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Information and communication technology (ICT) and democratic consolidation: a study of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Elections serve as a means of changing government at regular intervals in a democratic state. However, it is expected that elections should be credible, free, fair and transparent so that electorates would have confidence that their votes are counted. In order to ensure the integrity in the conduct of elections, technologies are deployed in most states with a view to curbing election rigging. This paper examined the 2023 elections and the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in order to ascertain the challenges inherent in the conducts of election. In achieving this, the paper made use of personal observations and secondary sources of data such as relevant textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, internet, etc while communication theory provided the framework. The study revealed that influence of technologies on the conduct of the elections shattered citizens' expectations thus making the opposition parties contesting the outcomes in the courts. Therefore, democracy that supposed to be immune was marred by the technology in Nigeria. It further revealed in theoretical insight that factors such as complexity of the Nigerian state and the alien root of liberal democracy, influence of political elite, poverty and failure of social services have negative significant influence on electoral technology in Nigeria. It concluded that electoral technology is a means in the electoral process but not a means to an end in curbing electoral corruption in Nigeria. The paper, therefore, recommended among others that the INEC should improve on the use of ICT and make it friendly with a view to curbing electoral fraud so that democracy will be consolidated in Nigeria.

Keywords: Elections, Information and Communication and Technology, Electorates, Democratic Consolidation

Introduction

In today's democratic systems, ability to conduct free, fair, and credible periodic election underlies the functioning of states, including the Nigerian state. Evidence continues to highlight the roles of information and communication technology (ICT) in this direction (Sambo, 2021; Fombad, 2021; Agunyai, 2023; Maseko, 2024). Emphasis on the roles of ICT in Nigeria's general elections becomes important because of the current accounts of several democratic scholars and practitioners have painted a gloomy picture of democracy in Africa, especially in Nigeria. Evidence showed that Nigeria's democratic consolidation is consistently challenged by the country's social-political climate marked by prolonged periods of electoral mal-practices (Agunyai et al 2024).

According to Agunyai et al (2024), Nigeria's quest for democratic consolidation points to the lingering problem of enthroning leaders through heavily rigged elections. It was further revealed that while democratic transitions through mal-administered elections have become the norm in Nigeria, they are increasingly being used to disguise various forms of undemocratic practices (Ibeanu, 2022; Fatai, 2022; Kolade et al., 2023). This aptly buttressed the calls and concerns for democratic consolidation in Nigeria, as the future of the country's democracy remained largely uncertain. The uncertainty in Nigeria's democracy to be transformed and becomes consolidated was a strategy that propels Fatai (2022) and Agunyai (2023), and several other scholars to conclude that a rethink in terms of the deployment of ICT in general elections, is needed to improve the quality of elections in Nigeria, consolidate democracy, and constitutionalism.

One of the basic features of democratic state is the conduct of periodic elections. In spite of this, election constitutes high stake

politics in emerging democracies across the world. This is because the conducts of elections always bring apprehension due to the fact that democracy is new and alien to these political systems despite its fascinating nature in any state where it is being practiced across the world. As a result of this, the parties involved always introduce winner-takes-all syndrome into electoral game which taints the integrity of the elections.

Against this background, the electoral controversies in Nigeria predate the country's independence (Obiyan & Olutola, 2013). Elections in Nigeria have been virtually all characterized by election rigging (Awopeju, 2009; Awopeju 2011). In order to address the problem regarding the integrity of an election, states have come out with strategies of addressing election rigging. These include electoral reforms introduced in many polities.

Consequently, part of the electoral reforms in a state is the introduction of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the electoral process. The fascinating of ICT in the process is that it reduces the human ingenuity in the electioneering process through its data base because the manual transmission of election results is hardly released on time. Besides, it also brings suspicion and tension among politicians and political parties that harbor the fear that their votes have been altered (Agunyai, Ojajorotu & Folusho, 2023).

In Nigeria, ICT was first introduced in 2011 with automated finger print identification system. Its administration in election was first observed in the 2015 general elections (Alayande, 2022). Although, the 2015 elections were not totally free, fair and credible but to some extent the outcome was acceptable to Nigerians. The use of technology devices was used in 2019 elections with a view to improving on the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, however, the elections were also marred with irregularities (Agbu, 2015). Also, technologies were deployed in 2023 electioneering process in Nigeria; yet the elections were not free and fair. The problem is

why is it that the use of ICT does not enhance free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria? This, therefore, calls for a line inquiry in the Nigerian electoral politics with a view to identifying the problem and to improving the electoral process in deepening and consolidating democracy in the subsequent elections.

