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Structural Violence in Nigeria's Elections: Migrating from Manual Systems to Adoption of Digital Technologies?

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Abstract

This study delves into the pervasive issue of structural violence in Nigeria's electoral processes and assesses the potential of digital technologies, particularly e-voting systems, in addressing these challenges. Employing qualitative methods, the research analyzes existing literature to reveal persistent issues such as vote-buying, ballot box snatching, and manipulation, hindering the realization of fair and transparent elections. Despite the promise of e-voting, challenges related to technological readiness, security concerns, and societal factors remain significant obstacles. The study emphasizes the critical need for a comprehensive approach, including robust training, awareness programs, and societal transformation, alongside technological adoption. Recent attempts at digital integration in Nigeria's elections have highlighted the importance of understanding the complexities involved. The findings underscore that without addressing underlying societal issues and enhancing institutional integrity, Nigeria cannot escape the grip of structural violence.

Keywords: *Structural violence, digital technology, election, voting, inclusiveness.*

Introduction

In democratic countries, the foundation of political identity is based on the essential right of citizens to participate in the electoral process, whether by voting or running for public office. Free and fair elections play a crucial role in turning public opinions into effective governance and establishing a representative government that truly reflects the desires of the people (Adepoju, Gberevbie, & Ibhawoh, 2021). However, many regions, including Nigeria, face systemic challenges that have resulted in structural violence in the electoral arena. This term refers to intentional actions that undermine the election process using illegal and forceful methods. It can lead to a significant loss of life, property, and peace, and has the potential to escalate into civil unrest (Ron, 2001).

Nigeria has been striving for democracy, but unfortunately, the country is facing challenges with insecurity, violence, and various issues that affect its electoral processes (Oyeyemi, 2019). Ever since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999, the country's electoral landscape has been plagued by structural violence, which has hindered the smooth functioning of the democratic process. Nigeria's elections are characterized by structural violence, which refers to the deep-rooted social and political patterns that contribute to inequality, discrimination, and marginalization (Murithi, 2008; Braveman et

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al., 2022). There are various challenges that exist when it comes to political engagement. These challenges include unequal opportunities for different groups of people, such as women, youth, those living in rural areas, and individuals with disabilities. Additionally, socio-economically disadvantaged groups also face barriers in participating in political activities. Furthermore, ethnic minority groups often face the issue of being underrepresented, which can further exacerbate conflicts. In addition, there are various factors that hinder inclusivity and fairness in the electoral process. These include voter suppression strategies, gerrymandering, economic obstacles, and discriminatory practices. These issues have been discussed in studies by Hajnal et al. (2017), Marcuse (2020), and Thai (2017). There are various types of electoral wrongdoings, such as bribery, voter intimidation, and ballot manipulation, that continue to pose challenges to our nation's goal of conducting fair and trustworthy elections (Davies, 2021).

Technology has been really important in preventing electoral misconduct in strong democracies around the world (Yao & Murphy, 2007). Countries around the world are using technological advancements to improve public participation and address the issue of decreasing voter turnout (Krimmer, Duenas-Cid, & Krivonosova, 2021). In recent years, Africa has also made efforts to use digital technologies to tackle problems in electoral processes on the continent (Cheeseman, Lynch & Willis, 2018). Digital technologies have the potential to enhance the capabilities of electoral commissions, reduce misconduct, and ensure fair and transparent election results. Many studies have looked at how digital technologies are important in elections. They focus on how these technologies can make the process more transparent and accountable. According to Passanti and Pommerolle (2022), technologies such as biometric voter registration systems and electronic voting machines provide verifiable and auditable vote records, which helps reduce the chances of fraud and manipulation. In addition, digital technologies make it easier to monitor and report election results in real-time. This helps to increase transparency and build public trust in the electoral process (Cheeseman et al., 2018). Furthermore, according to Dahdah & Quet (2020), they argue that digital technologies have the potential to improve the electoral process by making it more efficient and effective. Automated voter registration systems make the registration process more efficient, reducing mistakes and improving the accuracy of voter rolls. Electronic voting machines make voting easier for people by improving accessibility and efficiency. According to Mudau (2022), digital technologies help speed up the process of transmitting and collecting election data, resulting in quicker and more accurate results. To keep up with these advancements, the Independent National Electoral Commission introduced the biometric card reader and Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) during the 2015 and 2023 general elections.

