
ELECTORAL REFORMS AND ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC: EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF BIMODAL VOTER ACCREDITATION SYSTEM (BVAS) IN THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS.

Adamu Sa'adu

Department of Political Science
Al-Qalam University Katsina
Email: saadadamu2020@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses electoral reforms and elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. It specifically explores rationale for electoral reforms and evaluates the effectiveness of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in the conduct of the 2023 general elections. It is observed that, the introduction of BVAS was aimed at enhancing the transparency of election results and ultimately boosting public trust in electoral outcomes. Qualitative method of data collection has been used with data obtained mainly from secondary sources including library and the internet materials. Innovation Diffusion Theory has been applied as the theoretical framework of analysis. Drawing verifiable insights from the performances of the new technology (BVAS) in the 2023 general election in Nigeria, the paper contends that while the technological reform recorded some remarkable improvements in the conduct of the elections, especially in terms of efficient voters' accreditation, reduction in incidences of over voting, hijacking of election materials, intimidation of political opponents and attacks on security personnel, among others, it has failed in transparent collation or transmission of results to INEC Results Verification (IREV) Portal as promised by the Electoral Management Body. Though technological innovation is critical component of effective election administration in modern times, technological revolution without basic attitudinal and behavioural change, is grossly inadequate for electoral system to succeed. It is, therefore, recommended that INEC should strive to improve its efficiency in operation and functionality of BVAS while value reorientation should be promoted to foster basic change of political attitudes and behaviour of the entire citizenry towards greater transparency and credibility in the electoral process.

Key words: *Electoral reform, Election, Electronic voting, BVAS*

INTRODUCTION

Political and constitutional engineering have become enduring features of Nigeria's political development. Since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999, discussions on improving the country's electoral system and processes have been on the front burner and remain topical in Nigeria's democratic political discourse. The need for periodic reforms in the nation's electoral system becomes imperative, due in large part, to the myriads of problems associated with the conduct of elections. It is evident that the problematic nature of elections, usually accompanied with various degrees of electoral irregularities in the country has been a recurring decimal with dire consequences in the body polity, especially in the current dispensation. It is widely believed that there are manifold benefits derivable from the process of electoral reforms, especially in terms of minimizing the prevalence of electoral irregularities and host of other issues related to the conduct of democratic elections. Thus, reform of the electoral process is considered critically important as election means little without credibility in the public sphere. As part of effort to improve elections and electoral system in Nigeria, series of electoral reforms have been enacted by successive administrations, ranging from the 2001, 2006, 2010 to 2022 Electoral Acts basically to enhance the credibility of elections in the country.

To achieve the above vision, since 2011, INEC has started with introduction of information technology into the election process, the introduction of Electronic Voters Register (EVR), Automatic Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) and Smart Card Reader (SCR). The Electoral Act (2022) has further empowered INEC to apply electronic voting (BVAS) and Result Viewing Portal (IREV) in the 2023 elections in Nigeria. This development has raised hopes and expectations of the general public, civil societies, media and international community about the quality of the elections. However, as to be expected, the outcomes of the 2023 elections like every previous election in Nigeria attracted mixed reactions from both domestic and foreign observers and the general public.

The paper, therefore, takes a critical look at electoral reforms and elections in the Fourth Republic in Nigeria. It specifically explores the rationale for electoral reforms and evaluates the effectiveness of the BVAS Machine in the conduct of the 2023 general elections. The paper argues that while electoral reform is critical for significant improvement in

the credibility of democratic elections, attitudinal and behavioural reforms on the part of the political actors, the general public and officials of the Electoral Management Body are grossly inadequate to guarantee the effectiveness of any meaningful changes in the electoral system in Nigeria. The work is divided into five sections; section one is the introduction, section two reviewed related literature and theoretical framework in the area of the study, the third section deals with methodology, section four dwells on analysis of data, results and findings while the fifth and of course, the last section presents the conclusion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is critical review of relevant concepts, themes and theoretical framework from the relevant works on the subject matter so as to enable for the identification of the area that requires attention for filling the gap of knowledge. In doing so, concepts of electoral reforms, elections, E-Voting and Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) were thoroughly reviewed. Also, relevant issues including rationale for electoral reforms, electoral reforms in Nigeria, the E-Voting System and Credibility of Elections as well as Innovation Diffusion Theory by Everett Rogers were extensively reviewed to situate the paper in its proper intellectual context.