However, this paper complements studies on ICT and electoral processes (Ayeni & Esan, 2018; Nwagwu, 2016; Agbu, 2016); though the study departs from the large body of studies that has established the impact, prospect, encouragement of the ICT and election administration by examining ICT, its challenges and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The paper poses the following questions: What are the challenges associated with the use of technology vis-à-vis the conduct of elections in 2023 general elections in Nigeria? What theoretical insight explains the problems surrounding the 2023 general elections in Nigeria? How can ICT strengthen the public trust as regards conducting elections and ensuring democratic consolidation? Answers to these questions will be addressed through the use of secondary sources of data and personal observations of the author as regards 2023 elections. The secondary sources of data include the use of academic journals, textbooks, internet sources, newspapers, conference papers, etc.

The remaining parts of the paper are divided into six sections. Section one examines conceptual clarification. In section two, a theoretical framework for the paper is undertaken. Section three of the paper gives a critical historical analysis of ICT and the conduct of election in the fourth republic. Section four discusses the 2023 elections and its challenges. Section five examines the ICT, 2023 elections and democratic consolidation and the theoretical insight from Nigeria state while in the final section; conclusion and recommendations are made for the work.

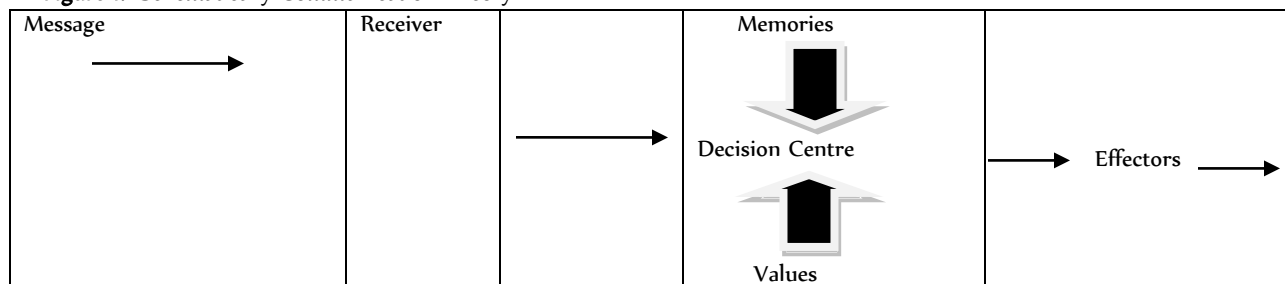
Conceptual Clarification

Election

Election is a complex process that involves a choice between candidates or a choice whether or not a particular policy is to be followed (Shively, 1999). Corroborating this, Dunmoye (2010) opines that it is a process of selection of one or more persons to serve in public office. It is an act of selecting a person or persons for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting. Similarly, an election is a process of voting to choose someone to be their political leader or representative in government (www.dkfindout.com).

Information and Communication Technology

Figure 1: Schematically Communication Theory



This means a broader term for technology, which embraces all communication technologies such as internet, wireless network, cell phones, computers, software, middleware, video conferencing, social networking and other social media applications and services. In the words of Karl (1961), ICT is the acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of vocal, pictorial, textual and numerical information by a microelectronics-based combination of computing and telecommunication. For the purpose of this study, ICT is seen as the electronics or devices used in transmitting information and processing election results.

Democratic Consolidation

This means as soon as the conclusion is reached that probability of democracy breakdown is very low, or the probability of survival is very high. Similarly, Przeworski (1991: 26) posits that democratic consolidation occurs:

when under given political and economic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions, when all the losers want to do is to try again within the same institutions under which they have just lost" (Przeworski, 1991: 26).

In this context, democratic consolidation is not only conceived as a game in town but ensuring that the democratic regime is stabilized and to last well into the foreseeable future.

Theoretical Framework

The study has communication theory as its framework. The proponent of this theory was by Karl Deutsch. He focuses on communication as the pivot of politics. Deutsch posits that communication theory and control represent a shift in the centre of interest from drives to steering and from instincts to systems of decisions, regulation and control. He conceived politics as a process of steering or control rather than the exercise of power.

