

Election Administration and Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria: An Assessment of the 2015 General Elections

Sakariyau Rauf Tunde, Mohd. Azizuddin bin Mohd Sanni and Ummu Atiyah Ahmad Zakuan
School of International Studies, University Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok,
Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah, Malaysia

Abstract: Electioneering process in Nigeria has always been marred with irregularities, malpractices and violence. However, the experience of the 2015 general election is a paradigm shift from electoral system largely characterised with fraud and manipulation to an internationally accepted electoral democracy. The sudden improvement as experienced in the 2015 elections was a product of internal and external factors. Internally, Nigeria was faced with many challenges ranging from security, economic depression, infrastructural decay and high level of impunity. All these, coupled with some other scenarios awakened the intervention of foreign powerful states and organisations in mounting pressure on Nigeria's government to play to the rules of free and fair elections. Based on this, there was limited political interference and this enabled the electoral umpire (INEC) to strengthen the electoral process via introduction of certain mechanisms which improved the conduct of the elections. It is against this background that this study explores election administration and democratisation in Nigeria with emphasis on the 2015 general elections. The paper infers that despite the beauty of the 2015 general elections, there is need for further improvement in Nigeria's electoral politics in order to enhance democratic sustainability and consolidation.

Key words: Election, administration, democratic, sustainability, electoral system

INTRODUCTION

The significance of election in any democratic setting cannot be overemphasised due to the fact that it is the only method that guarantees civic obligation of selecting legitimate government. It also constitutes a critical desideration for the sustenance and consolidation of democracy (Attahiru, 2014). Free and fair electoral contest that enhances mass political participation is the beauty of democracy. Elections provide essential validation for democracy by increasing the confidence of individual citizens in their ability to meaningfully participate in public life but in a situation when the electorates are faced repeatedly with episodes of election malpractices, political violence and disorderly administration, their fundamental trust in the institutions and processes of electioneering may aptly dissipate and the benefits of election may turn to deficits. However, Nigeria's electoral processes have always been marred with violence, irregularities, rigging and malpractices of highest order (Mustapha, 2007).

Historically, the Nigeria's independence election witnessed shortcomings and failed to meet international standard. At the independence of 1960, the dominant

political parties such as Northern People's Congress (NPC) had a coalition with National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) later metamorphosed to National Council of Nigeria Citizens and formed a national government. The first election at independence in Nigeria was characterised with massive fraud and this led to widespread violence in the polity. The ugly scenario of electoral fraud as witnessed led to the collapse of the first republic and became an excuse for the first military intrusion in Nigerian politics in 1966. The counter coup as a result of fragmentation among the military elites on one hand and among the civilian nationalists on the other hand threw the country into three years of civil war between 1967 and 1970 during Yakubu Gowon military regime.

The journey to second republic started with another opportunity provided by the military administration of Olusegun Obasanjo who transited power to a civilian government in 1979. The general election of 1979 which was keenly contested by five political parties was won by the National party of Nigeria (NPN). This republic was however short-lived as the military struck again in December 1983 thereby truncating the second republic. It is plausible to argue that most of these elections failed

because of lack of confidence in the electoral body which conducted the flawed elections. The major accusation has always evolved around biasness and partisanship of the electoral umpire favouring the ruling party.

The 1983 General Elections was not different as it also showcased the manifestation of Nigeria's flawed elections. On the eve of the elections, the socio-political tension spread across board and most observers expressed concern over the level of preparation for the contest. The elections were contested by the same political parties that participated in the 1979 general elections though with the inclusion of the National Advanced Party (NAP) led by Tunji Braithwaite. However, only three major political parties the NPN, the NPP and the UPN-again as it were observed in the 1979 elections dominated the political terrain with the issue of ethnicity and sentiment surfacing as the major platforms of the electioneering campaigns during the 1983 elections. In spite of its dismal performance in its first term of leadership in the country, the NPN capitalized on its incumbency and subsequently manipulated the electoral process to retain power (Nnadozie, 2007). Consequently, the election was marked by massive rigging, violence and all sorts of electoral fraud. As noted earlier, the military took advantage of the ugly situation, for the second time, to unseat the civilian government of Sheu Shagari in December 1983.