Previous studies have talked about how important it is to use digital technologies in Nigeria's elections, and they've also mentioned the problems and difficulties that come with them. However, they haven't really looked at how much these technologies can help reduce violence in Nigeria's elections. I want to look at this by studying the general elections from 2015 to 2023. The goal of this research is to close the gap. The electoral process in Nigeria is plagued by various forms of structural violence, such as disenfranchisement, voter suppression, manipulation of results, coercion of voters, and physical force. This study aims to delve into these specific contexts and examine how structural violence manifests itself.

Methodology

The current study adopts a qualitative research design as it is deemed appropriate for exploring the complex nature of structural violence in Nigeria's elections and the potential role of digital technologies in reducing it. Specifically, the study aims to examine how digital technologies can be utilized to decrease the tides of structural violence in Nigerian

elections. To achieve this aim, the study relied on secondary data sources from various academic journals, government reports, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations.

The secondary data was gathered through a comprehensive review of the literature on structural violence in Nigerian elections, digital technologies in Nigerian elections, and the efficacy of digital technologies in reducing structural violence. The search terms will include "structural violence in Nigerian elections," "digital technologies in Nigerian elections," and "digital technologies in reducing structural violence in Nigerian elections." The search was limited to sources published within the last decade to ensure that the data is current and relevant. To analyse the secondary data, the study utilized a qualitative content analysis approach. This approach involves coding and analysing the data for patterns, themes, and recurring concepts related to structural violence in Nigerian elections and the potential use of digital technologies to reduce it. The data analysis process entailed identifying key themes and sub-themes from the data, synthesizing the findings, and drawing conclusions about the extent to which these technologies can curtail structural violence in Nigeria's electoral process, drawing evidence from the 2015 to the 2023 general elections.

The Nature of Structural Violence in Electoral Process

The electoral process, a cornerstone of democratic societies, is often viewed as a symbol of fairness, equality, and representation (Ajagba, Gberevbie, & Agbu, 2020). However, beneath the surface, there exists a complex web of structural violence that disenfranchises communities, perpetuates inequality, and hampers the true spirit of democracy. This phenomenon, termed as structural violence, refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals. In the context of the electoral process, it manifests through various forms of discrimination, unjust disenfranchisement, creating barriers that impede the participation of certain groups, among others

Unjust Disenfranchisement: Disenfranchisement systematically denies certain groups their right to vote, creating a structural barrier that perpetuates social inequality. It reinforces existing power dynamics, where historically individuals are excluded from the democratic process, thereby maintaining their social, economic, and political disadvantage. Disenfranchisement operates through laws and policies, making it a structural issue. These laws, often rooted in historical discrimination, disproportionately affect specific racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. By preventing these individuals from voting, the system perpetuates their marginalization, creating a cycle of inequality and disempowerment.

Voter Suppression: Voter suppression tactics deliberately target specific demographics, hindering their ability to vote. By restricting access to the electoral process, certain groups are systemically disadvantaged. Voter suppression is an intentional act that reinforces existing power imbalances, marginalizing already vulnerable communities. Voter suppression operates through legal and administrative mechanisms. These mechanisms are embedded within the electoral system, making it a structural issue. By limiting early voting hours, imposing strict ID requirements, or purging voter rolls, the system itself becomes an instrument of discrimination, disenfranchising marginalized groups (Smith, 2016).

Manipulation of Electoral Results: Manipulation of electoral results undermines the very essence of democracy, where the will of the people should prevail. By distorting electoral outcomes, the system perpetuates a facade of democracy while denying citizens their rightful political representation (Olu-Owolabi, Gberevbie, & Abasilim, 2021). This manipulation is often used to maintain the status quo and suppress dissenting voices. Electoral manipulation can occur through institutional channels, such as tampering with voting machines or rigging ballot counts. When these tactics are employed systematically, they become embedded within the political structure, making it a form of

structural violence. Citizens are effectively denied their right to genuine political representation, reinforcing social hierarchies and power imbalances.

