



Off-Season Polls: INEC, Police, Tinubu disappointed Nigerians

The November 11, 2023 off-cycle governorship elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi states stirred questions afresh on the credibility, integrity and preparedness of the electoral umpire and the security agencies to conduct free and fair elections devoid of violence and malpractices. Though poll observers agreed that the elections were devoid of the scale of violence seen during the February/March general elections, voting witnessed accusations of result falsification, vote-buying, voter-suppression, calculated disenfranchisement, and poor logistics. Similarly, despite the massive deployment of police, military, and paramilitary forces in the three states, and the lower level of violence recorded, the elections still fell short of global standards of efficiency and credibility. Instead, Nigerians were once again traumatized. Rather than scenes of celebration that usually follow the announcement of results elsewhere, gloom, apprehension, anger, and complaints were on display in many parts of the three states. Being the first major elections held on his watch, President Bola Tinubu also disappointed, especially by his haste to congratulate his party's candidates declared winners even amid howls of protest by opponents and observers. Nigeria should aspire to the highest global standards. Though INEC, the Police and other security agencies have been congratulating themselves over the fewer recorded cases of violence, ballot box-snatching and other vices, real-time reports indicate that these were still visible in the three states, including vote-buying. An NGO, YIAGA Africa, at a post-election news briefing in Abuja, lamented that INEC had missed another opportunity to rebuild citizens' trust in Nigeria's electoral process. The Civil Liberties Union for Europe, an advocacy group, describes free and fair elections as "the foundation of democracy and allow for free and just societies...." The Inter-Parliamentary Union, a 180-member country grouping, agrees, emphasizing the pivotal issue of legitimacy that it said, "can only derive from the will of the people as expressed in genuine, free and fair elections held at regular intervals." In Nigeria however, politicians treat elections as warfare, deploying thugs, offensive weapons, bribery, violence, and manipulation. Their desperation is deadly. Press reports indicate generally low turnout. Observers for instance, questioned the Imo polling where voting did not take place in many polling units across different local government areas, including nine polling units in Orsu, eight in Okigwe, eight in Oru East, seven in Orlu, one polling unit each in Ideato North, Ikeduru, Oru West and Owerri West LGAs.

YIAGA, quoting field reports from its observers, alleged that "INEC polling officials were unprofessional and partisan in over 15 percent and 14 percent of polling units in Imo and Kogi states, respectively." Also, eight other observer groups that monitored the elections in Imo reported irregularities characterized by vote-buying and physical attacks on voters by thugs who prevented them from exercising their franchise. "In several instances, security agencies were complicit as observed in several viral videos where they compromised their duties of ensuring credible election. By that, they aided and abated the massive rigging as witnessed in the Imo election," they alleged. "INEC may have exhibited flaws in many areas, one of which is outright relocation without notice to voters. In Orsu LGA, voters were not informed of INEC's plan to conduct cluster election; hence, many voters were disenfranchised. The question INEC must answer is; who

are those that voted in Orsu? Are they from Orsu or strangers? "In Okigwe LGA, we observed that no result sheet was delivered to polling centres in all the 11 wards. We also observed that election did not occur in eight polling units. INEC and police authorities in Okigwe may have to explain where the collation for Okigwe was done," the groups said in their reports.

Similarly, in Kogi, there were reports of electoral malpractices. Electoral observers raised the alarm that pre-filled results sheets were discovered in some polling units even before voting commenced. INEC acknowledged some of these malpractices and cancelled the results from the nine wards in the state and vowed to sanction the erring officers. In Bayelsa, thugs reportedly killed a supporter of the Peoples Democratic Party in Brass LGA. These situations occurred amidst allegations of widespread vote-buying across the three states. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission announced that it arrested 14 persons in connection with vote-buying across the three states. Not surprisingly, all the major losers are calling for cancellation and alleging fraud.

Nigeria is a bad advertisement for democracy. The freedom to choose leaders and representatives through periodic elections that are free, fair and devoid of coercion or inducement is a major plank of democracy. "In a democracy, votes are the ultimate currency of power," declares the United States-based Election Law Journal. Selling votes, therefore, is a surrender of that ultimate power to choose an individual or group. In a country where 24 years of civil rule have brought ruin and poverty, those selling their votes for trifling lucre become accomplices in their own pauperization. It is tragic. The episode adds to the country's wretched global reputation. Although a few arrests were made by the police and the EFCC, Nigerians await the prosecution of the suspects. The perpetrators should not be allowed to go scot-free. Failure to impose punishment on electoral offenders in the past has entrenched a system of electoral abuse and impunity.

The security agencies should clean up. Heads of agencies should investigate, identify, and punish their officers that compromised in the three states. Personnel deployed should henceforth be professional and ensure that no one is induced, threatened, or lured to vote against their conscience. Distribution of money or promises of same at polling areas should be prevented and punished when they occur. Until the politicians who perpetrate and sponsor electoral offences are brought to justice, there can be no end to the malfeasance. INEC does claim some credit; thankfully, its deployed technology worked better this time. The Bi-modal Verification Accreditation System worked with 90 per cent efficiency, according to multiple reports. This is an incremental improvement; the commission should keep it up, perfect its ICT tools and tighten all the loose ends. Working with the security agencies, it should come up with strategies to avoid collusion by its personnel, vote-buying, voter-suppression, and logistics hitches. Tinubu should resolve to lead the efforts to clean up elections as part of his legacy. Two other off-season governorship polls will be held in Edo and Ondo states next year; INEC and the Police should resolve to do better there.

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