The concept of electoral reforms

Electoral reform is a broad term that is used to describe changes aimed at improving the responsiveness of the electoral process to meet public desires and expectations. These reforms may be legal or administrative in nature or even political which takes place in the political environment within which Electoral Management Body (EMB) operates, such as giving "more autonomy, or creating a more effective framework for it, its funding and accountability (Ojumu, 2023). It is a transformation of the whole gamut of election administration with a view to providing more opportunity for participation in an environment that is open, competitive and equitable. It is the change in electoral systems that enhance effectiveness and efficiency in election administration (Hammed, 2018). According to Ikeanyibe (2009) electoral reforms are deliberate attempt to address weakness, irregularities, or illegalities evidenced in national electoral process. The process involves re-examining laws that guide the process for electoral administrative change, ensure the formulation of good objectives, strategies and tactics aimed at reducing problems associated with electoral body to achieve credible election. For Butler

(2004) electoral reform refers to change in electoral systems to enhance effectiveness and efficiency in election administration. In the words of Ogwu, (2016), Electoral reform refers to changes made to electoral laws and processes over some time, often to improve the electoral process. It is a deliberate and conscious attempt by the state to correct loopholes and weaknesses in the electoral process. From the preceding explanations, electoral reforms generally represent fundamental or significant changes or improvements in the electoral system, which may assume various dimensions, including reforming the electoral laws (rules and regulations guiding the conduct of election), introduction of technology, remapping the electoral constituencies, electoral and party systems and election institution. It is, therefore, intended to fix the dysfunctions in a nation's electoral processes.

Concept of Election

Election as a concept, like many others in the social sciences, has been subjected to varied interpretations by different scholars. However, scholars have agreed that elections are intended to ensure and validate the legitimacy of the political office holders, as well as provide enabling ground for democracy to flourish. For example, Ujo (2000) sees election as one procedure of aggregating preferences of a particular kind. It is a process of choosing between alternatives. To him, election can be done in practice only through forms of procedure generally accepted and binding within the political system. In its proper sense, election is a process of selecting the officers or representatives of an organization or group by the vote of its qualified members (Nwolise,2007). What is important in these definitions is the process that produces the public office holders. On this, particularly, considers the existence of an independent election management body (EMB) as the most essential ingredient to credible election. However, it must be noted that both definitions wished away the place of political parties which serve as the platforms through which candidates are sponsored for elections into public positions in a liberal democracy.

It is suggested here that any conception of election in democratic politics must of necessity identifies election or electoral politics with party politics or political parties. This clearly reflected in Harris's definition which conceives election as an event that allows political parties to present their programmes and candidates to those voters qualified to participate in election (Harris, 1979).

Election in a democracy is, therefore, very important because it is a process through which the expression of the people is shown via legitimacy and leadership succession.

E-Voting and BVAS

The goal of any voting system is to establish the intent of the voter and transfer that intent to the vote counter. The efficiency of the voting method and the accuracy of the vote counter are the crucial determinants of the ability and capacity of the system to correctly determine the wish of the voters. E-voting system as Iwu (2006) defines; is one of the several forms of automated voting methods, which employ computer technology devices to improve several aspects of the electoral process. It incorporates largely paperless voting methods prominent among which are electronic voting machine (EVM), Internet voting, telephone, IVR voting, digital TV voting, electronic kiosk voting, etc. Babalola (2021) conceives electronic voting as a comprehensive system of casting, counting and transmission of votes through electronic means. It may involve both the process of casting and counting of votes or may relate only to the process of counting. E-voting technology includes punched cards, optical scanned voting systems and specialised voting cubicles or kiosks including self-contained direct recording electronic voting systems popularly referred to as DRE.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Results Viewing (IREV) Portal are two technological innovations celebrated for enhancing the transparency of election results and boosting public trust in electoral outcomes in recent elections. INEC asserts that these technologies are addressing the ten most pervasive weaknesses in Nigeria's election result management process such as falsification of number of accredited voters, collation of false results, mutilation of results and computational errors, swapping of results sheets, forging of results sheets, snatching and destruction of results sheets, (Itodo, 2022).

