The Role of BVAS in 2023 General Elections in Nigeria and Its Implications to National Development

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Abstract

This work, The Role of BVAS in 2023 General Elections in Nigeria and its Implications on National Development, tries to illuminate the intention behind the introduction of the BVAS machine by INEC in 2021, its merits and demerits, as well as, finding the link between the BVAS, 2023 general elections in Nigeria and national development. This work concluded that although INEC had procured 200,000 units of the BVAS machine at the total cost of N105.25 billion and deployed them in 8,809 wards and 119,973 polling units across the country during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, yet, not much significant differences were witnessed, as a lot of post-election cases still liter at different courts today, with the courts sacking and replacing many politicians declared by INEC after the election. Finally, it advices that the BVAS machine should be subjected to further scrutiny by the manufacturers, INEC should be made to become completely independent and to make sure that the people's votes count at all times.

Keywords: Election, national development, democracy and BVAS machine.

Introduction

In order to digitize the Nigerian electoral systemduring the 2023 general elections in Nigeria the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 2021 introduced the BVAS machine and made it available for use in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The BVAS machine was deployed both on the 25th of February and 18th of March, 2023, when the nation had its federal and states elections respectively.Oderemi (2023) puts the above succinctly thus:

> In the quest to improve the integrity of elections in Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has introduced what it called the Bimordial Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) as the journey to the 2023 elections progresses.

This BVAS machines, according to INEC (2023) were dispatched and used in the entire 8,809 wards and 119,973 polling units in Nigeria by INEC staff, delegates and representative(including adhoc staff) during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.The BVAS machine was designed, abinitio, to help digitize the system, transit theNigerian electoral process from manual to electronic, forestall recurring electoral blunders in Nigerian general elections, enable voters to get accredited electronically and enhance electoral accuracy, among others.

The BVAS machine was introduced, bearing national development in mind. This is because elections go a long way in determining the rate of development a nation would enjoy afterwards; thus, elections greatly contribute and facilitate national development.National development is only achieved when a country raises the standard of living of its citizens in all spheres of their existences,and this can only be achieved when such a country has reached the capacity to providebasic livelihood requirements and supplies requisite for its inhabitants.Therefore, this articles irradiatesthe purpose behind the introduction of the BVAS machine by INEC in 2021, its merits and demerits, as well as, finding the link between the BVAS, 2023 general elections in Nigeria and the expected national development in Nigeria today.

Literature Review

Democratic Participant Media Theory

The democratic participant media theoryis a theory thatemphasizes on the empowerment of citizens of a country by both the activities of the government as well as that of the mass media. It alsoencourages democratic principles through free flow of information from the government and the media to the people. It is a theory that insists that the mass media and its entire systemshould be democratic in construction and must stay away from too much regulations.According to Vilanilam (2021) democratic participant media theory was proposed by Professor Dennis McQuail in 1989. The theory is located mainly in rich, developed countries where the citizens have the scientific, technological and financial means to put the latest innovations in inter-personal communication to practical and regular use.

> The democratic-participant media theory is more relevant in liberal democratic developed countries than developing and least developed countries. Because, the countries in transition from underdevelopment and non-democracy are alleged to lack the infrastructures and professional skills needed for free media in democracy

The attention of democratic-participant media theoryconcentrates on countries with a prospect of political, scientific and technological advancement. Every country can adopt the democratic-participant media theory, as long as, there is a political will to do so, and to this effect, Nigeria is proud of having produced a handful of technological experts and acquired a couple of technology related gadgets. For example, in the previous general elections in Nigeria, from the time of President GoodluckJonathan, the card reader machines were used to read voter's biometricsthat were embedded in a voter's card, but in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria the card readers were substituted for the BVAS machine, which is a high-tech machine that has the capacity to capture and recognize individual voter's biometrics (face and finger prints, etc) and transmit results online in real-timeFinally, the adaptation of the democratic participant media theoryhere is because the theory supports the deployment of technologyin any democracy like Nigeriathat could enhance freedom of participation both in the political process and mass media, and in all, contribute immensely to thedevelopment of the nation through technology and press freedom.

