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CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND ELECTION MONITORING IN NIGERIA: THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTION

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Abstract

Civil Society Organisations have recently been active and playing a vital role in democratisation in Nigeria particularly in the Fourth Republic. They were instrumental in the success of the 2015 General Election. This paper is a research work that examined the role of Civil Societies in election monitoring in Nigeria during the 2015 General Election. The problem identified was the way in which the existence of numerous civil societies did not influenced positive electoral process in the country for more than a decade except in the 2015 General Election where their inputs aided the process of credible elections. The research used qualitative case study method of data collection where informants were selected from certain categories that are directly stakeholders in election in Nigeria including academicians, INEC workers and civil societies for Focus Group Discussion. The research discovered that, civil societies influenced the transparency and credibility of the 2015 General Election through proper monitoring, civic voter education, active collaboration with electoral body (INEC) and collaboration with international donor agencies through what they called "Civil Society Situation Room" consisting of more than 60 registered civil societies. The research recommends that, civil societies should be empowered with constitutional backing and independent funding to enable them carry out their responsibilities adequately. Also, the paper recommends that, the electoral body (INEC) should liaise more and cooperate with civil societies to enable for better elections undertaking in future.

Keywords: Civil societies, democracy; election, electoral body, monitoring, observer mission.

1. Introduction

Civil society is a voluntary and non-governmental organisation or an agency which has come to be identified as one of the modern institutions and a crystalliser for a sustainable democratic rule and good governance (Almond & Verba 1963; Bratton 1994, Canadian Foundation for the Americans 2006 and Ehrenberg 2011). Civil society has come to be recognised today as part of the state distinct from the state but, closer to it as an associational institution that promotes civil liberties and other voluntary activities (Chambers & Kopstein, 2008). Civil societies respond to critical national and international issues such as the economic situation, human rights, civil rights, politics, disasters, corruption, governments' abuses and failures and other issues that affect the well-being of the global citizenry (Sriskandarajah, 2016). Civil society is an important aspect of changing the geometry in the social life of mankind and human relations through providing a platform and a means of harnessing ideas in addressing the key issues that affect people in their societies (Edwards, 2011). Civil society is often referred to as non-governmental organisations which bridge the gap between the public or the private individuals and the public domain by identifying the means of synthesising the balance between the two for a better society (Klaus, Keping & Ole, 2009).

Civil society organisation has been in existence in Nigeria for many decades especially during the era of military rule and the period of democratic transition to civil rule. Indeed, civil society consolidates democracy in Nigeria and it is the role of civil society that was perceived as the major contributor which pressurised the military to surrender power in the current Fourth Republic (Udogu, 1995; Omodia & Erunke, 2007 and Mgba, 2015). According to United State Agency for International Development (2006), there was an emergence of positive trends such as the role of the civil societies in Nigeria which led to improved transparency and good governance. The African context of state-citizens relations is that of authoritarian approach and that necessitates for the role of civil societies in demanding for democratic rule and good governance as in the case of Nigeria where civil societies are found to be more active towards democratisation process (Aiyede, 2001). Civil society does not only play the role of promoting democracy in Nigeria but, it is also found to be proactive in democratic sustenance (Salamon, Anheier, List& Toepler, & Sokolowski, 1997; Ishkanian 2007; Sall 2009; Dakyyen & Dang 2014 and Kew & Oshikoya, 2014) because it emphasises on maintenance of rule of law (Utsaha, 2014). A very important state-civil society relationship emerged in Nigeria which is diverse, often mutual, and in other times conflictual (Ikelegbe, 2013, World Economic Forum 2013)

2. Problem Statement

Despite the role played by civil societies in Nigeria, there are many obstacles that impede its successful operation such as corruption, government policies, the national economy, literacy level, political awareness and many other factors. The above factors made the operations and activities of civil societies in Nigeria limited. One of the areas in which the civil society is more responsive in Nigeria is election and electoral process. Civil societies played different roles before, during and after election including civic voter education, public awareness, workshop for parties and stakeholders, collaboration with the electoral body; the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) towards a better and

credible election and other aspects of electoral conduct. This study discovered that, even with the huge presence of civil societies in the electoral process, most of the existing works in the field neglected this vital aspect and it is this knowledge gap that is identified as contribution to knowledge by this work.

3. Research Questions

The research questions are categorised into two

What are the roles of civil societies in monitoring of electoral process taking the last General Election; the 2015 as a case study?