Coercion of Voters: Coercion of voters undermines the principles of free and fair elections. When individuals are forced or intimidated into voting a certain way, their choices are no longer a true reflection of their political will. Coercion perpetuates a climate of fear, silencing dissent and creating a distorted version of democracy. Coercion often occurs within the existing power structures. Powerful individuals, groups, or institutions use their influence to manipulate vulnerable individuals, making it a structural issue. When coercion is widespread and systematic, it denies citizens their agency and maintains oppressive social structures.

Physical Force Application: The use of physical force to influence electoral outcomes is a direct attack on the democratic process. Violence and intimidation create an atmosphere of fear, preventing individuals from freely expressing their political preferences. This suppression of political dissent reinforces existing power structures, inhibiting social progress. Physical force solidifies existing power structures by silencing opposition and dissent. It establishes a climate of fear, ensuring that marginalized communities remain voiceless and powerless, reinforcing systemic violence within society.

Adoption of Digital Technology for Structural Violence in Elections

In healthy democracies around the world, technology has played a significant role in lowering instances of electoral misconduct over time. A closer examination of a few of them is enthralling.

In the United States, the earliest voting method used paper ballots that were manually counted. With the advent of technology, electoral process in the United States has advanced (Moynihan, 2008). In 1892, the United States employed the use of mechanical voting machines and Massachusetts was the first state in the United States to adopt the use of lever Machines for casting votes in her 1964 presidential election (Johnson, Jones & Clendenon, 2017). Subsequently, the use of Lever Machines was phased out and the Punch Card voting equipment was adopted as a replacement. This was created in response to the Help Americans Vote Act (HAVA) of 2000, which provided funds for the replacement of the Lever Machines (Carr, Newtson & Joshi, 2018). A final voting technology was developed in 1970s- the Direct Recording Electronic and Optical Scan voting systems. Technological advancement in the United States eliminated the need for physical act of voting (Dunn & Merkle, 2018). Through the establishment of state wide voter registration database, the country has been able to manage voter rolls. Furthermore, the electoral laws of the state have evolved, currently allowing electors to register and update their data online, with additional provisions for digitalized signatures on registration forms as well electronic identity verification.

The electoral process of the United States also provides an avenue for citizens of the state who are outside the country to cast their votes through the promulgation of Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act of 2009. Moreover, some states in the US have made further advancement by allowing for citizens overseas to submit completed absentee ballot through e-mails and facsimile (Embassy, 2011).

Electronic voting in Brazil was introduced in 1996, starting with the state of Santa Catarina, after which tests were conducted in more than 50 municipalities (Silva, 2020). Following this, the Brazilian Electoral Justice launched their "voting machine" and since then, all Brazilian elections have been fully electronic. In the 2000 and 2002 elections, more than 400,000 electronic voting machines were used nationwide in Brazil, and the results were tallied electronically within minutes after the polls closed. In 2012, fingerprint biometric voter identification was incorporated into the technology (Dias & Teles, 2018). Fraud prevention and ballot count efficiency were the key motivations for the early adoption of electronic voting in Brazil. The 2014 presidential election saw more

than 114 million ballots cast in over 500,000 electronic voting units deployed across this geographically diverse country. The result was announced within 2 hours of the closure of polling stations (Recuero, Zago & Bastos, 2015). In this regard, Brazil's voting system addresses key issues like ballot count efficiency and fraudulent reporting while maintaining the trust of the governed.

In the United Kingdom, parliamentary votes were initially cast orally and then published in a poll book (Crook & Crook, 2011). Through the introduction of the ballot act in 1872, this system was replaced with the use of polling booths and uniform ballot papers (Newton & Brynin, 2001). By 2000 and 2004, the London Mayoral and Assembly elections were counted using an optical scan voting system, and both elections required some editing of the ballot design to facilitate electronic tabulation (Arshad, Farooq-i-Azam, Khan, Irshad & Noman, 2021). As of January 2016, the UK Parliament had no plan to introduce electronic voting for statutory elections. In 2020, however, members of the House of Lords voted remotely for the first time via the internet (Essex & Goodman, 2020).