Therefore, Deutsch sees political phenomena to be better understood and analysed in the context of decisions, control and communication rather than power. Communication theory treats the government as a decision-making system based on diverse information flow where information is defined as a patterned distribution, or a patterned relationship between events. The needs and requirements of the society are transmitted to the society through another set of communication. Communication theory is illustrated by the diagram below:

From the above table, the communication theory is explanatory when the message is being received by the receiver and

the receiver transmits into the memories which later become the value through the efforts of decision makers and the centre. Consequently, the message will be effective by transmitting it to appropriate channels in the society.

The theory is relevant to the present study because technologies are communication devices through which information is transmitted and becomes the policy adapted in the society. Although, the present study examines the 2023 elections and the ICT and the democratic consolidation in Nigeria but the use of technologies was applied to the conduct of the elections and choices of the electorates were informed and transmitted through electronic devices.

History of ICT and Elections in Nigeria

It has been stated above that the use of ICT in the electioneering process could be traced to 2011 general elections in Nigeria though was not deployed for the conduct of elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), under the leadership of a renowned political scientist, Attahiru Jega, introduced automated fingerprint identification system to stop multiple voters' registration that had been associated with electoral fraud in the past elections.

In 2015, the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) and Smart Card Reader (SCR) were introduced in the conduct of elections in Nigeria. These innovations allowed a voter's identity to be verified vis-à-vis the biometrics of the voters as their information is entrenched to the cards. The combination of PVC and SCR was reliable deterrent to electoral fraud by identifying voters' identity (fingerprint and display) before voting.

The conduct of 2015 general elections were a watershed in the history of electoral technology because it was for the first time that election results were publicly available on INEC website. Although, elections were not totally credible but the outcomes of the result were largely accepted by the parties and the stakeholders involved in the electoral process. The election was significant because it was the first-time opposition party won the presidential election in Nigeria.

The 2019 general elections were identified with grey areas in the use of SCR after the 2015 elections. The frequency of the failure in fingerprint scanner was in the 2015 general election (Ayeni, Aweh and Ajisafe, 2023). As a result of this, INEC made enhancements to the hardware of the SCR. Following the observation that the limited size of the scanner surface led to a significant rate of fingerprint failure, a decision was made to replace the existing fingerprint scanners with large ones (Ayeni, Aweh and Ajisafe, 2023). Following this advancement, reduction in fingerprint failure was made in the 2018 off-cycle gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun states respectively. According to Ayeni (2018) confirmed this when he said:

The failure rate of 2018 governorship elections in Ekiti and Osun states was significantly reduced vis-à-vis 2015 general elections after the upgrade of the SCRs. However, the reason for this can be attributed to advancements in technology and software.

According to INEC (2023), the deployment of the technologies such as Collation Support and Results Verification System (SRVS), SCR registrations and white-listing, Seal in the battery/Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) compartment of SCR, a customized SIM cards for registration, Dedicated Virtual Private Network (VPN), and Real-time tracking of election materials was reported during

2019 general elections. These technologies were meant to improve the electoral process and to ensure credibility in Nigeria's elections. For instance, the SRVS was used for the first input of scores and numerical data. The application was meant to identify any miscalculations present in the figure, dedicated VPN was used to connect SCRs to the server using dedicated Internet Protocol (IP) Address for communication and data transmission in order to ensure security and effective management. While the Real-time tracking of election materials was implemented by INEC to ensure electoral worker cooperation with politicians sabotaging the process.

As good as these technological devices were deployed to curb election rigging, the 2019 elections were still marred with network failure and violence as regards free and fair elections" (Awopeju, 2024; Jim-Nwoko, 2019). Obim *et. al* (2022) confirmed that electoral violence was in some states such as Rivers, Benue, Kaduna, Osun, Lagos and Borno states. For instance, Osun state experienced an attack on INEC office at Ijebu-Jesa and ballot papers used in the conduct of presidential election were destroyed. The total number of 626 people were killed in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria (Civil Society Situation Room, 2009).

2023 General Elections and the ICT in Nigeria

Nigeria is the largest democracy in Africa. It held its seventh presidential elections in the fourth republic on 25th February, 2023. Before conducting 2023 general elections, the INEC made it public that there were measures put in place to enhance the integrity and restore popular confidence in the electioneering process. One of the measures was the digitalization of elections.

In order to achieve this, Nigeria reformed her electoral process through Electoral Act of 2022. This Act legitimized the use of technology in the conduct of election. With this development, Nigeria is one of the many African democracies that show impressive levels of progress in the use of electoral technology when compared with other regions of the world where democratic elections are held (Alayande, 2023). For example, out of the 177 countries listed on the International IDEA database, only 58 have digital voter registers, half of which are African countries (Alayande, 2023).

