elections is a revelation of the use of the PVC and card-reader which made ‘... the polls Nigeria’s first technologically compliant elections, with a greater degree of success, despite initial hitches and distraction’ (The Premium Times, 2015). Put differently, the election was fought and won by INEC’s insistence on the use of the PVC and Card reader. In fact, this gave the commission the leverage to crossmatch, using quick count procedure elections results as they were being reported, with that of independent election observers dispersed across the length and breadth of the country.

These achievements notwithstanding, there were some unavoidable challenges. The logistics arrangements of printing and distribution the PVCs created serious doubts. In fact, some states of the federation could not get their cards during the early time of national distributions. Others receive cards that were not theirs. Such drawbacks need to be avoided as opposition could read them with suspicion. With such evidence, it could be argued that the Commission performed impartially, improving its operational, administrative and logistic capacity. Thus, provided a neutral playing field for contestants, raising popular confidence on its capacity to conduct credible elections.

During the Elections

In spite of the challenges that greeted the pre-election period, the 2015 election was described as ‘... a revelation on how best to exercise the franchise of Nigerians’ (The Premium Times, 2015). Among the possible explanatory factors to this success was the Commission’s and its chairperson’s defence of its integrity and strengthening of its institutional capability to be better than any previous election in the country. Few, if any, for instance, will doubt that the 2015 electoral logistics were totally different to what was obtained in the 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011 elections. In fact, the Commission was so optimistic that it said, ‘[c]ompared with the 2011 General Elections, our systems are definitely more robust. We believe that we are ready for the elections as planned’ (Jega, *Press Conference*, 2015).

During the polls, the Commission supervised the conduct and activities of all stakeholders and where problems were identified the commission gave directives to that effect. Some of the burning issues during the polls included the failure of card reader machines and insecurity. Where card readers failed, INEC ensured prompt replacement before the end of accreditation period

(Aminu, Tahir, Alhassan & Bivan, 2015). Also, INEC agreed to the use of manual accreditation where necessary. This decision was laudable and could be said to have earned public respect for INEC. Yet, information from some states portrayed this decision as faulty. For example, it was reported that in Akwa Ibom state, while the card readers used by INEC recorded 437, 128 accredited voters during the governorship elections, the electoral commissioner announced that Udom Emmanuel of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) won the elections with 996, 071 votes and the second runner, Umana Okon Umana of the All Progressive Party, scored 89, 865 votes (Sahara Reporters, 2015). Thus, indicating that the winner has scored almost twice the total number of accredited voters in the state. This, perhaps, explains the position that the initial rejection of the card readers by politicians was an act of enemies of free and fair elections, who want to perpetuate their illegitimate mandate and want '... to continue to steal the people's mandate' (*The Premium Times*, 2015).

The 2015 elections also brought into sharp focus the turbulence about Boko Haram in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. After abducting 219 or more school girls, the radical group succeeded in killing thousands of people, forcing hundreds of thousands to take refuge in the neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger and displacing others. This unpatriotic act and the inability of the Nigeria government to handle the situation created legal and logistical tensions for INEC. The Commission faced the challenge of abiding by the principle that all resident adult Nigerians of 18 years and above should not be denied the right to vote merely because of displacement. INEC responded accordingly, making it categorically clear that,

... it is practically impossible for [it] to go outside the [conflict affected] states to organise voting for people. We should be realistic. We can't cater for everybody, but we'll do our best to cater for as many people as possible and we believe that from what we've heard and seen. There're still more IDPs in those states than those who've gone out. What we're doing is what will minimise the problem. It may not solve them, but at least it'll minimise them. We've to remain positive. Rather than doing nothing, we're trying to do something (*Aminu, Tahir, Alhassan & Bivan, 2015*).

This indicates that the Commission employed its rule making powers to ensure that each eligible voter in the country exercised his or her civil rights. In fact, all independent election observers across the country commended the 2015 electoral logistics. It showcased the way INEC and its electoral staff promptly responded to situations that required urgent attention.