2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were held both on the 25th of February and 18[th]ofMarch, 2023, under the supervision ofProfessor MahmoodYakubu, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC; the election took place in the entire 36 states of the federation, comprising 774 local government areas,8,809 wards and 119,973 polling units across the country(INEC, 2023), with a total registered voters of 9.4 million (Akinmoju, 2023), and about 27 percent of the total number coming out to participate actively in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria (Qosim, 2023) and with a total expenditure of N355 billion by the independent electoral commission of Nigeria (Umoru, 2022).The 2023 general elections have come and gone with its merits and demerits, with Bola Ahmed Tinubu beingdeclared the winner of the election, with a total of 8,794,726 votes, which accounts for 10.08 per cent of all eligible voter cast during the 25th February, 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and has been on the seat of power since May, 29th 2023, till date.

INEC as the Umpire of 2023 GeneralElections in Nigeria

According to Odeyemi (2022)the mission of INEC is to serve as an independent and effective Election Management Bodies (EMB) committed to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections for sustainable democracy in Nigeria."The role of theIndependent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is clearly of utmost important in the process of transitioning from one democratic dispensation to another, as well as,in consolidatingthe Nigerian nascent democracy (Uno, 2007). INEC was inaugurated in 1998 under the administration of AbdulsalamiAbubakar.The Electoral body, INEC, conducted the first election that ushered in the first president of Nigeria under the fourth republic which took effect from the 29th of May, 1999, with President OlusegunObasanjo as the winner of the election, and therefore, the first civilian government under this fourth republican Nigeria. Since then, INEC has been in charge of all elections inNigeria, both on-season and off-season, as the sole umpire of elections in Nigeria.

Between 1997 till date INEC has successfully conducted and supervised seven consecutive uninterruptedelections in Nigeria both at the federal and state levels. The body has tried in upgrading its gadgets after each elections but the benefit of all the money spent by the organization so far has not actually been felt by Nigerians since then, because none of the seven

elections has been adjudged to be completely free, fair or credible without post elections litigations and bickering.

BVAS and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

INEC in 2021 purchasedvoter biometric capturing devices known as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) that was aimed at perfecting the process of elections in Nigeria, as well as, uploading the outcome of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. According to Oderemi (2022)"INEC chairman, Professor MahmoodYakubu is confident that the commission would conduct a free and fair election in 2023 following the farreaching reforms, including the introduction of more technologies, like the BVAS into the 2023 electoral process".

> When the commission introduced the BVAS last year, the compact device was intended to achieve two objectives. First is the verification of the genuineness of the Permanent Voters' Cards (PVCs) and the fingerprint or facial authentication of voters during accreditation. Secondly, to replace the Z-pad for uploading the polling unit results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) in real-time on Election Day"Oderemi (2022).

The BVAS is a technological device used to identify legible voters for accreditation, with the inbuilt capacity to recognize voters' fingerprints and facial before voting, and to transmit/upload live results from poling units directly to INEC result portal, the IReV,in real-time. This device had cost the electoral body and the nation at large a whooping of N105.25 billion in 2021. Corroboratingly, Eleanya (2023) informs that:

> The Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC's) N105.25 billion budget for acquiring the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) surpasses the estimated market cost by 30.4 percent.

INEC acquired 200,000 units of the BVAS machine, all at the rate of $795 for each device, the 200,000 devices cost the nation a total of $159 million which was the equivalent of N73,217,910,000, a figure which was assumed to be at least 30.4 percent lower than INEC's initial budget for the same equipment, which was put at N105,250,000,000 (Eleanya, 2023).The BVAS has been introduced and deployed in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, but did not come without itscommendations and criticisms, as many Nigerians today still question the outcome of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, as evidentinthe number of post-election cases within the doorsteps of the Nigerian judiciary uptill today.

The Roles of BVAS in 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

When the BVAS machine was introduced by INEC in 2021 there were a lot of positive roles expected of the machine to play during 2023 general elections in Nigeria.According to INEC (2022) the BVAS machine was officially backed up by the Electoral Act of 2022. For instance, "Section 7 (2) of the Electoral Act 2022 makes it mandatory that to vote, the presiding officer shall use a smart card reader or any other technological device that may be prescribed by the commission for the accreditation of voters to verify, confirm or authenticate the particulars of the intending voter in the manner prescribed by the Commission"(Ihechukwu, 2023By).