Consequently, Nigeria has substantially implemented the use of technology across all stages of its election management except for E-voting. Therefore, the steady increase in technology adoption in the electoral process continued in 2023, following successful pilots in the Anambra, Ekiti and Osun gubernatorial elections.

The digitalization of 2023 elections comprised two innovations. These were Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV). The 2015 and 2019 elections only used PVC and SCR. The BVAS is a significant technology innovation that digitally reads fingerprints of the electorates at the polling unit, thus helping with voter authentication and accreditation. In other words, it reads the features of voters and compare then with the INEC's database of stored images.

The 2023 general elections supposed to be significant in two areas. One, the Chairman of INEC, Prof. Mahmood Yakubu, had reiterated that ICT will enhance transparency of the election and also will inspire public trust in the outcomes of the elections in Nigeria. According to the INEC Chairman, the new technology will deliver free, fair, credible and verifiable elections supported by technology which guarantees transparent accreditation and upload

of polling unit results for citizens to view in real time on Election Day (Suleiman, 2022). Two, the complementary innovations would be used for the first time in the conduct of election in Nigeria with the expectation that they would bring change in the conduct of election in Nigeria.

However, on the presidential Election Day, the polling officers began to experience difficulties with the BVAS. Due to this, they struggle with voter accreditation process. This caused delay and a lot of people were disenfranchised (Hoffmann, 2023; Oladeji, 2023). Closely related to these voter-accreditation delays was the widespread breakdown of the BVAS on the day in question itself (Acheampong, 2023). Reports from various polling units indicated that the BVAS failed to either function or suffered glitches in Borno and Lagos states respectively (Acheampong, 2023). Besides, in Rivers state, the BVAS failed to capture the biometric details of several individuals, including the governor, while identical twins failed to be validated as voters (Akeaya-inne, 2023). Prior to the Election Day, INEC had conducted mock trials in 12 polling units per state and BVAS was adjudged to have produced high degree of satisfaction (Acheampong, 2023).

Following the failure of the BVAS to function or suffered glitches, the elections experienced password errors, weak internet connectivity, lack of proper training of the ad hoc staff for operating of BVAS and IReV hitch (Acheampong, 2023). After the end of the voting process, some officials of INEC claimed not to remember their passwords to the IReV portal (Akeaya-Inn, 2023). Even those who could remember theirs, they complained that the passwords were wrong and that they could consequently not upload the polling unit results in real time (Unini, 2023).

The election monitoring groups such as European Union Observer Mission reported that the option to use the BVAS offline, led the result sheets to be uploaded even in situation of weak internet connectivity. Due to the fact that results could not be uploaded onto the IReV, this made some party agents to walk out in the collation centre in Abuja. In view of this, INEC couldn't adhere to its own statements and guidelines, which derive from its laws that election results would be uploaded to its portal using the BVAS directly from the polling unit in real-time for the public's viewing. This makes the electorates and the entire citizenry to lose confidence in INEC as regards the conduct of election through the use of technology in Nigeria. This is further confirmed by Olakunle and Oyoyo (2023). Besides, Olanmi and Oyoyo (2023) opined that INEC credibility sinks as 94% contested posts awaited tribunal. Consequently, an estimation of 1, 196 petitions were filed in courts challenging the outcome of the results. Out of these, 712 were dismissed and 179 invariably withdrawn (Olanmi and Oyoyo, 2023). However, 327 petitions were filed within election tribunals across the country (African Check, 2023).

Given the above analysis, it is important to note that the conducts of elections in Nigeria go beyond electoral technology although, it brings about credibility in the electoral process. In their view, Ojatorotu *et. al* (2023) are of the opinion that the use of technology in the democratic process has created mixed feeling among Nigerians. Therefore, findings disagree with communication theory which treats the government as a decision-making system based on diverse information flow where information is defined as a patterned distribution, or a patterned relationship between events.

Putting electoral technology, conduct of election and democratic consolidation through the authors' observations, the

conduct of election through the use of technology may not consolidate twenty-four years of uninterrupted democracy because of a quite number of factors. One, Nigeria is a complex state coupled with the alien root of liberal democracy. Some features such as vote buying, violence, arson characterize Nigerian state. All these will not consolidate democracy because electoral technology only makes the credibility in the conducts of elections but not the entire electoral game. How do you explain votes that have been bought before the conduct of election? However, the winner-takes-all approach threatens and destabilizes the hard-earned Nigerian democracy.