After long years of military dictatorships, the regime of Babaginda organised the 1993 general elections which was contested by the two registered political parties, SDP and NRC. Despite the free and fair contest of the presidential election as claimed by both local and international observers, its nullification was a stigma and thus led to the aborted third republic in Nigeria (Alabi and Sakariyau, 2013). The assumed winner, MKO Abiola, struggled to reclaim his mandates but no avail. This automatically created an avenue for further military rule as General Sani Abacha seized power from the interim government under the leadership of Chief Earnest Shonekan. General Sani Abacha remained in power till his mysterious death that brought in another military figure to the limelight of Nigeria's leadership. Interestingly, General Abdulsalam Abubakar who took mantle of leadership due to sudden exit of Abacha embarked on the shortest transitional program in the country between 1998 and 1999.

The beginning of Nigeria's fourth republic started precisely on May 29, 1999, after 16 years of military regimes marked a watershed in the history of political transition in the country. The elected president, Obasanjo, contested under the platform of Peoples' Democratic Party making him resurfacing at the helm of government for the second time having ruled as military head of state

from 1976-1979. Unfortunately, the election that produced him was flawed and manipulated by the elites. Since 1999 till date, Nigerians have witnessed five general elections but none was rated higher to have met international standards except the 2015 elections. The uniqueness of the election could be observed from the fact that since Nigeria got independence in 1960, no incumbent president has ever been defeated as witnessed in the 2015 elections. This makes it imperative to examine election administration and democratic sustainability in Nigeria with special appraisal of the 2015 general elections.

THE CONCEPT OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Election Administration is a key factor in determining democratic practice in any country as its proper conduct enhances free and fair election process. Election Administration involves the facilitation of voting and the management of electoral process at all levels from the local to the national. This includes the organisation of election agencies, the behaviour and characteristics of state and local election officials, the process of conducting election and the policies guiding the conduct of the elections. Election Administration at the local levels includes running the polls on the election day, as well as pre and post-election activities, such as maintaining votes registration lists, drawing precincts, selecting polling sites, procuring equipment, recruiting and training poll workers, canvassing the vote and evaluating and implementing improvements to the process itself. On the state level, election administration ranges from implementation of federal and state laws and policies concerning election, to the preparation and printing of the voter information guide or ballot pamphlet for state-wide offices and initiatives (Election Administration Center, 2011).

Put differently, election administration connotes the organization and conduct of elections to elective/public offices by an electoral body. According to Iwara, the components of election administration include structure and process. Structure connotes the bureaucracy that is set up to organize election while the process has to do with the rules, procedures etc that governs the conduct of elections. Similarly, Arifalo (Nnadozie, 2007) sees election administration as the optimal use of both man and human resources in ensuring conduct of credible election. The administration of elections occupies an important and strategic place in the enthronement of democracy. This becomes imperative, as the centrality of elections to liberal democratic politics assumes the existence of impartial election administrative body.

Election Administration has rightly noted by Jinadu (1997) entails the organization and conduct of elections to elective (political) public office by an electoral body. This perception of election management captures both structures and processes. By structure, it deals with the bureaucratic set up and the electoral body that ensures conduct of election. This structure is mandated to conduct election in Nigeria is the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

However, it should be noted that apart from this specific bureaucracy whose primary function is the administration of elections, there are agencies or institutions like the civil society, police and security agencies whose cooperation through the provision of logistic support is vital to the operation of the electoral body (Nnadozie, 2007). By process on the other hand, it indicates rules, procedures and activities relating to among others: the establishment of electoral bodies, the appointment of their members, selection and training of electoral officials, constituency delimitation, voter education, registration of political parties, registration of voters, the nomination of candidates, balloting, counting of the ballots, declaration of results and in some cases supervision of party nomination and congress (Jinadu, 1997).

In another dimension, election administration is the organization of all stages of the electoral process: the pre-election, election and post-election stages by an electoral body (Kunle, 2007). As Olatunde (2007) has rightly observed, the planning and organizing of election in order to achieve political stability within a state is the major attribute of electoral administration. This according to him, entails the revision of voters' list, mapping out pooling booths and centres, provision of election materials, conveying of election materials to site as well as training and development of electoral officers to sensitize them of the election rules and regulations and provision of security to safeguard election materials and personnel involved in the conduct of the election.