To what extent have the civil societies succeeded in achieving their role of monitoring the 2015 General Election in Nigeria?

4. Purpose of the Study

The Purpose of the study is to examine the role of civil societies in monitoring of electoral process taking the last General Election; the 2015 as a case study.

5. Research Methods

The work used a qualitative method of data collection and analysis. qualitative method is the use of a strategy to gather a large information from selected informants/participants using varieties of methods such as interviews either structured or unstructured, observation and Focus Group Discussion (FDG) (Lune & Berg, 2017). It is a paradigm of data gathering which is not only limited to one specific area or issue but different sources and a large data which can be grouped and interpreted using specific codes such as themes, models, tables and charts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The research design for this work is the use of qualitative case study involving an area of Nigeria with specific attention to an institution using inductive analogical method of data collection and analysis.

Data were collected from both the primary and secondary sources in the work. The primary source is the use of interview where unstructured questions were designed by the researchers and the selected informants were interviewed to generate their views and information on the subject matter of study. A total of 14 informants/participants were selected from three groups. The first group is the civil societies where a total of 8 members of civil societies were accessed and interviewed in a place called Unity Fountain in Abuja with each of the informants representing one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria and the remaining two from the Federal Capital Territory Abuja (FCTA) for a focus group discussion. The second category is the senior officials from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) where 3 of them were selected and the last group is the academicians where three experienced Professors of Political Science were selected from three famous Universities in Northern Nigeria due to accessibility factors out of which 3 were selected. This made a total of 14 informants/participants which is justified by Sharan (2002) and Creswell (2014) as an enough number for qualitative interview from an average perspective.

The secondary data include books, journals, internet sources and reports from civil societies and other international agencies that deal with civil societies directly. The data obtained was coded and

analysed using thematic analytical interpretations including tables and models for clarity of interpretation and perception. The data were backed up with theoretical postulations and the existing literature in the field for a better analysis and discussions.

6. Findings

In this section information from the field is presented and analysed in the thematic discussion of the interviewers' information. In this study, it is discovered that, the Situation Room engaged actively and monitored the election in three major sequences as follows: pre-election period, after the election and post-election assessment. This has been discussed extensively below.

6.1. Pre-election Monitoring

In the build up to the 2015 General Election, the members of the Situation Room revealed that, they played a critical role in the preparation where they narrated that:" the intervention of the Situation Room in the success of the 2015 General Election is very critical right from the preparation. For instance, the Situation Room hosted former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan to a dialogue session where he presented a speech on the critical importance of Nigeria's election to the Africa's continent". The Situation Room also according to some of the interviewers "Persuaded Kofi Anan to meet with the two major Presidential contenders; former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan and current President Muhammadu Buhari and other opposition parties too during the campaign period where he pleaded for peace and harmony". This position from the informants was also supported by a report from the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (2015), Adibe (2015), Paden (2015) and INEC (2017).

Another vital role played by the Situation Room in the pre-election period is the unwavering support it provided to the electoral body; the INEC. "The situation prior to the election; of tension and impending violence became major concern for the Situation Room" according to one of the interviewers. Indeed, "the Situation Room succeeded in averting disaster by supporting INEC in which it led other civil societies to resist an attempt to force the INEC Chairman to go into compulsory leave or retirement three months before the conduct of the election. The country would have been thrown into confusion and chaos but for the timely intervention and support. It also protested the postponement of the Election which was not welcomed by most Nigerians having seen the move as a ploy to subvert the democratic process and the election".

The Situation Room also according to one of the interviewers: "managed to assess the situation of INEC's preparation and the level of responsiveness of the parties and candidates as well as monitoring the parties' expenditure to ensure transparency". In another version: "The Situation Room worked closely with local communities through organising workshops, seminars and public lectures in addition to door to door campaign for enlightenment of the voters on the nature and pattern of the electronic card reader and franchise as well as shunning of violence of whatever nature". The same was also observed by Adibe (2015), Paden (2015) and INEC (2017).

The above analysis can be supported by the theoretical framework used and applied by the work. The Third Sector Theory of civil society implied that, civil societies are separate and distinct from government and other private organisations and operate towards fulfilling the civic interest and desires of

the members and individuals in the society. in the case of Nigeria, the Situation Room identified election monitoring as one of the most important civic duties that can serve the community and it did that successfully since the role above played contributed in the success of the Election.