Electronic voting in Belgium commenced during the 1991 general elections as a form of experiment permitted by the Law of 16 July 1991 (Cock & Preneel. 2007). Two systems were adopted in carrying out this experiment- a magnetic card and an electronic ballot marking device with a light pen. The experiment extended to other parts of Belgium in 1994 and then in 1999, it extended to 44% of the population (Kumar & Walia, 2011). As a result of lobbying by powerful groups like PourEva and an increasing doubt about the effectiveness of an e-voting system, more tests were conducted and more controls were added. The tests conducted were successful and an Optical reading of e-voting which is a Voters Verified Audit Paper Trail guaranteed the possibility of a human recount as the extra control needed (Dandoy, 2021). By 2004, over 44% of the entire population began to vote electronically with the use of the magnetic card. The introduction of E-voting in Belgium's electoral process was to ensure and protect secrecy of voters, verifiability of votes, transparency and auditability (Cock & Preneel. 2007).

In India, electronic voting is the standard method for conducting elections using Electronic Voting Machines, also known as "EVMs" (Wolchok, Wustrow, Halderman, Prasad, Kankipati, Sakhamuri & Gonggrijp, 2010). In the 1990s, the state-owned Electronics Corporation of India and Bharat Electronics developed and tested electronic voting machines. They were gradually implemented in Indian elections between 1998 and 2001. India used paper ballots and human counting prior to the introduction of computerized voting (Kumar & Begum, 2012). The paper ballot technique was heavily condemned due to fraudulent voting and booth grabbing, in which party supporters grabbed booths and stuffed them with pre-filled counterfeit ballots. However, the advent of EVM has brought about significant reduction in counterfeit ballots (Chauhan, Jaiswal & Kar, 2018). Furthermore, it allows for efficiency in voting counting and in situations where illiteracy is a factor, illiterate find EVMs easier to use than ballot papers (Debnath, Kapoor & Ravi, 2017).

Structural Violence and the Nigeria's Electoral Process

Structural violence is characterized by the denial of citizens' political rights to participate in the state's political affairs, such as voting or running for office. People often deny the public's choice or try to prevent them from exercising their political rights by engaging in various criminal activities (Aliyu, Olawoyin & Bamidele, 2020). Often, political candidates and bureaucrats resort to using money politics in order to manipulate the choices of the public (Davies, 2021). During election time, it's unfortunately common to see instances of bribery involving electoral officials, politicians, and influential individuals. According to Chigora and Chilunjika (2016), this goes against the rules stated in the Electoral Act of 2010.

In Nigeria, it's unfortunate that the principle of free and fair elections is not always upheld. This is because elections are often rigged through manipulation of the entire electoral process. According to Nwabueze (2003), it is often observed that the winning party is sometimes announced as the loser, and vice versa, where the loser is declared as the winner. However, the success of this act relies on the cooperation of electoral officials. So, it seems like some electoral officials are to blame for obstructing the process of having a free and fair election.

Political leaders and candidates have unfortunately started using electoral violence as a means to prevent the public from exercising their right to vote and run for office. Since gaining independence, this act has greatly influenced Nigeria's electoral process and has frequently led to voter apathy among the population (Frazer & Hutchings, 2020). According to Oshiomole (2011), he described the act as a planned and deliberate act of violence that is done with the intention of influencing election results.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was established by the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to ensure that elections for different political offices in the country are well-organized. The commission is responsible for organizing and overseeing all elections for public offices in the country. They also register political parties in accordance with the constitution and the Act of the National Assembly (Badejo & Obah-Akpowoghaha, 2015). However, the truth is that INEC has consistently faced challenges when it comes to organizing elections that can truly be considered free and fair. These are elections where the results accurately represent the choices made by the public as a whole (Dode, 2012). Below, we will discuss the challenges that INEC faces in ensuring a free and fair election in Nigeria using the manual process.

