

Challenges of Card Reader on the Conduct of the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

The use of card reader during 2015 general election in Nigeria is a new trend and innovations in electioneering. This is geared towards ensuring credibility, and to stop all manners of falsification, rigging and other related vices associated with elections in Nigeria. However, there are recorded and observed shortcomings in this practice, this include malfunctioning of Biometric machines, non-activation of the subscriber identification card, low battery incidences etc. Having identified these shortcomings, the researcher's intent is to reexamine the challenges, impact and technical hitches that frustrated the application of card readers during 2015 general election and recommend necessary innovations on the areas of weaknesses to ensure credibility in the subsequent elections in Nigeria.

Key words: Card Readers, Elections, Credibility, Democracy.

Introduction

The introduction of card reader device in 2015 general election in Nigeria marked a major departure from what had been obtainable in previous elections in the country. The card reader is a biometric system that contained the registration and authentication of dully registered voters, that is those who had Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and who ultimately participated in the election. The card reader had been promoted by INEC as an anti-electoral fraud device and was introduced to enhance the integrity of the voting process and dissuade multiple voting (as only duly accredited and verified PVC holders could vote). The cards were also programmed to

work for specific polling units. This meant that PVC could not be used in multiple polling units (Amenaghawon, 2015).

In spite of the assurances given by INEC to address the issues that arose with the card readers after its test-ran in twelve states of the federation, the 2015 elections witnessed the inability of the device to deliver effectively in a large number of polling units. Therefore, card reader was confronted with challenges in its operation in the 2015 general elections. The level of awareness among the electorates about the card reader was poor. Many Nigerians especially the electorates in rural communities were completely unaware of the device. Many of these categories of people neither saw nor heard about the card reader until the day election was conducted. These categories of people did not have any information on the use of card reader in election. There was a lot of misconception about the card reader. To some of the electorates, the card reader was a voting device. This inadequate information dissemination and poor sensitization of the electorates on the card reader led to some poor human relations and uncooperative attitudes between some of the illiterate electorates and election officials (Onapajo, 2014).

There were claims that training given to the ad hoc and INEC staff on the use of the card reader was inadequate. Majority of the presiding officers and Assistant Presiding Officers that were in the polling units were not effectively trained on the proper use and handling of the card reader. In most cases the venues provided by INEC for their training were crowded and not conducive such that most of the trainees did not properly receive the instructions on the use of card reader. There was imperfect practical demonstration of how the card reader would properly be effective. In some cases, two card readers were provided for a class of hundred trainees on training day (Ekuwem, 2015).

Many of the trainees did not have the opportunities of operating the device. In some few cases, those that received training were replaced with those that have no proper idea of the effective use of the device. All of these led to the poor handling of the card reader during the elections to the extent that the protective film of some of the card readers were not removed thereby leading to the impossibility of the device to detect thumbprint in election day.

Card reader breakdown was also witnessed during the elections. Some of these machines malfunctioned on the day of election. Though, INEC had provided back-up in case of any card reader breakdown. However, some of the back-up failed to also function. For instance, five card readers were deployed for use at the polling unit of the Presidential Candidate for PDP in Bayelsa State yet, none of them functioned. Similarly, the card reader at the polling unit of the Vice-President Candidate of APC was nonfunctional. A few smart card readers were not smart to function effectively. A few of the card readers were unable to function due to blank screen, non-activation of the Subscriber Identification Module (SIM) card in the device and low battery. Some INEC officials attributed the failure of the card readers to INEC engineers who could not

decode the inbuilt security installation in the card reader. The security code in the card reader is reportedly designed to update the time and date of voting. One official claimed that the cards were initially programmed, for February 14 that with the postponement of March 28, some of the card's readers had not been reprogrammed (Vanguard, 2015). Wherein the card readers functioned, a few of the devices were confronted with the challenge of PVC authentication and biometric data verification of the voters in the polling units. The authentication and verification of voters was part of the accreditation process for the election.