6.2. Monitoring During the Conduct of the Election

According to diverse views of the informants, during the conduct of the 2015 General Election, the Situation Room coordinated the human resources of various civil society groups that are not members in the Room. This process enabled for them to gather and share critical information, planned for expected challenges during elections and rapid response towards the challenges. A central command centre was established which coordinated the plans and activities of the Situation Room during the conduct of the Election. The Situation Room engaged INEC workers to guarantee public confidence in the Commission to deliver credible elections. The group was engaged in advocacy with local and international leaders to identify quickly the potential flashpoint for conflict and how to curb it. The Situation Room monitored the Election in the field by sending its members across the nation to watch, observe and report. The Situation Room in its headquarters received reports on the way the Election was going.

The Situation Room was categorised into three main groups on the Election day; the expert/analysts, the technical team and the field officers. The technical team received reports from the field and verified its authenticity, then intimated the INEC on the situation and used social media to reveal the information. This role succeeded in averting many conflicts, subversion of the electoral process and other irregularities that used to take place previously in the past elections. It has been observed by Sule (2018) that civil society is one of the pillar behind the success of the 2015 General Election. In addition, the theory of Third Sector of civil society is also confirmed and applied here because the civil society which distinguished itself from the government and private business organisations succeeded in watching the Election.

6.3. Post-Election Period

The Situation Room having successfully seen the conduct of the 2015 General Election played another role in the post-election through providing a comprehensive report according to many of the selected informants. The report was made on the areas of success, improvement, challenges and future anticipation of the conduct of elections in Nigeria and handed over the report to the INEC, government, other civil societies and international observers and agencies that are operating in Nigeria. The report includes some recommendations especially on the campaign expenditure, the adoption of electronic card reader permanently for voting, the use of e-collation of results from polling units and wards, the administration of local council elections by the INEC at the national level and not by the state government and other notable observations. This position has been supported by International Republican Institute (2015), Songonuga (2015), Mgba (2015), the Centre for Public Policy Alternative (2015) and Wikipedia (2018).

Thus, the theory of Third Sector is applicable here because it can be understood that the Situation Room maintained neutrality from the two other sectors; the government and private profit organisations through a carefully assembled ideas and recommendations for an improvement in the future

elections to ensure transparency and good governance for the sake of the well-being of the public. The findings of the discussion can be presented summarily in the table below for easy perception.

Table 01. Summary of Major Findings (Activities of Civil Society Situation Room during the 2015 General Election) Type your title here

S/No.	Period	Activities
1.	Pre-election	Liaising with local and international stakeholders, resisting manipulations, assessing the level of preparedness, identifying flashpoints for conflicts and rapid response
2.	During election	Harmonising civil society groups, sharing of critical information, preparing for expected challenges, local and international advocacy, election monitoring and observation and report on the happenings in the field
3.	Post-Election	Preparing a comprehensive report with recommendations on an improved future election in Nigeria

Source: Field Survey 2017

7. Conclusion

The paper concludes that civil societies played a greater role in many social services and activities in Nigeria for many decades since pre-colonial, colonial, military and post-military periods. However, the most vibrant and active role of civil society is that of democratic sustanance and electoral support through monitoring the process. This has been the great role of Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room which has become more pronounced in the 2015 General Election. Thus, this study is very important and of great interest to researchers, policymakers, civil societies and other champions of democratic governance and credible election conduct in Nigeria and Africa since it has identified a new era and area of knowledge and action that will be more beneficial in the future. The study therefore, recommends the following for an improved role of the civil societies in election monitoring in future:

7.1. Recommendation

1.The civil societies should join the coalition in the Situation Room for those who are non-members to make the group formidable and leverage for negotiation and their activities;

2.The civil societies should try to improve in terms of their activities by expanding into other parts of the country especially the remote areas and rural places;

3.The civil societies should strive hard to detach themselves from any corrupt practices and romance with public agencies except in a legal manner to be as neutral as possible;

4.The civil societies should sponsor a bill in the National Assembly as part of their recommendations that they observed during their monitoring of the election in 2015;

5.The civil societies should involve other sectors in the state for coordinated activities that will lead to harmony and achievement of their goals and

6.The civil societies should continue to play the role of economic, social, political, environmental and other services to the communities as part of their responsibilities.

Acknowledgments

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