

CITYSTRINGS

Group Features Editor: Chiemelie Ezeobi
Email chiemelie.ezeobi@thisdaylive.com, 08152252325

Memories of an Election

Chiemelie Ezeobi who captured some of the highlights of what transpired during the just concluded presidential and National Assembly elections, writes that it was characterised by violence in some parts, ballot box snatching, voters suppression, disenfranchisement of the blind, among others



Some hoodlums arrested by operatives of 9brigade of the Nigerian Army



One of the polling units in Ago Palace Way that was destroyed by hoodlums

After months of preparation and exchange of cross-fire, especially between the two major parties, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC), the 2019 presidential and National Assembly elections have come and gone. Expectedly, the last few weeks leading to the election was a tense one, with both major parties and a few of the newbies doing their last minute campaigns. Finally, the Election Day arrived and Nigerians at large went out to vote en masse for their favourite candidate.

This election revealed the resilience and patriotism of many Nigerians especially the aged and physically disabled persons. In some areas, the aged and the physically challenged were supported as they cast their votes. Another plus experienced with this election was the large turnout of voters despite the one-week postponement that saw the election shifted from February 16 to 23. However, notwithstanding the preparedness, the election still experienced hitches here and there.

Registered Parties

As at August 2018, the total number of parties were 68 before the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) registered 23 new political parties, bringing the total number of parties to 91.

The new parties are: Advanced Alliance Party, Advanced Nigeria

Democratic Party, African Action Congress, Alliance for a United Nigeria, Alliance of Social Democrats, Alliance National Party, Allied People's Movement and Alternative Party of Nigeria.

Others include Change Nigeria Party, Congress Of Patriots, Liberation Movement, Movement for Restoration and Defence of Democracy, Nigeria Community Movement Party, Nigeria For Democracy, Peoples Coalition Party, Reform and Advancement Party, Save Nigeria Congress and the United Patriots, United Peoples Congress, We The People Nigeria, Yes Electorates Solidarity, Youth Party and Zenith Labour Party.

Meanwhile some of the old parties include the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the main opposition to the All Progressives Congress (APC). Others are the Social Democratic Party, United Democratic Party, Advanced Congress of Democrats, Accord (A) party, Independent Democrats, Alliance Congress Party of Nigeria, African Peoples Alliance, All Progressives Grand Alliance, Citizens Popular Party, Action Alliance, Democratic Peoples Party, Democratic Peoples Congress, Alliance for Democracy, Kowa Party, Labour Party, Unity Party of Nigeria, Mega Progressive Peoples Party, National Conscience Party, New Nigeria Peoples Party.

Others include the Progressive Peoples Alliance, Peoples Democratic Movement, Fresh Democratic Party, Hope Democratic Party, Peoples Party

of Nigeria, United Progressive Party, People For Democratic Change, African Democratic Congress, Youth Democratic Alliance, Advanced People Democratic Alliance, Action Congress, Action Party of Nigeria, Advanced Congress Of Democrats, African Democratic Congress, African Liberation Party, African Political System, African Renaissance Party, All Nigeria Peoples Party, All Progressives Grand Alliance, Alliance For Democracy, Allied Congress Party of Nigeria, Better Nigeria Progressive Party and Change Advocacy Party.

Still on the list are Citizens Popular Party, Community Party of Nigeria, Congress for Democratic Change, Congress for Progressive Change, Democratic Alternative, Democratic Front for Peoples Federation, Democratic Peoples Alliance, Democratic Peoples Party, Freedom Party of Nigeria, Fresh Democratic Party, Hope Democratic Party, Justice Party, Kowa Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democratic Party of Nigeria, Masses Movement of Nigeria, Mega Progressive Peoples Party, Movement for Democracy and Justice, Movement for the Restoration and Defence of Democracy, National Action Council, National Conscience Party, National Democratic Liberty Party, National Democratic Party, National Majority Democratic Party, National Movement of Progressive Party, National Reformation Party, National Solidarity Democratic Party, National Transformation Party, National Unity Party, New Democrats, New Nigeria Peoples Party, Nigeria

Advance Party, Nigeria Elements Progressive Party, Nigeria Peoples Congress, Peoples Democratic Party, Peoples Mandate Party, Peoples Party of Nigeria, Peoples Progressive Party, Peoples Redemption Party, Peoples Salvation Party, Progressive Action Congress, Progressive Peoples Alliance, Republican Party of Nigeria, Social Democratic Mega Party, United Democratic Party, United National Party for Development and United Nigeria Peoples Party.

Intra-city Movement for the Voting

One highpoint that showed the burning patriotism of Lagosians was the fact that some of them walked or drove long distances just to vote. These group of people braved the sun to walk long distances just to vote.

Speaking to THISDAY, Mr. and Mrs Ikehukwu Edmund, who drove down from Ikorodu to Ago area in Okota, to vote, said they were buoyed by the zeal to fulfill their civic responsibility. To beat the 6am to 6pm curfew, the couple said they left their home as early as 5am and drove down to Lagos to vote. Explaining why they did not register in Ikorodu, they said they were residing in Ago in 2011 when registration was being done.

Another electorate who spoke to THISDAY at another polling unit in Ago said he trekked from Ejigbo. He said, "I really wanted to vote this year. When I left my house, I didn't see any bus or bike to convey me to my polling unit so I walked."

CRIME & SECURITY

THISDAY

The only hassles I had on the way was security people who stopped me intermittently but they always released me each time I showed them my Permanent Voter's Card, which showed my polling unit."

Hiccups

Although the election has been adjudged somewhat credible it was not without some initial hitches, chief among it being some initial difficulties with the card reader. Across the nation, some of the card readers deployed suffered technical glitches and in those areas, this prompted the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to resort to manual accreditation in instances when the technical team couldn't fix it.