In a more specific and comprehensive explanation, IDEA (2022) sees the BVAS machine as technological device used to identify and accredit voters' fingerprints and facial recognition before voting. The device is also used for capturing images of the polling unit result sheet (Form EC8A) and uploading the image of the result sheet online. IREV which is an important component of Electronic Voting System is an online portal where polling unit level results are uploaded directly from the polling unit, transmitted, and published for the public. At the front end of the

online portal, members of the public can create personal accounts with which they can gain access to all uploaded results stored as PDF files. This accessibility of polling unit level results increases transparency and public trust in the process.

Rationale for Electoral Reforms

In any given political system, periodic and regular reforms of the electoral system are a major prerequisite for a free and fair electoral context. The significance of an efficient and effective electoral system cannot, therefore, be overemphasized in a democratic political system (NOUN, n.d.) A good electoral system delicately balances the politics of participation with the politics of representation and ultimately contributes to the building of a viable and sustainable political culture. The act of participation in the electoral process in a country not only vests legitimacy on the decision makers, it also makes the voters conscious that they are active and effective participants, though in an indirect sense, in the decision making process of their country. In a country where a good electoral systems

Electoral reforms are considered as avenue for improving on the quality of elections as it provides both emerging and older democracies with the opportunities for introducing new rules such as new techniques, technologies and improved system of safeguarding the electoral process. Against the backdrop of the chronic problem of electoral irregularities and other related issues in the conduct of elections in Nigeria, it is widely believed that there are several benefits derivable from the process of electoral reforms in the country.

Reflecting on electoral reforms in the USA, Tausanovitch (2023) argues that ultimately, any reform is worthy of consideration if it advances at least one of two criteria:

- i. **Improves incentives for problem-solving and collaboration:** Any electoral reform should at least maintain, if not improve, the motivation for legislators to govern collectively and responsibly. An ideal legislature would contain people with diverse points of view; after all, most people in any given community have diverse points of view. But it would also encourage legislators to work with their colleagues in good faith to get things done.
- ii. **Improves representation:** Any electoral reform should at least maintain, if not improve, how well the public is represented in local, state, or federal legislatures. Electoral reforms should,

therefore, aspire to provide more meaningful choices to voters and greater alignment between the public and their representatives.

For Hammed (2018) electoral reform may serve the following:

- a. To enhance impartiality of electoral body and other institutions involved in the administration of elections like police and court;
- b. To ensure inclusiveness, independence and financial autonomy of the e electoral body; and
- c. To guarantee transparency, broadened franchise and widened participation and integrity of the process.

Generally, electoral reforms are aimed at making elections more transparent, competitive and credible, whose outcomes will be more acceptable to majority of the participants.

Electoral Reforms in Nigeria

Electoral reforms are generally associated with problem confronting elections and electoral process in the nation's democratic development and In recent time, electoral reforms in Nigeria revolve around electoral laws, geography, party system and election institution. These areas fundamentally affect electoral behaviour of voters, political party, financing, strategy, and the adoption of national value system as prelude to meaningful democratization in Nigeria (Obiani& Solomon, 2019). To this end, various reforms have been undertaken especially in Nigeria's Fourth Republic as part of deliberate efforts to notable among which are the 2001, 2006, 2010 and the most recent one; the 2022 Electoral Act. The 2010 reform was, however, remarkable for introducing the Smart Card Reader (SCR) which was believed to have significantly improved the quality of the 2011 elections.

The main justification for electoral reform in Nigeria according to Ibrahim (2007) is rooted in the historiography of Nigerian elections, which some have characterized as a history of competitive rigging. Indeed, throughout the various epochs of the country's political development (pre- and post-independence) (Omotola, 2011) electoral issues have remained, arguably, among the most influential factors in the political cycle of the country. Omotola (2011) further contends that the electoral reform process in Nigeria has mainly been built on fostering the independence of the EMB and promoting a democratic political culture

within political parties. The essence is to evolve a strong institutional basis of politics.

