

Elections marred by irregularities – Commonwealth

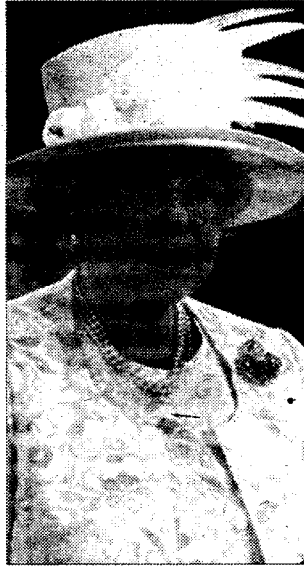
The Commonwealth is privileged to have observed the 2007 elections in Nigeria. These are seen as a political landmark for this country, representing the first ever occasion when power will be handed over by one elected civilian administration to another. They were also a crucial test for the country's young democracy, an opportunity to build on the experiences of the 1999 and 2003 elections.

These polls were more competitive than previous elections, with 25 parties contesting the presidential candidates and thousands of others competing across the country for seats in the National Assembly. Contestants generally enjoyed freedom of assembly, freedom of movement and freedom of expression. Also, it was to the credit of the various political forces that their grievances were pursued through the courts and that ultimately they all decided to participate in the electoral process despite reservations and stated concerns.

The patience shown by the Nigerian people across the country both on 14 and 21 April was admirable, and it is commendable that in the face of

any impediments in exercising their right to vote they remained resolute in their determination to do so. Voting was peaceful and orderly in most places. However the turnout in many areas seems to have been noticeably lower for the Federal than for the State elections.

We had noted a number of deficiencies which affected the State elections on 14 April and had brought these to the notice of INEC. They included late opening of polling stations in many areas as a result of late distribution of poll materials, variations on the type of voters register used for the polling, inadequate secrecy of the vote, cases of under-age voting, and isolated security incidents, including some serious ones such as snatching of ballot boxes. INEC had taken note of these deficiencies, which other observers and indeed the Nigerian media had also reported. We noted that INEC themselves announced that elections in at least six states would be re-run. The assurance was given that a concerted effort would be made to improve matters by re-training election officials, increasing transparency of the tabulation of



Queen Elizabeth II, Head of the Commonwealth

results and ensuring a more cohesive implementation of the process with increased security.

Improvements were indeed visible in parts of the country for the national elections on 21 April. Our observers noted a relatively greater sense of organisation in some places and an improved security presence across the country. Polling officials had a better sense of their own role and how to conduct the process.

However, there were significant shortcomings yet

again.

The late opening of polls in most parts of the country on 21 April was widely reported. In some areas, such as Kaduna, Enugu, Plateau, Taraba, Adamawa and Bauchi, polls did not open until between 1 and 3 p.m., or even later. In certain other locations, notably in Lagos, some polling stations were closed much earlier than the scheduled closing time. The variation in polling hours also adversely affected the voter turnout.

The delays in the start of polling were mainly due to the late distribution of polling materials. The printing and delivery of new ballots for the presidential election in the space of a few days required a monumental effort on the part of INEC and others, but their arrival in the country on the eve of polling clearly affected their timely distribution. The lack of serial numbers on the presidential ballots also made them less secure.

I must here pay tribute to the brave crew members who died in the crash, in Imo State, of the Navy helicopter carrying election materials. I salute also the brave security personnel who have lost their lives in the

line of duty in recent days. To all of their bereaved families I extend my sincere condolences.

The lack of ballot papers for Senate elections in Kaduna and Niger also caused confusion and tension, and the reported lack of proper ballots for various National Assembly elections in areas such as Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Akwa-Ibom, Plateau, Delta and Rivers will also require the re-scheduling of these polls.

The lack of secrecy in the voting was again a prevalent feature of the process, though some improvements were made after the State polls.

Our team in Edo state was witness to a case of ballot box stuffing. The Kaduna team was shown a wad of pre-marked ballots which the Police had seized.

In parts of Lagos, as well as Enugu, polling officials had no results sheets and counting was done at collation centres. We also had reports from Edo that counting was not done at some polling centres, but at the collation centre. No Presiding Officers appear to have been given instructions to post the official results at the premises for public display.

The deferred polling hours posed a challenge to polling

officials in so far as the count was concerned. Darkness fell while counting was still in progress and no provision had been made to provide artificial lighting for such a contingency, leaving the officials to improvise as best they could.

At this crucial stage in the process, when votes are still being tabulated and results finalised, it is imperative that INEC ensure the utmost transparency to provide the Nigerian people and political parties confidence in the process, and full accountability where irregularities are evident.

The last stages of the process go on and final conclusions can only be drawn once these are complete. It is important that the remarkable patience and forbearance shown throughout this electoral process by the Nigerian people continues and that the country's leaders and representatives are driven by the same spirit of patience, tolerance, reconciliation and respect for the rule of law in the aftermath of these vexed elections.

This is the interim statement on Nigeria's elections issued by the Chair of the Commonwealth Observer Group, Justice Joseph Warioba.