REPORT OF
PALACE OF PRIESTS ASSEMBLY
OBSERVATION OF THE BYE-ELECTIONS
HELD IN CROSS RIVER, ONDO,
AND PLATEAU STATES
ON FEBRUARY 26, 2022.

Submitted to:
The Chairman,
Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)
Zambezi Crescent, Maitama 904101, Abuja

Introduction

This is the report of the bye-elections held on February 26, 2022, in Cross River state; Akpabuyo State Constituency, and Ogoja/Yala Federal Constituency, Ondo State; Akure North/Akure South Federal Constituency and Plateau State; Jos North/Bassa Federal Constituency and Pankshin South State Constituency. The elections followed the declaration of vacancies by the Honourable Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Honourable Speaker of those State Houses of Assembly.

Although elections were also held in the Ngor-Okpala, the Palace of Priests Assembly (PPA), one of the accredited observer organizations based in Abuja, observed the elections in collaboration with the Priests Peace and Justice Initiative (PPJ)- the social arm of PPA in only the three states of Cross River, Ondo, and Plateau. The organizations deployed 14 observers in the three states; Four (4) in Akure North/Akure South Federal Constituency, three (3) in Jos North/Bassa Federal Constituency and four (4) in Pankshin South State Constituency, three (3) in Akpabuyo State Constituency and three (3) in the Ogoja/Yala Federal Constituency.

Observation

The general impression about the observation is as captured below:

a) INEC logistics and arrival of materials:

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has taken these bye-elections as preparatory for the forthcoming general elections in 2023. INEC staff and election materials arrived at polling units across the locations promptly. They were there in majority of the polling stations before 8.00 am. Setup in several polling stations started immediately and was closely followed by accreditation and voting. In Cross River State, at the Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, in the Ogoja/Yala Federal Constituency, Ward 6/18, PU014B, INEC officials, and materials arrived before 8.00 am. At the same Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, PU003, INEC staff and materials arrived at 8.05 am. At Okuku Ward 06, PU007, INEC staff
and materials arrived before 8.00 am. In Akpabuyo at the Ikot Nakanda Primary School Ward 10, PU001, materials, and INEC officials arrived 7.10 am. At Ward 1, PU006, Ikot Offiong Ambai INEC staff and materials arrived at 8.00 am. An exception is at the Atimbo East Ward 2, PU 005, where materials arrived at 9.09 am.

In Plateau State, at the Plateau Hospital, Jenta Adamu Ward, PU001, INEC staff, and materials arrived at 7.30 am. In Chip Ward, Kwala PU 001, INEC staff and materials arrived before 8.00 am. In Bassa-Farin Lamba, PU 004 INEC staff and materials arrived before 8.00 am.

In Ondo State, at Akure South in Lisa Ward 5, PU 005, INEC staff and materials arrived before 8.00 am. In the same Akure at Lisa Ward 5, NEPA Office, PU 013, INEC staff and materials arrived before 8.00 am also. In Akure North at Oba Ile, PU 009 and also in Akure South, Obayele Post Office, PU 006 materials and staff arrive before 8.00 am.

b) Turnout of voters:

In the three states, there was a recurring voters apathy. Voters’ turnout was abysmally low everywhere. In Ikot Offiong Ambai, there were 820 registered voters with only 128 votes. At the Saint Joseph Primary School, Ward 6/18, PU014B, out of 947 registered voters, only 113 voted. At the same the Saint Joseph Primary School, PU003, there were 710 registered voters with just 79 people voting. At Okuku Ward 06, there were 541 voters registered while 117 were voting. In Akpabuyo, Ikot Offiong Ambai where there was a total of 820 voters, only 131 voted. At Atimbo East Ward 2, PU 005, the number registered was 1011 but only 153 people voted. Voters were deterred from coming out to vote largely because of the intimidating presence of security personnel driving with mounted rifles in large convoys.

In Ondo and Plateau states, the turnout of voters was at the same poor level. In Akure South Lisa Ward, the number of registered voters was 890 and only 108 voted. At the NEPA office, 637 registered while only 77 voted. In Bassa, Farin Lamba 1, the number of registered voters was 1,609 and only 248 voted.

c) Secrecy of the ballot:

Secrecy of the ballot was observed as spelled out by the law. In all the polling stations observed, there were voting cubicles positioned to ensure secrecy.
In Cross River State, voting cubicles were provided in all the polling units observed, including Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, in PU014B, PU003, and Okuku Ward 06, PU007, in Akpabuyo at the Ikot Nakanda Primary School Ward 10, PU001, PU006, Ikot Offiong Ambai and Atimbo East Ward 2, PU 005 to ensure secrecy of the ballot. Cubicles were also provided in Plateau State at the Plateau Hospital, Jenta Adamu Ward, PU001, Chip Ward, Kwala PU 001, and Bassa-Farin Lamba, PU 004.