Insecurity: In Nigeria, during electoral periods, there is often a sense of insecurity, violence, destruction, and conflict. It becomes a time of uncertainty and fear for the safety of people and their belongings. The 2015 presidential election was filled with a lot of tension, which led to the election being postponed by INEC. This happened because it was discovered that some political figures had hired armed gangs to help them. (Steve, Nwocha & Igwe, 2019) During this time, there was a significant increase in the number of small arms and light weapons, as well as compromises by security agencies and ethno-religious differences. All of these factors contributed to a heightened sense of insecurity in the country (Tsuwa & Aliegba, 2021). In addition, the presidential election in 2019, which resulted in President Muhammadu Buhari being re-elected for a second term, was unfortunately marked by a rise in violence, as reported by Human Rights Watch in 2020. The security situation in the country during both periods was extremely delicate, especially due to the activities of Boko Haram and later on, the Farmers-Herders crisis. These factors made the issue of insecurity even more challenging during the elections. Since gaining independence, Nigeria has consistently experienced this situation, and there are growing concerns about the deteriorating state of insecurity during elections.

Voters Apathy: One of the reasons why some people don't participate in voting is because they may not be aware of their civic duties and political rights. Additionally, another significant factor that contributes to voter apathy is the feeling of insecurity. This means that people may not feel safe or confident enough to engage in the voting process. Because people feel insecure and afraid, they are hesitant to vote because they worry about their safety. It's really sad and concerning to see how many lives have been lost during elections in Nigeria. It's understandable that people are hesitant to vote in an election where the results might not truly reflect their choices. Another significant reason for voters' apathy, apart from feeling insecure, is the decline in confidence people have in their country. Nigeria is widely known for its high levels of corruption, which has earned it a reputation as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Over the years, there have been numerous events and incidents related to elections in Nigeria that have left many Nigerians feeling disillusioned and convinced that their votes don't make a

difference (Madubuegwu, Agudiegwu, Onyia, Odoh & Steve, 2020). Many people believe that the election winner is ultimately determined by the political elites and their preferences.

Unethical and Criminal Practices by Electoral Officials, Politicians and Bureaucrats: It has become a common practice during elections in Nigeria. Even INEC has been unable to stop a practice that occurs during the electoral process because many of its officials have been found guilty of it at some point (EFCC, 2017). In the 2015 presidential election, it was uncovered that politicians and bureaucrats had taken trillions of dollars from the national treasury to finance their campaigns. In addition, an amount of over two billion dollars that was originally meant for purchasing weapons to combat the Boko Haram insurgents ended up being misappropriated by political elites, traditional leaders, INEC officials, influential power brokers, and various other individuals who were part of the electoral process (EFCC, 2017). Furthermore, it was noticed that politicians exceeded the maximum financial limit set by the Electoral Act of 2010 when it came to campaign spending. The Act states that each contestant has a limit on how much they can spend on their campaigns. If they don't follow this rule, they will face sanctions. However, politicians continue to spend as much as they want, disregarding the rules of the Act, without facing any consequences at all (Sule, Sani & Mat, 2018).

Manual Counting Process: Counting ballots can be a lengthy and tiring process, especially in areas with a high population. This process has the potential to influence the outcome of an election. Even though counting has been done by humans in Nigeria since independence, the fact that it is still done by people makes the entire process prone to inaccuracies (Kerr, 2018). In 2015, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) as a replacement for the Temporary Voter's Card (TVC). This decision was made because the TVC had certain limitations when it came to ensuring a free and fair election without any fraudulent activities. According to Aremu and Aluko (2016), the 2011 general elections revealed that the TVC was susceptible to electoral crimes, fraud, and manipulation. The Electronic Card Reader was introduced during the 2015 general elections. This was a significant milestone for Nigeria, as it was the first time an electronic voters' authentication system was used in the country's history. However, the new technology encountered several challenges, primarily technical malfunctions and human errors in operating the machine. A lot of the people in charge at various polling stations didn't receive sufficient training on how to operate the card reader. Additionally, there was a significant technical malfunction where the card reader failed to recognize President Goodluck Jonathan's card and his wife's card on four separate occasions (Aremu & Aluko, 2016). Also, there were instances where the card readers couldn't properly record the biometric information of voters. Additionally, there were issues with capturing irregularly and the battery draining quickly.

