

**A PAPER ON THE VOTING SYSTEM IN NIGERIA PRESENTED  
BY OKOP UMONBONG, AT THE AEA SEMINAR HELD IN  
BLACKPOOL, ENGLAND IN FEBRUARY, 2006**

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed my privilege to be invited to contribute to the discourse on “Voting Systems” at this AEA Seminar, and especially to share with you the Nigerian experience.

Let me start by providing a sneak overview of the challenges of organizing an election in Nigeria, not because it is unique, but because it will give you an insight into the difficult choices the Electoral body in our country is often faced with.

**The Challenges**

Nigeria is a country with a projected population of about 120 million people, out of which, there are about 60 million registered and eligible voters spread across 120,000 polling centres. Election supervision and manning of the centres require about 500,000 officials, a greater number of which are temporary or ad-hoc staff, recruited and trained, usually on the eve of the elections.

The country has 33 political parties, and the Commission is still receiving applications for registration of new ones, and an unprecedented number of candidates- more than 4000 vying for 1458 seats in the National and States’ Houses of Assembly Elections alone. The sourcing and procuring of balloting instruments, recruitment and training of personnel, transportation and movement of men and thousands of tones of election materials across varied and often difficult terrains, and to all nooks and corners of Nigeria

over a relatively short time, makes the exercise one of the most challenging electoral activities in the world.

The other tasks of organizing and managing other facets of the electoral process up to the election day – registration of political parties, delimitation of constituencies, registration of voters, conduct of the elections, collation of votes and declaration of results are no less daunting.

While the above fall within the duties of the Commission, the tasks are usually made more arduous by the apprehension and pessimism within the polity on the expected outcome. The apprehension is borne out of our foreboding as a people, and especially considering our nation's history of many failures at managing peaceful, acceptable and credible transition from civilian to civilian administration; late release of funds occasioned by annual budgeting procedures with antecedent delays in the procurement of materials; confusing and often times uncertain judicial pronouncements arising out of the interpretations of the legal framework which continue well into the period close to the elections.

These conditions may not be peculiar, but they nevertheless, place the various experiments on balloting methods in the proper perspective.

### **The Electoral Systems**

The Nigeria Electoral system is the single member constituency type with competitive multiparty and the first past the post winner system. The method of voting used in four out of five past elections, that is, in 1979, 1983, 1999 and 2003 was the Open Ballot System (OSBS) in which the prospective Voter goes through a process of accreditation, receives a ballot paper from the appropriate poll official and thereafter makes the confidential thumb

impression in favour of the political party or candidate of choice in a secret voting compartment before dropping the ballot in the box positioned in the open, in the full glare of officials, security and party agents.

The modified Open ballot system was adopted in the 1993 elections, in which voters filed behind the party symbol or photograph of the candidate of choice. Voters were physically counted at the close of polls and the results declared to officials, security and party agents.

Although the method is simple and produced what many in Nigeria have often described as the fairest and most peaceful elections in the country, the election was unsuccessful. The election involved two parties, a clear departure from the over thirty political parties of today, and also suffered the flaw of not providing the voter with the secrecy of ballot- a basic internationally acceptable standard for any elections.

All the electoral systems used allow disputed results to be challenged by way of election petitions, judicially heard and determined at tribunals or courts established for the purpose as the case may be.

However, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria plans to conduct the year 2007 elections in a radically different way. The idea arose from reviews of the year 2003 elections at several conferences involving stakeholders – INEC officials, Political Parties, Local and International Observer groups, Civil Society Organizations, etc. It is interesting to note that IFES played a laudable role in facilitating these conferences.

### **Preview of year 2007 Elections**

The 2007 general elections will do away with the traditional ballot paper and box for making a choice at an election. The Commission plans to take advantage of Information and Communication Technology in the management of the election process.

In particular, the Commission seeks to use a process called “Electronic Voting System”. The main components of the process include , the Electronic Voters Register- a database of eligible Voters complete with photographs, biometric data(fingerprint) and other bio-data such as age, sex, address, polling unit, registration area, etc; Voter Accreditation and Authentication prior to balloting . This will be based on the use of a secure Voter identification and the biometric information and photograph on the cards; the use of some form of Direct Recording Balloting Machines (Electronic Voting Machines) will completely eliminate the cost associated with the printing of several million ballot papers. The last, but most important component of the Electronic Voting System is the immediate collation and transmission of election results directly from each of the polling stations at the close of polls to designated collation centres nation wide.

It is the hope of the Electoral Commission in Nigeria that given the culture of election violence including ballot snatching, impersonation, ballot stuffing and vote rigging, the introduction of the Electronic Voting System will reduce to the barest minimum these unwholesome electoral malpractices. In particular the direct transmission of results will eliminate to a very great extent the opportunity for vote rigging which usually occur between the close of ballot and the collation of results.

The Commission, however, is not unmindful, of challenges the introduction of the new system will pose, but is nevertheless, ready to learn from the experience of other countries with similar challenges where the system has been tested and found to be acceptable like Brazil, India, Venezuela, etc.

One more, I thank you for the opportunity to share our experience and vision of the Elections in Nigeria.

Thank you, all

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