Election administration also involves collation, record keeping, verification and dissemination of election results to the political parties, relevant agencies and security organizations who participated in the national or state election and the general public who casted their votes during the election. From the above concept, one can see that election administration is a complex issue that involves careful logistic planning from the time the election time table was released and the time the processes completed. In essence, electoral management is an inter related set of actions which national organization in charge of the conduct and process of election has to put in place to ensure success of election process and achieve national stability (Olatunde, 2007). In a similar vein, electoral management is also viewed from an aspect

of public administration (management) work that requires proper planning, articulation, control and coordination. Election Administration will be free and fair, when management principles or elements are followed to a reasonable extent. No nation has achieved one hundred percent in election management but, there is the need to ensure free and fair election under democratic setting.

In view of this, Election Administration can be examined from mechanism introduced to strengthen the electoral process. The innovations employed by the electoral body in the conduct of the 2015 general elections influenced the credibility, transparency and fairness of the exercise. For instance, the introduction and insistence of the electoral umpire on the use of Permanent Voters Card (PVC) and Card Reader gadget during the 2015 general elections was a paradigm shift in the history of Nigeria's electoral system. Such approach checked the excesses of election malpractices and outrageous figures of votes cast which largely used to be contradictory to registered voters. This input did not only place the administration and management of the recently concluded general elections in a good shape but also ranked Nigeria's electoral democracy higher.

More also, as rightly posits by Alade, elections and electoral processes are expected to usher in the integrity of democratic rule rather than embracing irregularities and fraudulent practises. The Nigeria's electoral system which has been tagged to be anti-democratic considering the history of electioneering in the country can be well repositioned if the gains of the 2015 are sustained and strengthened so as to ensure democratic sustainability.

The funnel of causality theory: The evolution of Causal Order in Electoral Studies could be traced to the 1960's when Agnus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes gave a theoretical account of voting behaviour in the American setting having studied the elections of 1948, 1952 and 1956. The American voters' behaviour was likened to the metaphor "funnel of causality," in which voting behaviour was said to have been influenced by causally forces (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). As it known generally that 'Funnel' is an "object that has a wider round opening at the top, sloping sides and a narrow tube at the bottom, usually used to pour liquids into container with narrow head". Causality on the other hand implies the relationship between causes and effect. It is a principle which adheres to the notion that every occurrence has a cause. The Funnel of Causality since it was introduced by Agnus Campbell in the 1960's has become a model adopted to theorise in many disciplines especially Political Science to explaining factors influencing decision making among a large group of people.

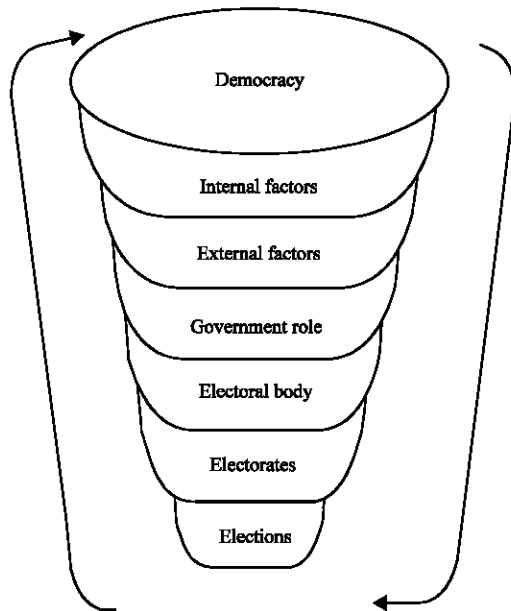


Fig. 1: The funnel of causality

Given these assumptions, this study adopts the Funnel of Causality in explaining electoral democracy of Nigeria. As argued earlier, the democratisation process of Nigeria had been struggling with electoral irregularities tracing the background of the country's election administration; however, the sudden change as experienced in the 2015 general elections is traceable to some key factors. What warrant this is not limited to socio-economic, political and other internal issues in Nigeria; it has elements of external or foreign impacts. The 'funnel of causality' in this instance hopes to explore the linkage determining factors in Nigeria's electoral administration with cognisance on the last general elections. The Funnel of Causality in Nigeria's electoral context is simply illustrated by Fig. 1.