In Ondo State, at Akure South in Lisa Ward 5, PU 005, Lisa Ward 5, NEPA Office, PU 013, and in Akure North at Oba Ile, PU 009, Akure South, Obayele Post Office, PU 006 there was adequate secrecy maintained for voters.

d) Security of the election:

There was a very impressive presence of security personnel at all the polling units in all three states. In the different units observed, in Ogoja/Yala it was only a police affair with at least three police officers. In the Akpabuyo area of the state, there was also an adequate police presence. In Ondo State, at Akure South in Lisa Ward 5, PU 005, Lisa Ward 5, NEPA Office, PU 013, and in Akure North at Oba Ile, PU 009, Akure South, Obayele Post Office, PU 006 there were adequate police officers to provide security for voters. There was also a good presence of security operatives in Jenta Adamu Ward, PU001, Chip Ward, Kwala PU 001, and Bassa-Farin Lamba, PU 004 where there was a mixed presence of police, civil defense, and members of the vigilante group of Nigeria.

e) Location of polling units:

The location of the polling station was where INEC scored very high in arranging for the elections. The locations were accessible even to Persons Living with disabilities (PLWD). The majority of the polling units, and indeed the voting environment, were in open areas like primary schools, open compounds, corporations, and town squares. In Ogoja/Yala it was at the Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku. In Akpabuyo, the health center was used as a polling station. In Akure South, in Lisa Ward 5, PU 005, Lisa Ward 5 polling stations were situated at the NEPA Office, PU 013, and in Akure North at Oba Ile, PU 009. In Akure South, it was the Obayele Post Office. The Plateau State polling station was also located in the hospital premises.
f) **Capability of INEC staff:**

INEC staff were courteous and professional in attending to the few voters who turned out and party agents. Given the low turnout, their capacity, competence, and staying power were not truly tested to determine their mastery of the processes in conducting free, fair, and credible elections under pressure. There was no delay with accreditation and they were able to deploy the Biometric Voters Accreditation System (BIVAS) appropriately in capturing the photos of voters in place of the card readers. The ballot boxes were displayed to ensure nothing was inside, so also were the number of ballot papers. Before accreditation and voting began, at the Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, in the Ogoja/Yala Federal Constituency, Ward 6/18, PU014B, INEC officials took time to explain the process for accreditation using the BIVAS in place of the Card Reader. The same procedure was adopted at the same Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, PU003, as well as Okuku Ward 06, PU007. In Akpabuyo, at the Ward 1, PU006, Ikot Offiong Ambai and Atimbo East Ward 2, PU 005 the calm disposition of the INEC staff may have helped in the calmness of the voting process.

g) **Vote Buying:**

The buying of votes seems to have become an integral but ugly part of the electoral process. At Saint Joseph Primary School, Okuku, Yala, a party member was spraying money for voters to scramble for. The man was alleged to be a member of the All Progressive Congress (APC) as party members were heard telling those who were members of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) that they should not benefit from the money being shared by the APC. In Akpabuyo, vote buying was done openly in the presence of security officials.

Although there was no record of vote-buying in Jos North/Bassa, the current Speaker of the Plateau State House of Assembly was around with his entourage and as he was leaving the premises, he was seen doling out money to voters resulting in a momentary chaotic situation at the polling center.

In Akure South Ward 5 at NEPA Office, vote-buying was carried out with impunity. Party members alleged to be APC agents stood close to the ballot boxes to ask for voters to show where they thumb printed and were given money if it is the correct and required vote. In Akure North, both parties (APC and PDP) were involved in the commercialization of the voting process.
Challenges

The challenges that are fast becoming the nature and character of elections in Nigeria were recurring issues in the three states and they include the following;

1. Voter apathy

2. Vote buying

3. Poor communication procedures that delayed some security personnel in locating their polling units.

4. The absence of a law to addresses the menace of vote buying.

Recommendations

Following from the above observation, the underlisted recommendations are critical for urgent consideration;

1) INEC should improve on the credibility and outcome of elections to restore the confidence of Nigerians in the electoral process.

2) INEC should collaborate with the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Political Parties, and Civil Society Organizations to intensify and deepen civic and voter education to improve voter turnout and participation of citizens in the electoral process.

3) INEC should work with critical stakeholders, including party officials, to find a way to deter politicians from the brazen act of vote-buying.

4) INEC should ensure ways of identifying and sanctioning party officials that threaten the staff that is on election duties. This will help to shore up the confidence of INEC staff and reduce intimidation and make officials sign under duress.

5) The Electoral act as amended must be vigorously enforced by both the Commission and the government if the gains anticipated in the new law must be sustained and the tenets of democracy maintained.
**Conclusion**

Although there were few incidents of violence far from where the observation took place, the bye-elections were generally peaceful and orderly. The major flaw in the ointment was the high level of voter apathy displayed by registered voters. Unless there are deliberate measures to stop the dwindling numbers of Nigerians who are interested in the electoral process, the integrity of the system would soon be compromised and the consequences would be too grave to consider. The absence of a law to deal with the challenge of vote-buying is also worrisome. INEC performed incredibly in the deployment of staff and material but the Commission needs to find a strategy along with relevant stakeholders to get Nigerians back to be favorably disposed to the electoral process.

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