Disenfranchisement of Voter’s in Diaspora: It's concerning when many Nigerian immigrants living abroad are not given the chance to vote. This makes us question how much their rights are acknowledged and honored. Furthermore, electoral officials and security officers who are stationed outside their polling stations face difficulties in voting. Currently, Nigeria's voting system does not allow for voting by absentee ballot. This has led to requests from both within Nigeria and internationally for further exploration into voting methods that would enable Nigerians living abroad to participate in the voting process (Obiefuna-Oguejiofor, 2018).

Curtailing Structural Violence in Elections: E-Voting as a Necessity in Nigeria’s Electoral System?

Ever since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999, elections in the country have consistently faced problems like allegations of rigging, ballot box snatching, and various other issues that have troubled the election process. This information was reported by The

Guardian in 2021. Actually, the most common complaints have been about allegations of vote-buying and ballot box snatching. Between the years 1999 and 2023, the country has had at least seven national elections. Unfortunately, only a few of them have been free from suspicions of fraud (Joseph, 2020). The issue of free and fair elections has been a long-standing problem. It's mainly because the ruling class is driven by their desire to hold onto power, and citizens sometimes accept bribes in exchange for their votes (Davies, 2021).

Some scholars believe that if Nigeria were to implement an e-voting system, it could help solve many of the problems that Nigerians face during elections (Obiefuna-Oguejiofor, 2018). There have been a number of studies that have shown the possible advantages of using electronic voting systems in Nigeria's electoral system. These studies include the works of Uzedhe and Okhaifoh in 2016, Omotayo and Adekunle in 2021, and Ikuero et al. in 2021. According to these studies, e-voting has the potential to tackle various challenges encountered during elections, including issues like electoral fraud, ballot box theft, result manipulation, and instances of multiple voting (Chukwuma, 2022). According to Osho et al. (2016), electronic voting has the ability to enhance voters' trust and make the electoral process more transparent. On the other hand, there are also some concerns and challenges that come with the adoption of e-voting in Nigeria. A study conducted by Uzedhe and Okhaifoh in 2016 emphasizes the importance of having a technological framework that guarantees transparency and security in the e-voting system. There is another study that highlights how crucial it is to deal with trust and security concerns in e-voting systems (Osho et al., 2015). Researchers have suggested using e-voting systems that rely on blockchain technology to improve the security and reliability of the voting process (Ikuero et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2018).

The adoption of e-voting in Nigeria is not just about technology, but it also involves social and political considerations. Several studies have emphasized the importance of institutions and policy makers in influencing the use of e-voting (Ahmad et al., 2015; Adeshina & Ojo, 2014). It's also important to consider how voters perceive and accept e-voting (Okediran et al., 2020). According to Okediran et al. (2020), there are several factors that can influence a person's decision to adopt e-voting. These factors include subjective norm, perceived compatibility, privacy, security, price value, and trust. In addition, the introduction of e-voting in Nigeria needs to consider various factors, such as the social and technical aspects of the system (Adeshina & Ojo, 2014; Avgerou, 2013).

However, it is crucial to take into account the willingness of Nigerians to embrace an electronic voting system. In both the 2015 and 2023 general elections, Nigeria was unable to successfully implement a free and fair election, despite incorporating digital technologies. It is important to note that electronic voting is even more delicate and intricate than simply using technological devices during the electoral process. Do you think Nigeria is truly prepared for that? To better grasp the significance of this issue, it is important to gain an understanding of what took place during the 2015 and 2023 general elections.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) implemented card readers as a significant technological innovation to improve the credibility and reliability of the electoral system. According to Alebiosu (2016), the card readers were employed to authenticate the identities of voters and guarantee that they cast their votes in the appropriate registration area and polling unit.