From the above funnel, electoral democracy is determined by a causal relationship that flows from different sources as obtained in this 'funnel of causality'. Democracy is believed to have been sustained through electioneering arrangement which is determined by many factors. The factors serve as regulatory measures put in place in ensuring credible election that can enhance democratic sustenance. Considering the Nigeria's 2015 elections, one can view it from the causal effects ranging from internal factors which include the peoples' demand for change due to issues such as security threat especially the Boko Haram saga, corruption, economic depression, impunity, etc. These domestic factors called for the attentions of foreign countries and institutions on Nigeria, being the largest economy in Africa and most

populous country in the continent. The intervention of external sources using carrot and stick, coupled with pressures within, influenced the government of Nigeria to play according to the rules. Such compliance from the government drastically reduced the level of political Interference which enabled the Electoral Commission (INEC) to have a better and conducive atmosphere to strengthen the electoral system through the introduction of certain mechanism such as Biometric data, Card reader, Permanent Voters Card (PVC). This definitely encouraged the electorates not to be intimidated in exercising their civic obligations. At the bottom of the funnel is election that led to change the political dimension of Nigeria's democratisation.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AND DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA

The nexus between election and democracy cannot be overemphasised in any democratic setting. As rightly affirms by Ogunsanwo, no superior means of changing government in a democratic setting except through elections. Considering the utility of elections to democracy, Ojo (2007) states that in order to avoid political succession crisis in a polity, electoral conduct must be free, fair and transparent. Based on this, administration of elections must be credible so as to ensure democratic sustainability.

However, the previous elections in Nigeria have suffered certain setbacks which question the credibility of the entire process. In fact, preparation for elections was almost synonymous for war preparation due to the bloody nature of Nigeria's electoral contest that has become a do or die affair. As pinpointed in the background of this study, the issue of electoral irregularities in Nigeria predated her independence. The British colonialists were involved in shadow elections which their results were totally antithetical to the people wish (Harold, 2005). Unfortunately, most of the elections administered after the country's independence felled below democratic standards. The ugly trend of military intervention in Nigeria's politics was virtually necessitated by poor electioneering conduct under civilian administrations. The first military coup of 1966 happened to be the implication of the fall out of 1964/65 general elections marred with high level of violence, irregularities and malpractices (Nnadozie, 2007).

Similarly, the transition of power from military regime to civilian rule in 1979 ushered in second republican in the country and also introduced for the first time presidential system of government. Although the 1979 general elections were flawed, Nigerians only embraced the

outcome due to the clamour for civilian administration. Incidentally, the democratic arrangement was cut short by another military coup in 1983 which as usual was attributed to poor management of governance by the civilian rule of Sheu Shagari. This regime was accused of corruption, abuse of law, impunity and to cap it all electoral fraud as witnessed in the 1983 general elections. The election was marked by massive rigging and all sorts of electoral fraud. As Kyari described it:

It is very clear that Nigerian Election of 1983 is a sham election. It was massively rigged and nobody can honestly, truthfully and scientifically state that Shagari and his lieutenants in the state capitals were democratically voted into office. A massive collusion involving the NPN, the FEDECO, the Police and some sections of the judiciary had produced governments that could not claim legitimacy by dint of even the most rudimentary of bourgeois democracy

The consequence of the flawed 1983 general elections resulted to another long transitional process lasting for a decade (1983-1993). Meanwhile, there was a sign of relief with the result of the 1993 general elections which were adjudged to be free and fair but was annulled by the military regime of Babaginda. This was a serious threat to Nigeria's democratisation (Sakariyau and Lawal, 2014). The annulment by implication led to the abortion of the third republic and military autocratic regime continued till 1999. Though there was an interim government headed by Chief Earnest Shonekan, it did not last beyond few months due to its illegitimacy and contradictory to constitutional dictates of the federal republic of Nigeria.

The yearning for democratic consolidation intensified since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999 after long years of military dictatorship. Despite the systemic rigging (Mustapha, 2007) in the 1999 general elections, democracy was still nascent in Nigeria. But subsequent elections conducted in 2003 and 2007 for instance posed serious threat to Nigeria's readiness for democratic sustainability. The 2003 general elections were poorly managed by the electoral commission and the level of political interference was highly tensed which created an avenue for the ruling party, Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) to sweep majority of the assemblies seats and state gubernatorial elections (ref.). The 2007 elections were referred by many analysts to be have been the worst in the history of Nigeria's elections (Nnadozie, 2007; Ojo, 2007; Alabi and Sakariyau, 2013). As rightly observed by Human Rights Watch, the management of the 2007 elections marked a dramatic backwardness in Nigeria's

democratic electioneering system. In some polling units, while voting was going on, results were being announced at the electoral commission office. Cases of snatching of ballot boxes and intimidations of voters by both security agencies and hoodlums were rampant (Nwolise, 2007). The total violation of electoral laws became noticeable when the outgoing president called for a 'do or die' elections and indeed the 2007 exercise to more of battle field without a level playing ground.