In response to the above situations, since 1999, series of electoral reforms have been enacted by successive administrations, notably the 2001, 2006, 2010 and most recently the 2022 Electoral Acts basically to enhance the credibility of elections in the country. The 2010 Electoral Act is particularly remarkable for the introduction of Information Technology into the election process in Nigeria, including the Electronic Voters Register (EVR), Automatic Fingerprint Identification System (AFIS) and Smart Card Reader (SCR) deployed in the 2011 general elections.

EU (2021) has identified three broad reasons being advanced to support the implementation of e-voting as a potential solution to Nigeria's lingering electoral challenges. These reasons are based on perceived understanding of the e-voting as well as expectations as follows:

- ***Integrity hypothesis.*** This hypothesis sees e-voting as a tool for enhancing credibility and transparency of the electoral process through the elimination or reduction of negative practices and trends such as rigging, manipulation of results, low voter turnout and human errors associated with manual voting/collation system. It is believed that the automated system of the e-voting will mitigate these errors, thereby, improving the integrity of the process.
- ***Cost saving hypothesis.*** Concerned about the rising cost of elections, proponents of this hypothesis believe that e-voting is capable of eliminating or at least reducing high ticket election expenses such as printing and distribution of ballot papers, sensitive and other non-sensitive materials, recruitment and payment of a large pool of ad-hoc staff and election logistics, through the virtual management of these activities or with limited need physical operations or human interference. The cost of investing in e-voting infrastructure and material in the long run is presumably lower than the above-mentioned recurrent costs, hence ensuring cost-effectiveness.
- ***Preventing Election Violence (PEV) hypothesis:*** Proponents of this theory are of the view that e-voting, will reduce or eliminate acts of electoral conflicts and violence such as snatching of ballot boxes, disruption of voting at Polling Units, intimidation of voters and arsons due to a drastic reduction in human interactions. This will also reduce the large-scale deployment of security personnel, which

often lead to intimidation of voters and militarisation of the electoral process in some cases.

It could be deduced from the foregoing that the demand for technological innovation in the electoral process in Nigeria is premised on the view that it would reduce the manipulation attributed to the manual system and make the votes count. The improvement is also aimed to expand the scope of participation, inspire confidence of the public and ultimately make elections credible and ensure that government is accountable to the people. It is, however widely assumed that the whole process of e-voting will be automated with virtually no human involvement or physical activity while the cost saving hypothesis has not reckoned with the fact that huge capital investment will be required at the initial stage to implement e-voting. In this connection,

EU (2021) has rightly observed that operational challenges related to the uneven communication infrastructure networks in the country as well as human interface with the system needs to be carefully handled. Additional challenge to the e-voting implementation plan is the peculiar nature of Nigeria's electoral environment marked by stiff competition, weak infrastructural development, dynamics of inter-group competition, violence and paucity of fund, among others. For instance, e-voting experience in Brazil has been faulted on the basis of its huge cost. It has been posited that investments in e-voting are higher than spending in basic social programs that could alleviate poverty and provide more resources to improve basic education and healthcare. It is considered as an expensive toy belonging to the rich and privileged and which does not reflect the fact that Brazil is confronted with many pressing domestic demands and competing priorities from healthcare, to water and sewage quality to housing and education needs (EU, 2021).

The E-Voting System and Credibility of Elections

Several works have been carried out in areas of research that concern electronic voting. For instance, the work of Musa, Ayo and John (2011), on building of a multi-modal trust-based e-voting system advocates the use of a multimodal authentication method for the electorate when casting their votes. These methods includes biometric enabled voters card, finger print authentication and the use of PIN (Personal Identification Number) for voters to avoid time wastage during voting especially when one of the authentication methods failed, they can easily switch to another one. Similarly in their work, Duruji, Ayo, Oni and Oni (2015)

made a case for e-voting in Nigeria with strong contention that open and secret ballot was unsuitable for conducting election in Nigeria, especially citing the country's political environment. The authors proposed the use of e-voting for subsequent election in Nigeria, which according to them, will help to eliminate electoral flaws associated with the open and secret ballot system. The study by Ayo, Adebisi and Sofowu (2008), on e-voting implementation in Nigeria: the success factor; proposed an implementation of an integrated system that comprises an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), the Internet Voting (i-Voting) and the Mobile Voting (m-Voting) for conducting election in the country to enhance participatory democracy.