While funding has been identified amongst the major challenges facing the conduct of credible elections in Nigeria (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2009; 2010; Junaidu, 2011), the 2015 elections appear to be an exception. The Commission's chair revealed that INEC's financial capability was challenged when the federal government introduced the Centralised Payment System (CPS). The system draws all funds of federal agencies into a one Central Bank Account from which all governmental agencies and departments are to be sponsored. This decision, the commission argued, violates the existing financial provision which is based on first-line-charge. INEC engaged the government on this and was able to sort things out before the 2015 elections. Indeed, the Commission-

chair confirmed that ‘... [a]s I speak to you, the entire funding required for the conduct of the 2015 general elections has been provided and is in our custody’ (Aminu, Tahir, Alhassan & Bivan, 2015). What is important, he stressed, is that both the commission and ‘... government maintain a balance view of funding election based on adequate resources and financial discipline’ (Aminu, Tahir, Alhassan & Bivan, 2015). This affirms the overwhelming belief that elections is ‘... meaningless without adequate funding ... and [its] timely release.’

Similarly, where general insecurity was observed, INEC, in collaboration with security agencies, decided on the right action to be taken. For example, under the umbrella of the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCESS) established in December 2010, INEC succeeded in addressing some teething elections-related security challenges.

Technical faults associated with the card readers in some states precipitates some electoral irregularities on the day of the elections. Some voters complained of not seeing their names on the national voter register despite presenting a valid PVC on the day of the elections. However, INEC gave poll officials discretionary powers to manage such problems as they were raised. Similarly, based on the provision of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended), the Commission allowed for the physically challenged to be assisted by other persons. But for ignorance or sheer disregard and suspicion, party agents were reported to have fought and stopped third party assistance. This notwithstanding, the election was commended and judged as the most successful in Nigerian electoral history by many election observers – both domestic and foreign.

After the Elections

Following the successful conduct of 2015 elections, compilation from across the constituencies in the country began. The state Electoral commissioners and Returning Officers were empowered to compile and announce results at local government and state collation centres, while presidential election result was announced at the national collation centre by the National Chairman of the Commission. Notwithstanding the power of the Commission to set the rules of engagement, the collation and announcement of result presented yet another interesting gallery. The Commission dramatized its fairness to all contestants and showcased its maturity and commitment to the sanctity of the ballot. The then ruling and seemingly losing-party through its lobbyists sought to deter INEC and its national chair to see the presidential elections to conclusion. In particular, an Honourable Minister of the Federal Republic accused the Commission's Chairperson of selective management, stating that PDP has lost confidence in him and what he is doing. The complainant argued that,

You have refused to listen to our protest. We have lost confidence in you and we do not believe in you anymore. We have complained against the election results from Kano, Kaduna, and Katsina. You are partial and tribalistic. We would not take it anymore until something is done. He returned our protests to us. We complained against Kaduna and [you] hurriedly set up a committee for Rivers. Let him set up a committee to go to Kano, Kaduna and Katsina. He is playing a script, we will not allow it. This country belongs to everybody, Jega has nothing to reply. He did not reply us (*This Day Live*, 2015).

Contrary to the intimidating, inciting, and personality attacking comments by one of such characters, Jega, responded with maturity, refusing to get distracted by these inciting acts. Instead, the Chairman of the Commission said,

Yesterday, after we took the first batch of result, as I was walking back to the office, my PA [Personal Assistance] came to present a paper from Dr. Fadile. I told him that I did not ask him to collect any letter from any one and that he return the letter to Fadile. Thereafter, Fadile send a text message about the petition, claiming ‘... that I do not accept petitions from here that they should go to the INEC office as this is a collation centre where results are being released. The Secretary is in INEC office. As I speak to you now is not in receipt of any petition (*This Day Live*, 2015).

Thus, INEC managed the situation while letting popular choice triumph over what appeared to be mere parochial claims. The Commission and its Chair appeared heroic in the conduct of the 2015 elections and have offered Nigeria and Nigerians a chance to build democratic rule.