Several PVC issued to voters by the INEC could not be authenticated thereby disenfranchising some eligible voters in the election. Wherein some voters' cards were authenticated, their biometric data could not be verified after several trials; and where it was verified, it was slow in some cases, especially with regards to the fingerprints. For instance, in Borno State, ten percent of eligible voters' cards were authentic aid and biometric data verified by the card readers at most of the polling units (Odiakose, 2015). Notwithstanding, the inability of the device to capture the fingerprints of some voters was attributed to greasy or dirty fingers of the voters. In most cases, people had to scrub their hands on the ground just to ensure that the device recognizes their fingerprints (Okoro, 2015). Furthermore, following the widespread failure of the card reader, Prof. Atairu Jega, the then INEC Chairman, changed the guidelines (while the election was ongoing and after millions of frustrated voters had gone home disenchanted) in the conduct of the election on March 28 and approved the use of manual accreditation in areas that the smart card readers failed to function during the 2015 general election (Odiakose, 2015). The announcement by the former INEC Chairman (Prof. Atairu Jega) seemed to have eased accreditation in many places. However, the extent to which this announcement may have inadvertently opened the flood gates for electoral fraud is yet to be fully analyzed (Amenaghawon, 2015). It is unfortunate that the rules of the game were changed in the middle of the electoral competition. Despite this, the smart card reader had an impact on the 2015 general election.

Effect of Card Readers on the Conduct of 2015 General Election

Despite the challenges that confronted the card readers, during the 2015 general election, a significant effect of the device was observed after the elections. Amenaghawon (2015) therefore identified the following impacts.

1. The use of the card reader led to the increase confidence and trust in the electoral process. This public confidence is dependent on the integrity of the election which the 2015 general election appears to possess.
2. Majority of Nigerians after the elections believed that their votes would be counted and as such their vote will be respected in future elections; and this has reinforced the legitimacy of Nigerians in the democratic process.
3. Electoral fraud was reduced, inflation of the number of voters present and at polling stations were reduced. The device checked the undemocratic attitude of politicians in

polling booth.

4. Election litigations were minimized; there was a departure from the past where every election outcome is being contested at the election tribunal. Most of the candidates that lost in the 2015 general election did not challenge the outcome. In fact, some of the major contenders that did not win in the election embraced and congratulated the winners before the announcement from the INEC, Goodluck Jonathan, candidate of the ruling PDP congratulated Muhammed Buhari, the APC presidential candidate, the winner of the presidential election. This attitude also happened across many states of the federation in the governorship, national assembly and state houses of assembly elections.
5. Electoral conflicts and violence were very minimal as the election seemed to have been transparent and credible due to the use of the card reader. The usually excessive and pointless attacking and degrading between the election winners and losers in past electoral contest was significantly reduced. In view of the minimal level of electoral fraud due to the use of the card reader, tensions were reduced among the political gladiators, and as such, electoral conflict was grossly diminished in the 2015 general elections outcome compared to other elections in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Nigeria's democratic capacity has increased, and its democracy strengthened. Nigerians and Nigeria's democratic institutions now understood the knowledge needed to have a free and fair election to deepen the democratic process (Ekuwem, 2015).

Impact of Card Readers in 2015 General Election in Nigeria

Stakeholders continued to hail INEC for introducing card readers in the 2015 general elections, which they said, helped in no small measure in reducing election fraud across the country, despite its challenges. According to them (stakeholders) the card reader technology did not only reduce election rigging and snatching of ballot boxes from polling units but enhanced speedy and accurate process during accreditation of voters.

Dr. Emmanuel Ekuwem of Teleem Group told This Day Newspaper that the use of card reader for the 2015 general elections had proved that INEC could conduct credible elections with minimal complaints (This Day 2015). The use of card readers for elections is highly commendable because it has helped reduce election fraud like multiple registrations and multiple voting. With the card readers, the true identities of card holders were matched with the details contained in their permanent voter's card (PVCs) during accreditation and the process helped in reducing fraudulent accreditation that marred electoral processes in the past" (Ekuwem, 2015).

Ekuwem admonished INEC to continue to explore the power of technology in subsequent elections and called on the electoral body to create a backend database that is linked with the card readers in order to give voters the opportunity to vote from anywhere in the country, using their Permanent Voters' Card (PVC), instead of restricting them to vote only in their registration centers. He advised INEC to apply the technology of Automated Teller

Machines (ATM) cards issued by banks, which allows card holders withdraw cash from any bank that is located anywhere in the country.