Ahmad, John, Abdullah, & Arshad (2015), in their study on issues and challenges of transition to e-voting technology in Nigeria, critically appraised the challenges of e-voting in other countries of the world and the implementation of e-voting in Nigeria. The study recommends to the Nigerian government greater investments on research and development for deeper and better understanding of challenges and sustainability of e-voting system. In the same vein, Abu-Shanab et Knight and Rafai (2010), in their work, e-Voting System: a tool for e-democracy argued and stressed the significance of the use of e-voting system in conducting election across board due to its attendance benefits, convenience and enhancement of integrity of the election process. They also explore the factors influencing the adoption of e-voting system in a University environment.

Moreover, Yekini, Oyeyinka, Oludipe and Lawal (2012), in their work on computer-based automated voting machine for Elections in Nigeria, recommended the development and deployment of Automated Voting Machine (AVM) that will automate the entire election procedures thereby creating reliable, cost effective electioneering process and ultimately leading to a focused and genuine democracy that will bring about unity and peace in our country in the future election in Nigeria. Similarly, Ajiboye et al (2013) conducted their research on modeling and evaluation of e-voting system for sustainable credible election. They proposed a model for evaluating e-voting system by using fuzzy logic approach. The model developed was simulated and tested with student union election in a Federal University in Nigeria and obtained a promising outcome. Gerlach (2009) propounded seven design principles for a secured e-voting system, among which are: proven security, trustworthy

design, published source codes, vote verification, voter accessibility, ensure anonymization and expert oversight.

The various explanations above obviously depict the comparative advantages of technological innovations in the electoral system over the conventional or paper based system. However, concerns have also been raised about the challenges associated with the e-voting system. According to Kozakova(2011), the famous risk of e-voting adoption concerns program error, software attack or system hacking, risk of fake voting sites and eventual submission of electronically altered result as a result of computer virus. Reinforcing this position, Fernandez, Red and Peláez (2013) stress that caution must, therefore, be applied in designing the technology to ensuring security, confidentiality and convenience to avoid losing public confidence in the technology. Hence, the quest for viable electoral process in Nigeria, Naijalog (2014) emphasizes, is not about changing voting system, rather about addressing corrupt tendencies and unethical behavior of electoral officials and other stakeholders involved. This implies that attitudinal mindsets of the citizens are very crucial as major driver of the new technology.

Theoretical framework

This work is anchored on Everett Rogers's (1962) Innovation Diffusion Theory (IDT) to explain the effectiveness of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BIVAS) used by INEC in the conduct of 2023 general election in Nigeria. The diffusion of innovations theory seeks to explain how and why new ideas and practices are adopted, including why the adoption of new ideas can be spread out over long periods through a specific population or social system. The end result of this diffusion is that people, as part of a social system, adopt a new idea, behavior or product. Adoption means that a person does something differently than what they had previously (LaMorte, 2022). The theory also explains the passage of a new idea through stages of adoption by different people who participate in or begin using the new idea. The "new ideas" in the diffusion of innovations theory can be things like ideas, technologies, goods, services, or behaviors. Thus, the theory is relevant in evaluating the introduction and application of BVAS in the conduct of 2023 elections.

Methodology

The paper is anchored on correlational research design. It involves a process of exploring, and providing an understanding of the issues and trends of electoral reforms, with emphasis on the effectiveness of BVAS introduced in the 2023 elections. Basically, the paper applies qualitative method and data were obtained mainly from the secondary sources (including books, journals, newspapers and government or special publications) through desk review of relevant literature. Data were presented and analyzed carefully by means of content analysis.

BVAS and the 2023 General Elections: An Evaluation.

Technology innovation and its deployment into electoral process as earlier mentioned are aimed to encourage citizens to participate and bolster their trust in democratic process. In line with this assumption, it should be noted that popular belief and expectations of most Nigerians, in the build up to the 2023 general elections, was that BVAS would be just another significant technological advancement to Nigeria's electoral infrastructure. As to be expected, however, the deployment of BVAS machine has its merits as well shortcoming as experienced in the conduct of the elections in Nigeria demonstrated.