Conclusion

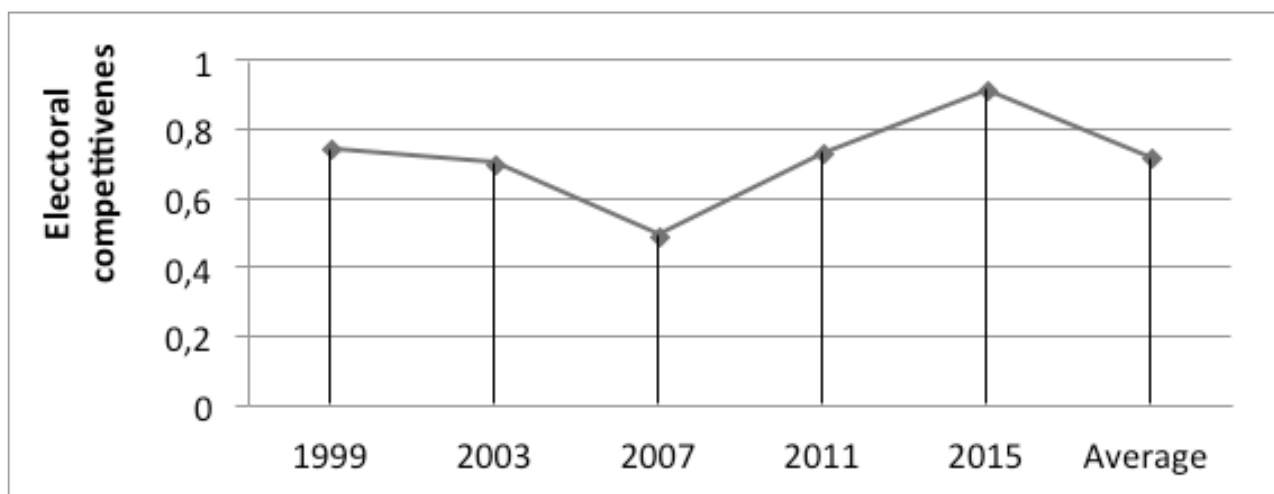
The management of an election is an interesting safety valve of democracy and democratisation (Birch, 2008 & 2011; Elklit & Reynolds, 2002 & 2005; Gazibo, 2006; Hartlyn, McCoy, & Mustillo, 2008; IDEA, 2006; Mozaffar, 2002; Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002). While this is well acknowledged, examination of the possible effects of an autonomous electoral commission and its strategic role in electoral conduct remains rare. Scholarship has made giant strides, building patterns and categories that highlight electoral administration as a potential and significant factor in understanding electoral politics. Evidence from above indicates the significance of our theoretical notion of autonomous electoral commission.

Using the empirical reality of what transpired between the periods before, during, and after the 2015 elections in Nigeria, we deduced that INEC is a far more autonomous and reliable institution than its predecessors. While we are not claiming to have found the single or actual factors responsible for the autonomy, it is apparent that the Commission’s probity appeared well enhanced by some changes in its legal status, commitment to fair and balanced operations, and in its uninterrupted supply of funds. Of course, the personality of Jega cannot be underestimated. However, given similar context, we expect any other person to deliver and excel. In particular, we demonstrate that the Commission succeeded in providing a level playing field for both the incumbent and oppositions. It empowered the electorates to decide who shall govern their affairs at different levels of government.

In fact, there is a significant connection between effective electoral competition among parties and candidates with INEC’s strategic innovations in the conduct of the elections. The

2015 Presidential election, for instance, is far more competitive compared to all other presidential elections conducted from 1999 to 2015. Figure 1 below indicates that the 2015 presidential election is even more competitive than the average of all the most recent past presidential elections conducted in the country.

Figure 1: Presidential Electoral Competition in Nigeria



Source: Authors' Compilation

Note: This figure was calculated using the formula - $(100 - [\text{winner's percentage of presidential votes or legislative seats} - 2\text{nd - place percentage share of votes of legislative seats}]/100)$ as provided by Bratton (2013).

The quality of competition is equally the same at the national legislative houses as the composition of the two houses changed completely. The ruling PDP with its 16 years of absolute majority lost this status to the vibrant opposition APC. APC now has a total majority of 60 seats of the 109 Senate seats and 225 seats of the 360 National Assembly seats. The story is not different with what is obtained in the States Governorship and Houses of Assembly elections. Possible explanatory factors to this trend could be the ability of the commission to assert its independence by validating the national voter list, production of microchipped PVCs which helped in the authentication of card holder as eligible voters using Card Reader machines. The combination of these initiatives reduced electoral frauds, safeguarded voters' preferences, and placed each contestant on a level playing field.

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