The major beneficiary of the flawed exercise, Umar Musa Yar'Adua, the acclaimed winner of the presidential election also affirmed to the inconsistency and irregularity of the election that brought him to power (Daily Trust, 2007). Interestingly, he summoned the courage by setting up a 22 man panel to review and ensure electoral reform in the country. The Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) headed by retired Chief Justice of Federation, Muhammed Uwais, after series of meetings, public hearing, symposium and consultations came up with recommendations that can improve Nigeria's electoral system. Following the recommendation of the ERC, there was an approved amendment of the 1999 constitution by both the National and State Assemblies. The amendment brought significant improvement in the area of election time table, financial autonomy of the INEC, administrative independence of the commission, reduction of quorum for election petitions. Regrettably, the amended constitution failed to address some recommendations made by local and international stakeholders and by the Uwais Panel (ERC) particularly regarding the appointment of INEC Chairperson and Commissioners who are still being appointed by the Executive President. Also, non-establishment of Electoral Offences Commission and a Political Parties Registrations Commission could be seen as a vacuum that allows electoral irregularities. Moreover, lack of provision for Independent Candidature to run for office as recommended by the ERC is not in conformity with the international electoral practices as it limits voters choice of candidates and restricts individual's right to vie political office

Meanwhile, the conduct of the 2011 general elections witnessed some improvement compared to 2007. The 2011 elections marked an important step towards strengthening democratic elections in Nigeria, but challenges remained. Generally, it is agreed that the legal framework for the 2011 General Elections provided an adequate basis for the conduct of democratic elections in accordance with international principles. Unlike the previous administration of Olusegun Obasanjo's 'do or die' election of the 2007, the Jonathan's administration to some extent allowed neutrality of the electoral umpire as witnessed in the 2011 elections. This argument can be

juxtaposed with the outcome of election results in some state whereby power of incumbency did not count (Alabi and Sakariyau, 2013). Unfortunately, the post-election violence that claimed several lives and destroyed valuable properties after the 2011 elections was a major setback. Thus, Nigeria's democracy was believed to have failed to survive another huddle electoral violence.

The implication of all these definitely tells on Nigeria's sustainable democracy. It is believed that democracy can hardly be sustained amidst electoral irregularities and violence. In fact, electoral violence is antithetical to democratic sustainability. Nevertheless, the administration and conduct of the 2015 general elections has been a welcome development towards consolidating and sustaining Nigeria's democratic space. In view of this, the appraisal of the 2015 election is captured in the next segment of this study.

THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS: AN ASSESSMENT

The administration of the 2015 general elections which has been adjudged peaceful and applauded to have met international best practises by both local and international observers did not happen by accident (Konle, 2007). Rather it was a product of decisions, actions and inactions of individuals, groups and institutions. The credibility attributed to the election can be understood from moderating factors which are internal and external dimensions. Internally, Nigerians before the 2015 elections were faced with serious challenges of security, corruption, impunity and other socio economic depression. Although, some of the problems were not new phenomena in the country, the pervasiveness of corruption, insecurity and impunity in Jonathan's administration was becoming unbearable and awakened the spirit of Nigerians to clamour for change. Boko Haram was a serious security threat and going by the figure of Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), total number of 6,347 civilians were killed by the insurgent group in Nigeria (ACLED, 2014). Also, the inability of Jonathan's government to rescue over 200 school girls kidnapped in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria by the Boko Haram terrorist counted against the administration. The level of corruption during the Jonathan's government was significant and disturbing. Cases of missing public funds and abuse of offices by government personnel were reported but no positive reaction from the presidency which enabled the impunity to be more

pronounced in the country. All these coupled with other factors ignited peoples agitation for change of government.