In preparation for the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria, INEC carried out a test of the biometric technology employed in the card readers. According to Idowu (2015), the trial was conducted in a small fraction of the vast number of polling units and voting points allocated for the elections. The trial involved a total of 12 states, namely Delta, Rivers, Kano, Kebbi, Anambra, Ebonyi, Ekiti, Lagos, Bauchi, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Niger. The Commission recognized the difficulties in verifying fingerprints but expressed

contentment with the card reader's main objective of authenticating Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), which was largely successful. Nevertheless, the implementation of biometric devices during the electoral process faced several obstacles. The issues observed during the election process were related to the verification of voters' fingerprints, which were not adequately verified even after authenticating their PVCs. Additionally, there were delays in accreditation caused by poor internet server operations in specific regions. Another concern was the insufficient understanding of card reader usage among INEC officials (The Guardian, 2015). During those situations, polling officials faced challenges due to a lack of consistent knowledge about backup plans. These plans included verifying voters' identities manually by comparing them with the printed voter registry and using Incident Forms (NDI, 2015). As a result, a significant number of eligible voters were deprived of their right to vote.

In 2023, new electoral technology was implemented, which included two innovative features: the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) (Acheampong, 2023). The BVAS is a compact device that utilizes biometric elements, including fingerprint scanning and facial recognition, to verify and authorize voters at polling stations. The system employs fingerprint scanning to authenticate voters' identities by comparing their biometric data with the stored information in the INEC database. Furthermore, the device comes with a camera feature that allows for the capturing of the original result sheets from the polling units. These captured images are subsequently transmitted to the collation center of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Bot, 2022). The raw images of the result sheets are captured and then uploaded to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). This internet-based platform offers immediate access to the general public, enabling them to observe and track the data collected and transmitted from the polling units (Udemezue, 2023). In order to view the PDF results from different polling units nationwide, users must first register an account on the portal.

Observers immediately identified issues with the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) shortly after the commencement of polling on Election Day. The voter-accreditation process using the BVAS faced challenges, causing delays and ultimately leading to the disenfranchisement of numerous individuals (Hoffmann, 2023; Oladeji, 2023). The unexpected failure of the BVAS came as a surprise to both voters and election observers. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) had organized mock voter-accreditation exercises and expressed positive evaluations of the technology's capabilities during press briefings prior to the elections. Nevertheless, the implementation of the BVAS on a broader scale during Election Day presented unexpected technical obstacles that were not anticipated by either the INEC or the voters. The Election Management Body (EMB) considered the mock trials conducted at just 12 polling units per state to be satisfactory. However, these trials proved to be premature celebrations and were unable to handle the challenges faced on an actual election day. The delays in voter accreditation were closely connected to the extensive malfunctioning of the BVAS system. Reports from different polling units across the nation have shown cases where the BVAS either completely malfunctioned (for example, in Borno State) or encountered occasional technical issues (for instance, in Lagos State). In River State, the BVAS system encountered difficulties in recording the biometric information of various individuals, including the governor. Additionally, it faced challenges in accurately verifying identical twins as eligible voters (Akeaya-inne, 2023). Other regions of the country also documented similar incidents (Akinlotan, 2022). According to an article in The Punch newspaper, there have been instances where INEC officials mistakenly brought inaccurate BVAS devices to specific polling units, resulting in the exclusion of numerous eligible voters from participating in the elections.

The IReV is designed to be activated promptly following the completion of voting and functions through a sequence of actions. To begin with, an INEC officer is responsible for

sorting, counting, and endorsing the ballots from the polling units. Afterward, the camera function of the BVAS device is utilized to capture the original result sheets, which are subsequently sent to a portal for real-time result viewing. Nevertheless, the transmission phase of this supposedly smooth process faced controversies that undermined its effectiveness.