According to Ekuwem (2015), voters should be able to use their PVCs on any card reader for accreditation and voting in any part of the country, irrespective of where the voter was registered. This will allow people who may have relocated from their place of registration, to vote in their new areas of residence. Reacting to the situation where some of the card readers malfunctioned during the elections, Ekuwem said it was expected because the technology was new and that most of the INEC officials were not conversant with the card reader technology. He said he became pleased with INEC when some of the complaints about card readers were addressed during the Governorship and State House of Assembly elections (Ekuwem, 2015).

The President of Information Technology Systems and Security Professionals (ITSSP) Mr. Rogba Adeoye, commended INEC for the use of card readers. According to him, the card reader technology was able to reduce election fraud by providing accurate records of accredited voters who were the same people that were allowed to vote. He said the card readers were able to address discrepancies between actual voters and fake voters. Chairman of the House of Representative Committee on ICT, Honourable Shehu Gusau, told This Day that although the Card reader technology is new to Nigerians, it has helped to achieve a fair and free election without massive rigging (Onapajo, 2014).

President of the Association of Telecommunications Companies of Nigeria (ATCON), Mr. Lanre Ajayi, also commended INEC for the introduction of card reader machines for election and described the technology as a worldwide technology that is driving economies. However, he argued that having successfully tested and implemented the card reader technology for the 2015 general elections, it will be good if INEC take into consideration the observed lapses from the use of the machines, and perfect them in subsequent elections in order to surpass the election credibility and transparency it achieved in the 2015 general elections (Amenaghawon, 2015).

Card Readers and Subsequent Elections in Nigeria: The Way Forward

The introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) into the electoral process is generating both interest and concern not only among the Nigerian public, but practitioners across the globe. Today, most electoral management bodies (EMEs) around the world use new technologies with the aim of improving the electoral process. This technological software device including the smart card reader must be deployed in manner that will engender a transparent and effective electoral process (Ekuwem, 2015). No doubt, the smart card reader had played a very significant role in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. However, there is need to ensure that the issues and challenges which confronted the use of the device before, during and after the election in Nigeria do not repeat itself in subsequent elections. Therefore, a

few mechanisms would need to be put in place by INEC for the deployment of card readers in subsequent elections to strengthen the democratic process in Nigeria.

INEC should ensure that its conduct and activities in subsequent elections is transparent especially with the use of technology like the card reader. This is because transparency is a key principle in credible elections, and this will bring about trust and public confidence in the electoral process. Also, INEC should consult widely and carry out effective campaigns on the card reader and any other technology to be deployed in subsequent elections. Stakeholders including the media, political parties, civil societies, national assembly, and the electorate should be adequately consulted. INEC should partner with them to carry out massive dissemination of information, sensitize them on the need to key into the technology in order to improve the electoral process and deepen the democratic process (Ekuwem, 2015).

However, INEC should endeavor to manage information about the technology and changes so that stakeholders do not have unrealistic expectations and do not impose impossible deadlines (ACE Project). These stakeholders can be engaged to make rules and regulations on the electoral process. The need to implement the electoral law in conformity with the technology deployed for future elections is germane. The Electoral Act, 2010 (as amended) should be amended to include the use of the card reader for biometric verification of voters for the purpose of accreditation in subsequent elections. Therefore, the National Assembly should quickly be approached by INEC to amend the electoral legal frameworks on the use of card reader to address the issue of legality which the card reader had generated. In addition, adequate training of election officials both temporary and permanent staff of INEC should be conducted in a conducive environment ahead of time in subsequent elections so as to give room for practical demonstrations of how to use the device effectively. Enough card readers should be made available during the training session. Every one of the trainee should undergo a mock test during training. Strict compliance with all instructions handed down to the trainees should be monitored. The trainee's allowances should be paid in full and on time to encourage them in handling the device properly (Ekuwem, 2015).

Conclusion

Card Reader devices have proved its worthiness irrespective of some flaws associated with its usage. It is evident that subsequent practices and the use of biometric mechanism in subsequent elections in Nigeria would correct these anomalies and incidences of fraudulent behaviors among voters and party members rigging, falsification of results, and touting during elections in Nigeria, which inadvertently affect the credibility of elections in the country. Therefore, in ensuring free, fair and credible elections for democratic consolidation in Nigeria, card reader and biometric system remains a panacea. Card reader and biometric system remain an innovative solution to credible elections in Nigeria.

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