Two, the influence of political elite will not make the electoral technology to work. The political elites are desperate and they are ready to introduce the winner-takes-all as regards election in Nigeria. Every contestant is determined to rig election in his own favour or buy votes. And where rigging is made impossible, murder of political opponents is introduced into the electoral game. However, win takes all approach threatens and destabilize the hard-earned democracy in Nigeria

The third one is poverty. Poverty is at the root of the "politics of bitterness" that characterized Nigerian politics, thus serving as a constraint on stabilizing democracy. Therefore, electoral technology seems to make unworkable. Nigerians have been impoverished by the politicians; as a result of this, electoral officials are bribed before elections so as to guarantee their partial support.

Four is failure of social services such as internet, functional education, effective health care, telephone services, etc. All of these are associated with human development and promotion of the citizenry. Ajayi (1998: 43) is of the view that "human development and promotion of the citizenry's happiness which are important goals of democracy are absent in the country." for instance, lack of social service such as weak internet connectivity has significant factor on institutional failure. For instance, the weak internet service experienced by INEC in the 2023 presidential election derail the electoral process. The argument is that the social services provided by the government are too poor for electoral technology in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this article was to provide better insights into the complexities presented by digital technologies in cyberspace and make recommendations on how to address Nigeria's ICT challenges. While digital technologies offer promising opportunities to consolidate democracy in Nigeria by eradicating electoral mal-practices, ICT use in Nigeria's general election equally presented significant challenges relating to illegal manipulations of ICT, hitches, the digital divide, and asymmetric information. Even with the introduction of BVAS, IREV, and other devices enabled by ICT, there are still some concerns about the failures of this ICT digital technology to deliver credible general elections in 2023. This necessitates more study by scholars in order to look into the underlying causes of Nigeria's ongoing ICT problems, possibly in conjunction with practitioners and other stakeholders. Additionally, the data demonstrates that although digitalization certainly presents new challenges to democracy nationwide, its advantages cannot be overstated. Furthermore, this article makes clear that Nigeria's democratic transfers from one civilian government to another since 1999 are not indicative of a stable democracy by any means.

Based on the findings, the paper draws a conclusion that although the use of electoral technology is desirable and expedient in the conduct of elections but it does not guarantee free, fair and credible elections due to some factors associated with complexity of Nigerian state, poverty, failure of social services and influence of political elite. However, despite these factors, Nigeria's democracy should not be reversed and it should be consolidated. It must be noted that elections and ICT should be encouraged in the process while the identified factors should be guarded for democracy to take its firm roots. It must be remembered that "the longer democracy persists, the more it imposes its own rhythms and deadlines on those who have agreed to play by its rules of competition and cooperation" (Schmitter and Santiso, 1998: 71). However, for democracy to be consolidated and to ensure public trust as regards election in Nigeria, the underlisted recommendations are made.

One, INEC should improve on the use of ICT and make it friendly so that citizens will have confidence in the Commission in the conduct of subsequent elections. There is no doubt that ICT will deter electoral fraud in the electioneering process but it must be made friendly for the users. Nigerians had believed that they would access the results via the ICT but their expectation was dashed. Therefore, for democracy to be consolidated, technology should be workable and improve upon in all the process in the conduct of elections in Nigeria.

Two, adequate funding of the electoral body (INEC) is also necessary as a veritable ingredient for the growth and development of a lasting democracy. The funding will help the electoral body in procuring the technologies needed. Besides, it will not only enhance the capacity technologies and subsequently upgrading them but also help training their staff in the use of ICT in the subsequent of elections in Nigeria.

Three, the culture good governance culture must be instilled in Nigerians. The parameters of good governance such as accountability, participation, inclusive and transparent government, service delivery, cooperation between government and civil society and economic and financial governance must be instilled in the citizens. These will likely make democracy to be immune in Nigeria.

Four, the legal framework of the electoral act should be strengthened to encourage the use of electoral technology. Strict laws should be made to discourage those people that intend to use their influence to frustrate the use of ICT in the conduct of elections. In other words, any politician that intends to derail the electoral process should be strictly penalized by the government and see the offence as a treason against the Nigerian state.

Five, poverty should be addressed by the Nigerian government for consolidating democracy. Poverty breeds corruption in the electoral process and it is a means of ensuring the victory of the competitors. The aftermath is the legitimacy problem in the society. The Electoral Act should address the corruptible influence of money politics before, during and after elections in Nigeria.

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