Following the conclusion of the voting process, several INEC officials reported that they had encountered difficulties accessing the IReV portal due to password-related issues (Akeaya-inne, 2023). Individuals who were able to recall their passwords faced difficulties when their passwords were deemed incorrect, which hindered them from uploading the polling unit results in real-time (Unini, 2023). Although it is possible that the cases mentioned were due to insufficient training of the temporary staff operating the BVAS, it is important to consider the potential involvement of INEC officials in deliberate sabotage (Akeaya-inne, 2023).

In addition, the issue of delayed transmission of results to the INEC portal gained significant attention. Results from multiple polling units were still pending upload even a full day after voting had ended, as reported by the Premium Times newspaper (Suleiman, 2022). While the INEC explained that the delay was caused by regular technical issues commonly experienced with platforms such as the IReV, independent election monitoring organizations like the European Union Observer Mission (EOM) observed that the alternative of using the BVAS offline, which would have enabled the uploading of result sheets in areas with limited internet access, either did not work or was not effectively utilized by the responsible parties (Akeaya-inne, 2023). Additionally, as reported by the Election Monitor in 2023, there were challenges encountered when attempting to upload scanned copies of the presidential election outcomes from different regions across the nation onto the designated portal. Consequently, the INEC portal did not meet the anticipated requirement of displaying the outcome of elections from all 176,000 polling units nationwide by the end of voting. In truth, there was only a restricted amount of scanned election results that could be viewed online. The INEC's failure to uphold transparency prior to Election Day greatly diminished the credibility of their assurance efforts.

Certainly, the Nigerian electoral landscape stands as a testament to the complexities surrounding the integration of digital technologies into democratic processes. While the recent elections did incorporate certain technologies, the outcome was far from the seamless democratic exercise envisioned. This raises critical questions about the efficacy of transitioning to e-voting systems. If existing digital technologies failed to safeguard the democratic ideals in Nigeria, what assurance is there that e-voting would not succumb to the same pitfalls?

The heart of the matter lies not merely in the mode of voting but in the deep-rooted issues that underpin the electoral process. One glaring challenge is the need for a profound understanding of these technologies, not just their introduction. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must invest in comprehensive training for its staff. The lack of knowledge and expertise has disenfranchised countless Nigerians, rendering their votes inconsequential. Even for those who managed to cast their votes, the inability of INEC officials to upload results to the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) rendered their efforts futile.

Yet, technology is not the sole culprit; the human factor looms large. Throughout history, Nigerians have been active agents in disrupting electoral processes, denying others their fundamental right to vote. Despite the introduction of the BVAS, cases of voter suppression persisted in recent elections. Moreover, manipulation of electoral results endured, highlighting the inherent vulnerabilities of the system.

Even more disconcerting were deliberate delays in result uploads and disparities between BVAS records and those from various polling units. These discrepancies underscore a

fundamental truth: the introduction of e-voting, while theoretically promising, cannot exist in a vacuum. Without addressing the underlying societal issues, the cycle of structural violence will inevitably persist. Mere technological solutions cannot dismantle the deeply ingrained challenges of disenfranchisement, manipulation, and suppression that mar Nigeria's democratic processes.

In essence, the path toward a more robust and fair electoral system demands a holistic approach. INEC must prioritize not just technological adoption but also comprehensive training and awareness programs. Simultaneously, there must be a concerted effort to address societal attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate electoral violence. Only through a combined focus on technological literacy, institutional integrity, and societal transformation can Nigeria pave the way for a truly democratic future, breaking free from the shackles of structural violence that have plagued its electoral history.

Conclusion

Nigeria is currently striving to achieve fair and transparent elections, which is evident in their consideration of e-voting. However, they are encountering significant obstacles that are deeply rooted in both technological and societal aspects. The recent failures observed in various attempts to implement digital integration highlight an important fact: technology, although a powerful tool, cannot solely address the intricate challenges associated with electoral processes. It is crucial to adopt a comprehensive approach that encompasses thorough technological literacy, rigorous institutional training, and a societal shift in attitudes and behaviors. Nigeria can only achieve liberation from the enduring hold of structural violence and establish a truly democratic electoral future by implementing a comprehensive approach.

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