On the positive side, the deployment of BVAS in the 2023 general elections has been adjudged a tremendous success, though not without some obvious challenges. Oladeji (2023) observed that although election officials have come under fire for not using BVAS to announce results from specific polling unit in a timely manner, the system appears to have done a good job of validating voters' identities otherwise known as accreditation. In the reckoning of Aragba-Akpore, the BVAS has revolutionized Nigeria's elections. There is evidence today that for the first time in Nigeria's national history, the ballot paper made a difference in the political misfortunes of the well-heeled and the fortunes of the okada rider in Kaduna State heading for the House of Representatives. The votes counted; the mighty fell on the sword of the people's rejection and the reject of the earth rose because the votes counted as never before. The signposts are evident everywhere. They glitter like the diamond in the sun. With the BVAS as the rampart against the flood of rigging, we are moving away from a government of the powerful and the influential to a government freely instituted by the people (THISDAY July, 2023).

On their part, Lawrence and Adenkunle(2023) noted that the introduction of BVAS has altered the electoral process in Nigeria. Though there are still grey areas that need to be cleared, it can be deduced from the development emanating from the 2023 election, the major faults were more of human fault than technological lapses. A good example is the hasty and illegal announcement of the Adamawa State governorship bye-elections where the APC governorship candidate Aishatu Dahiru (hajia Binani) was hastily and illegally announced winner even before results were completely collected. As Iremeka (2023) explains; the deployment of technologies in the 2023 elections brought about a number of improvements, though some schools of thoughts felt that the technologies, especially BVAS, failed the country despite its achievements. It is on record that for the first time, some sitting governors in the country lost elections in the manner that they did. The improvement associated with the deployment of the technologies, especially BVAS, was seen in Lagos where, for the first time since 1999, Asiwaju Bola Tinubu lost an election to a party considered to be small. By the same reason, a number of sitting governors notably Ben Ayade of Cross River State, Samuel Ortom of Benue, Abubakar Bagudu of Kebbi State, Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi of Enugu State, Governor Darius Ishaku of Taraba State, Simon Lalong of Plateau state and Governor Okezie Ikpeazu of Abia state have failed in their attempts to become Senators in the 10th National Assembly.

However, on the critical side, the technology was deemed to have failed in some areas, mostly due to its susceptibility to manipulations. For instance, there have been reported cases of BVAS not capturing older permanent voter card (PVC) or its inability to read some elderly peoples' thumb print and this has led to the disenfranchisement of eligible voters. The increasing reliance on e-voting is not without risk of cyber- attacks and manipulation by those entrusted with the technology. There is, therefore, high tendency that cyber-attack will be focused on both the BVAS and IReV. The objective of cyber-attack on BVAS will be to prevent the snapped results sheet from being transmitted to INEC Server. A cyber-attack on the IReV portal might include modification of the results on the portal or the disruption of the IReV Portal from the public. Notwithstanding, the modification of the results sheet might only be possible with the cooperation of a malicious insider, but disruption can be done with or without a malicious insider. (THISDAY July, 2023)

Some have also argued that despite deployment of BVAS in February 25 presidential election, INEC did not, as promised, disclose all of the results from Nigeria's 176,000 polling units on the day of the election. This perhaps has made Oladeji (2023) to comment that the incident has not only damaged Nigeria's democratic development; it has also clouded to employ biometric authentication technology to increase election security in the nation. Oladeji cited many cases filed against the incumbent government by opposition parties, which they accused of manipulating the election in February as being centered on the failure of the system, which has been employed successfully in other municipal and regional elections (Ripples Nigeria, 2023). The Punch Newspaper also reported incidences of malfunctioning of BVAS machine across states in the country especially emphasizing failure of the system to accredit some electorate; a development which significantly affected the exercise (Punch February 26, 2023). Drawing from the foregoing explanations, it could be contended that although BVAS is credited to have achieved some measure of successes in the 2023 general elections, effectively lending credence to the benefits of technological innovation in enhancing the credibility and outcomes of democratic election, it fell short of promises made by INEC of direct transmission of results to its portal with attendant implication for public acceptance of the overall results of the 2023 elections.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Judging From the foregoing discussions, it becomes apparent that recent development of ICT and its growing spread and speedy acceptance across the globe continues to change the way public institutions and in particular INEC operates as part of deliberate effort to promote effective and functional electoral process for improved citizens' political participation in Nigeria. Findings seems to suggest widespread belief that the introduction and deployment of BVAS machines in the conduct of the 2023 general elections was a significant improvement in Nigeria's electoral system. The most visible areas where improvements were evidenced include the efficiency with which BVAS accredited voters, prospect of collation and transmission of results to INEC Results Portal and voters' enthusiasm about participating and safeguarding the results to ensure that their votes counted. This development has, in line with the central idea of diffusion Innovation theory, which stresses the potential benefits of new technological innovation in the electoral process, helped to reinforce citizens' trust in the capacity of the Electoral Agency in the