However, towards preparations for the 2015 general elections, considering the tension its generated in terms of survival of nationhood, the role of some key notable stakeholders within Nigerians really accounted for the successful outing. The instrumentality of the National Peace Committee (NPC) organised by the former head of state, Abubakar Abdulsalam, to mediate between the political parties by persuading the presidential candidates to pledge for peaceful contest cannot be overlooked. The peace pact agreements were signed by all the two major contenders, Goodluck Jonathan (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari (APC), assuring Nigerians of issues based campaign and readiness to embrace the outcome of the election results (ref). Apart from the peace pact agreement anchored by Abdulsalam's group, the former United Nations (UN) Secretary Generals, Kofi Anna and former Common Wealth Secretary, Emeka Anyaokwu, also facilitated the "Abuja Accord". The Abuja Accord was an agreement signed by all the fourteen presidential candidates pledging non-violence and issue based campaigns (The News, 2015).

In addition, the electoral body (INEC) came up with some newly introduced mechanism to boost the credibility of the elections. The election management body adopted biometric technology such as card reader used in identifying originality of voters' card and voters' fingers thumb prints. The issuance of Permanent Voters Card (PVC) to eligible voters, public display of results at the polling units and group accreditations contributed immensely in reducing election malpractices during the 2015 general elections. Recurrent issues of multiple voting was controlled with the availability of PVC because no one was allowed to cast vote without having the card. Though, there few cases of shortcomings especially missing of voter's names from the registered list without any justifiable reason and malfunctioning of card readers in some polling units, the exercise was boosted with the use of PVC and Card Reader (Nnadozie, 2007). Such innovations from the electoral commission really enhanced free and fair electioneering exercise of the 2015 elections.

The supportive role of the international presence was also substantive during the conduct of the 2015 general elections. In the area of election monitoring, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provided monitoring assistance through civil society, tracking incidences, deployment of electoral observers. The

international presence is not limited to monitoring exercise, the United States of America on January 25, 2015, sent delegation headed by the Secretary of State, John Kerry, who visited Nigeria to discuss and urge the dominant political parties (PDP and APC) to maintain a peaceful elections (New York Times, January, 25, 2015). During the course of interacting with relevant stakeholders, Kerry read a note of warning to Politicians to desist from violence and that American government was ready to impose stringent visa policy for any violator of electoral law. Apart from Kerry, the U.S Vice President, Joe Biden, placed a phone to the two major rivalry of the presidential elections, Jonathan and Buhari, urging them to embrace peaceful electioneering. To cap it all, the video message from Barrack Obama to Nigerians, few days to the election, was a signal towards internationalisation of Nigeria's 2015 election.

Not only that, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron showed concern through his public call message before the elections. Also, the U.N Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, made public statement encouraging the stakeholders more especially the political parties to stick to free and fair electoral process and avoid distortion of public will. The pressure from international community really indicated the full engagement of external sources in preparation for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria.

In a nutshell, the internal and external factors became an interplay in Nigeria's 2015 elections and this boosted the moral of the electoral body to allow peoples' choice to count. This as reflected in the 2015 general elections and presidential contest in particular which ensured the emergence of Muhamadu Buhari of the APC to gather total votes of 15,424,921 to defeat the incumbent president Jonathan with 12,853,162 in an historic election. The beauty of the election could be seen in the statesmanship approach of the incumbent president who personally made a phone call to congratulate his main rivalry and the winner of the presidential poll. The insinuation of possible violence became obsolete with such simple gesture from President Jonathan and this extended Nigeria's pride within the world democracies.

CONCLUSION

In as much as Nigeria prefers democratic governance, the suitable process of achieving this remains conducting free and fair elections. Though the history of the country's electoral system was not encouraging, the paradigm shift in the administration of the 2015 general

elections is a boost for Nigeria's electoral democracy. However, no perfect election anywhere in the world, Nigeria's electoral system still needs improvement. There is need for capital punishment for violators of Electoral Act. The issue of electoral crimes should be severely tackled so that any individual involved, no matter highly placed, can face the law. With this, reduction of electoral criminality is guaranteed.

Also, the ugly phenomenon of vote buying and selling needs attention. Monetisation of politics should not be abused as it is obtained in the country. Despite the fact that money must involve in electioneering, peoples should desist from selling and buying votes. This can be easily solved with proper electoral education and government needs to improve the economic well beings of its populace. Not only that, the electoral body (INEC) needs to maintain neutrality and avoids any form of biasedness. The failure of the previous elections was centred majorly on partiality of the electoral management body, the tempo of neutrality of the commission as observed to a greater extent in the 2015 elections needs to be strengthened in the future electoral conduct.

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