The BVAS ensures that only persons eligible to vote and in possession of their PVCs and whose names areon the register of voters of a particular polling unit are allowed to voteat that polling unit and to only vote once.Again, the BVAS is not just a regular card reader, it functions way above mere card readers, and according to INEC (2022), "the differences between BVAS and the Smart Card Reader (SCR) previouslyused by INECis that the BVAS machine verifies and accredits voter using either their fingerprints ortheir face and eliminating failure to accredit eligible voter".Some of the roles of the BVAS in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, according to INEC is that it was used to store the details of voters, as INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) duringvoters' registration and for uploading election results to the INEC Resultsviewing Portal (IReV).

Chronicling, further, the roles of the BVAS on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, Dawn(2022) outlines the following:

    a. The BVAS machine enabled voters to get accredited and vote without wasting time,

    b. It helped in transmitting some election results to IReV, thereby reducing interference, and

    c. With BVAS, any polling unit where any form of violence was detected, results from such polling units was automatically nullified and voided.

Manya and Dangnan (2022) also add the following to the roles of the BVAS machine as, "to increased accuracy, transparency and efficiency, make elections digital other that analogue, accommodates more people in shorter time and make the process interesting and less cumbersome".

The BVAS machine could help to reduce the incidence of electoral fraud. This is because paper ballots are much easier to manipulate than electronic ones. Furthermore, digitalizing elections could help to increase turnout by making it faster and easier for people to vote (Manya and Dangnan, 2022).

Challenge of the BVAS Machine during 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

With the entire roles, benefits and importance of the BVAS machine as outlined above it still incurred a lot ofsetbacks while on the field during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Manya and Dangnan (2022) list the following as some of the challenges of the BVAS machine faced during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

a. Nigeria lacks the required technology to use the BVAS machine,
b. The machine is expensive to procure and maintain,
c. BVAS in amenable to Cybercrimes and security risks,
d. There were several reported BVAS malfunctioning cases during the elections,
e. Even with the presence of the BVAS, INEC still eventually reported hacking attempts on its IReV portal, and
f. There were seeming cases of over-voting recorded in many states like Abia, Enugu and many others.

National Development

Every election comes with its prospect of contributing to the nation's development index, and that of 2023 was not an exception. National development is the capacity of the country to raise the standard of living of its residents. It can be achieved by providing the citizens with basic livelihood requirements and supplying them with employment, etc.Development is a process that creates growth, brings in progress and positive changes. The two aspects of development are economic growth or increase in people's income and social progress includes literacy, health and the provision of public services(Buju, 2022).

The components of national development, according to Buju (2022) are as follows:

a. Development of rural areas,
b. Increasing agricultural outputs,

c. Enlargement of economic opportunities,

d. Handling of growth in urban areas,

e. Eradication of poverty, among others.

National development can only be said to have been achieved if the per capita income, literacy level, health status of the citizens and others have been obviously enhanced by the policies of a subsisting government who had come into the reins of power through a free and fair election.

Conclusion

In 2021, the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) introduced the Biometric Verification and Accreditation System, BVAS, machine with the aim of digitizing Nigerian electoral process, reducing electoral anomalies, identifying only duly registered voters, uploading voters result, real-time, from poling units to the IReV, which is INEC'S result portal. The device was sampled in Anambra and Osun's of-season's elections and faired very well then, and that factor alone gave Nigerians the assurance that their votes were actually going to count at last, hence they trouped out en masse to registerin order to earn voters legibility, at last, over 90 million Nigerians registered before the process ended late 2022. Both on the 25th of February andi8[th] of March, 2023, the BVAS devices were deployed for the presidency and governorship elections in Nigeria, however, the outcome of both exercises are still being questioned in the court even till date, as many that were declared by INEC have been sacked by the court and many others replaced, and this shows that actually the acquired 200,000 units of the BVAS machine did not live up to its expectation withat least N105.25 billion naira being invested on it yet, the machine still could not transmit election results real-time as promised and still haboured pockets of incidences of over voting and other electoral anomalies, like violence, killings and disruption that were recorded in several statesduring the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Recommendation

Finally, this work recommends the following:

a. The BVAS machine should be subjected to further scrutiny by the manufacturers,

b. The network providers in Nigeria, like MTN, AITEL, GLO and 9Mobile should work on their capacity to ensure that information from BVAS could be transmitted in the future without hitches,

c. There is need for INEC to become completely independent as its name suggest,

d. The INEC leadership should be overhaul, and

e. INEC should henceforth let the people's vote to count.

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