Does Nigeria Truly Have Over 103 million Voters?

By Chidi Anselm Odinkalu

Ahead of Nigeria's general elections in January and February 2027, *African Confidential warns* that "turnout in the elections is likely to be even lower than the average 26.7% four years ago. Nigerian voters are among the least enthusiastic in the world…. Out of more than 93.4 million registered voters, 24.9 million total votes were cast. This represented an 8.03-point decline from the 2019 elections and was the lowest voter turnout since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999." Complaints about voter apathy *are* the staple of Nigeria's electoral commentariat. The number patterns seem to bear this out. In 1999, turnout was 52.3%. Officially, it grew to 69% in 2003; and has fallen since then to 57.5% in 2007; 53.7% in 2011; 43.7% in 2015; and 34.8% in 2019, before cratering to 26.7% in 2023.

These claims require us to accord credibility to the underlying numbers from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). That begins with belief in the baseline of INEC's electoral register against which turnout is judged. If that register is flawed, then all calculations hinged on it also suffer. Yet, the foundational affliction underlying of Nigeria's elections is not in INEC's numbers. Rather, it is an absence of credible demographic management system against which to verify INEC's claims. The National Population Commission (NPoPC) claims *53%* of births in the country are registered and only 10% of deaths are. The implications of this for the credibility of the electoral register should worry everyone. To be sure, electoral rolls are ambulatory. People are not static: we move; relocate, and die too. This is why a demographic management system is essential. In Nigeria, this does not exist. A register of voters does not automatically change because a person whose name is on it has died. But a person should also not be on the register one decade after their death. In Nigeria, there is no way of stopping this. These define the many curiosities about Nigeria's voting numbers. First, they bear no rational relationship to wider demographic trends. Nigeria's pattern of supposedly precipitous collapse in voter turnout, for instance, is inversely proportional to both baseline population and civic gripe. In 1999, Nigeria's population was estimated to be 115,766,000. Nigeria's current population is estimated at 244 million. That means the country has more than doubled its population since 1999 by 128,234,000 or 110.77%.

Over the same period, the voting roll has grown by 81.4%, even as life expectancy in the intervening quarter century has increased *by* about nine years. If life expectancy is growing with the population and crude death rates falling, then the rate of growth in the voting population should ordinarily outstrip the underlying population growth rate. In 20 years from 1999 to 2023, Nigeria's population rose by about 87% but the register of voters grew by 36,530,063 or 63.05%. The mis-match between the two trendlines is significant. In 1999, Nigeria had 57.94 million registered voters. This rose by 2.88 million or 4.97% to 60.82 million in 2003 and then by a mere three-quarters of a million or 1.23% to 61.57 million in 2007. By 2011, the number of registered voters climbed by over 12 million (20.5%) to 73.53 million, representing an average yearly growth rate of nearly 5.12%, where previously it had grown by 1.24 % in 1999-2003 and 0.3% between 2003-2007. By 2015, the population of registered voters fell to 68.83 million, a deficit of 4.7 million voters or 6.39%, representing an annualized rate of reversal of 1.6%. Yet, over the same period, Nigeria, a country with a median age of just under 18 years, had grown in population from an estimated 162.9 million to 181.2 million, an increase of 15.174 million or 11.23%, representing an annual growth rate of 2.8%. The patterns from these numbers do not lend themselves to easy explanations. It is possible to speculate about what may explain this significant delta in growth between the general population and register of voters. Rational factors such as migration; agency dysfunctions in INEC; civic inertia or disaffection; or high transaction costs may be relevant. But there remain worrying patterns that are not easily accounted for even by all these.

As the Justice Uwais presidential committee on electoral reform *pointed* out in its 2008 report, much of what passed for electoral numbers in Nigeria before 2011 was voodoo. Just to illustrate this point, the *INEC does not have a breakdown of official result for the 2007 presidential elections yet* there are turnout figures for that election. This leads to a second issue: Nigeria's register of voters has always had invalid voters. The current register of voters in Nigeria dates back to November 2010 when the Attahiru Jega-led INEC set about establishing a credible register of voters for the country. The Commission had limited time to authenticate the raw data before the 2011 general election. When the Automatic Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) finished its work on the 2011 register nearly four years later, INEC invalidated 4.7 million entries, which reduced the number of registered voters from 73.53 in 2011 to 68.83 in 2015 but not before these invalids 4.7 million were eligible to vote in 2011. Third, the biggest problem may be dead voters. That's an oxymoron because the dead should not vote. In 2022, INEC explained that it could not expunge the dead from the register because "the country does not have reliable data of births and deaths and the commission cannot engage in arbitrary removal of the names of individuals it suspects are deceased." This has not changed. It means we have no way of knowing how many ghosts there are among the 103.4 million on INEC's current register. By failing to display the register as required by law, the Commission does not even care to disabuse suspicions that its register may be bloated. Its response to non-compliance is institutional insouciance. Nigeria's register of voters is the classic Hotel California*:* it is "programmed to receive" and, for anyone with their name on it, "you can check out any time you like but you can never leave." The implications of this for electoral integrity are staggering. An illustrative exercise may help. Nigerian law allows adults alone to vote. The World Bank estimates the country's crude mortality rate at 11.64 per 1000. Applied to a baseline from 2011, that is about 34,748,845 dead in 15 years. But not all these will be adults. Mortality rate for under-5s is 117 per 1000 live births. That's700,000 to 855,000 under five child death yearly. To 2025, that could be about 12 million dead under-fives since 2011. The country also reported an estimated median of 111,425 deaths among 5-14 years olds from 1990 to 2016. Applied again to a 2011 baseline, that's another 1,671,375. In total, there could be up to 13.67 million infants, children, and adolescent deaths since 2011. Adjusting the crude death rates for mortality among infants, children, and adolescents, there could be about 18-20 million people liable to be lanced from the electoral register since 2011. Applying the same methodology to a baseline of the 2023 register, that could be up to five million dead people alone on the register since the last election. In its latest announcement, however, INEC said it captured a total of 10,772,421 new voters. It has not accounted for deaths or natural attrition. Separately, at the end of 2025, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, (IDMC) reported that Nigeria had at least 3.7 million in internal displacement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees adds up to 4788,000 Nigeria refugees *outside* the country. Admittedly not all of these are adults of voting age. Almost assuredly, INEC's 103.4 million voters is corpulent. When you look at the numbers on INEC's register and account for the fact that the baseline data goes back to 2011, there is a reasonable likelihood that up to about 25% on it could be dead or dud. That should put all the talk about voter apathy in perspective. But this story has a uniquely Nigerian sting: our diaspora on earth may not have a vote, but we may have a diaspora in Heaven with a veto.