build up to the most keenly contested election, to deliver credible outcomes. The effectiveness of BVAS has also been demonstrated in the drastic decline in the prevalence of multiple registrations, underage voting, over voting, snatching of electoral materials, intimidation of political opponents, attacks on security personnel and INEC officials in the 2023 general elections which were the hallmarks of elections in Nigeria. It, therefore, demonstrates that the new technology was fairly effective, it did not, however, prevent manipulation especially of recorded votes within the number of accredited voters per polling units.

The findings further demonstrate that though INEC was not under compulsion to transmit results of the 2023 election via its result portal, without doubt, the failure of the Agency's Result Portal, as mentioned earlier, has raised serious concerns that significantly undermined the integrity and credibility of the outcomes of the elections. The petitions filed at the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PEPT) against INEC and APC by the two leading political parties PDP and LP and their Presidential candidates, Alh. Atiku Abubakar and Perter Obi respectively, challenging the declaration of Ahmed Bola Tinubu, as winner of the February 25, 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, are more intricately connected to the fallout of IReV in the election than the actual voting process. This scenario, perhaps, led many to believe that INEC might have compromised in the electoral process.

Moreover, the results clearly show that advanced electoral technology alone does not guarantee credible elections. On the contrary a number of factors, including social, economic and attitudinal and behavioural could also have significant impacts on the overall success of every democratic election. More importantly, therefore, the disposition of political actors at all levels of the polity to take advantage of the technological reform process, within the limits of the law, is a critical factor to the success of BVAS in the conduct of the election and overall outcomes of the electoral process in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The various initiatives towards institutionalization of e-voting system to ensure transparent and credible elections in Nigeria are justifiable in view of recurrent electoral deficit in Nigeria's elections. This paper has, therefore examined the rationale for electoral reforms and particularly evaluates the effectiveness of BVAS in the 2023 general elections in the

country. As the outcomes of 2023 elections suggest, the introduction of BVAS machine has made significant difference in terms of competitiveness, transparency and credibility of the elections, at least at the level of polling units. This much were demonstrated in the efficiency of BVAS in voters' accreditation, drastic decline in over voting and snatching of election materials that were typical of elections in the country.

Despite the modest progress made, some obvious challenges to the outcomes and overall quality of the elections, were the failure of BVAS and apparent lack of transparency, to some extent, in collation and transmission of results to INEC Results Verification Portal, literacy level of most Nigerians especially in the rural communities, poor state of infrastructure, inadequate education of the citizens about the new technology in the elections and limited time for training of ad-hoc staff. This scenario obviously implies some possible manipulation of the election process with attendant question on the integrity of INEC and outcomes of the elections. What the 2023 elections demonstrates is that a lot more is required of INEC to significantly improve its efficiency in operation and functionality of BVAS and mitigate the susceptibility of the BVAS against manipulation and hacking by desperate politicians in subsequent elections. INEC should also endeavour to collaborate with relevant agencies for effective guard against the electronic devices. Additionally, stringent measures should be applied against any deviant politicians, political parties and INEC officials found wanting in any kind of electoral irregularities while value reorientation should be pursued vigorously to foster basic change of political attitudes and behaviour of the entire citizenry towards greater transparency and credibility in the electoral process.

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