At the end of the election, it was clear that some of the challenges of the election was the minor logistic challenges, and widespread violence. In some areas, accreditation and voting commenced as early as 8am in many locations, while in some places, they did not start till early afternoon.

Another challenge was the late arrival of voting materials in many centres, which caused delays and unease among voters in some of the affected areas. To ameliorate this, INEC had to declare that the election at polling units where the voting process did not start as scheduled would be extended by the amount of time lost.

Voting Disruption

In Lagos, despite the deployment of 30,000 personnel comprising the police and other law enforcement agencies, by the state Commissioner of Police, CP Zubairu Muazu, hoodlums had a field day in some parts of the state. From Ago to Okota, Isolo, Aguda, Surulere, Fafeyi and some parts of Amuwo Odofin, the electorates has difficulties in voting.

At Ago Palace Way, thugs who were purportedly loyal to the APC stormed polling units like Adeneken and Alhaji Olusesi Streets and were forcing voters to vote APC. When they refused, they started assaulting them.

Other affected areas were polling units at Century, Ohafia, Nwachukwu drive, Balogun, Jemtok, Sijula, Streets. At Ohafia unit, the hoodlums who stormed the unit on five motorcycles had disrupted voting. They were however dispersed by the Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS). But no sooner did the SARS operatives leave, the hoodlums returned and this time around, they threw the ballot box away and burnt the data of people that have votes already.

Given the sparse number of unarmed policemen who were deployed to man the polls, the hoodlums were able to overpower them. However, the army from 9 brigade led by the commander, Brigadier General Timothy Lagbaja, were later deployed as they restored peace according to the mandate given them by the General Officer Commanding, 81 Division, Major General Musa.

At Ajeromi-Ajeromi-Ifeoludun LGA of Lagos State, Mrs. Peace Obi gave a first hand experience of electoral violence in Tejumola Street, Amukoko area of the LG. She narrated how political thugs beat up voters, electoral officers and ended up disrupting the election.

She said: "The thugs numbering about 10 in number stormed the polling booth in a tricycle, a motorcycle and a bus shouting that nobody was allowed to vote for any other party than APC. And whosoever that would not vote for APC should leave Lagos State."

The thugs who attacked voters with sticks, metals and any other weapon they could lay their hands left a woman with a supposedly fractured hand as she was badly hit on the shoulder with their weapon.

Many voters have pointed accusing fingers on APC party agents. They came and scattered the tables, broke ballot boxes. Electoral officers, voters



A gallant corper carrying an injured colleague to safety in Rivers State while policemen watch at the sidelines

ran away and some were wounded. After this invasion, the ballot papers that were thumb-printed and stuffed into the ballot boxes were seen littering the street and in the gutter."

Allegation of Voters Suppression

In most of those affected places, it was alleged that the attacks were premeditated against the Igbo block to prevent them from voting the opposition. For instance, areas like Ago and Okota are predominately Igbos that reside there with majority rooting to vote PDP, a move the hoodlums countered.

Also, at the Aguda area, another place believed to be heavily populated by the Igbos, was also under siege to prevent the Igbos from voting for fear of preference for the opposition. Some areas in Ajeromi Ifeoludun local government were also affected, also predominantly-Igbo residence. Oshodi was also not left out in this challenge.

Disenfranchisement of the Blind

In September 2018, INEC had launched a braille ballot guide to assist eligible voters who are visually impaired to assist them cast their ballot without support. According to the commission, it was done in a bid to break every barrier during the election process for voters with visual impairments to vote using the braille ballot guide.

At the polls however, the reverse was the case as none of that was made available for the blind. According to Emmanuella Agboje-Akinola, who is the Executive Programme Director at Disability Awareness and Development Initiative, the Braille Ballot guide was only a mirage.

Agboje-Akinola who led her husband to the polls to vote said: "Blind persons were hoping to vote independently today. We are disappointed INEC."

The Braille Ballot guide was meant to be inserted into the ballot paper so that blind voter can know the parties and vote independently. This would have been the first time blind persons will vote independently in Nigeria but I had to place my husband's finger on the ballot paper today."

Also lamenting the lack of the Braille was the Inclusive Friends Association. Their pains was justified given the fact that their Executive Director, Grace Jerry, had commended the launch of the Braille Voting Guide, which was supported by Access Nigeria campaign and its ally, NAPVID, having worked closely with INEC to design and produce the guide.

Election Tragedies

It was a harvest of tragedies across the nation on the day of the election. From Borno to Zamfara, Yobe, Kogi, Ebonyi, Bayelsa, Lagos and Rivers. In Rivers, electoral violence was the order of the day and four persons were said to have been killed. The APC had alleged that one of its chieftains and former Chairman of Andoni Local Government Area of the state, Chief Mowan Etefe, was killed alongside his elder brother and also his cousin in Asarama. Also, one of its ex-officio members of the State Executive Committee, Ignatius, was allegedly shot dead at Ajaka.

Other casualties in the state according to the Nigerian Army were six assailants and a lieutenant, who were killed during attacks by suspected political thugs in Abonnenma, headquarters of Akuku Toru Local Government Area of Rivers State. A statement yesterday by Acting Director Army Public Relations, Colonel Sagir Musa, said, "Information reaching Headquarters Nigerian Army (NA) revealed that troops of 6 Division on a legitimate duty of protecting lives and properties of law abiding citizens and ensuring a conducive environment for peaceful conduct of 2019 General Elections in Abonnenma, Akuku Toru Local Government Area (LGA) Rivers State were attacked by some hoodlums."

The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room said it received reports that about 16 persons had lost their lives due to the violence that characterised Saturday's presidential and National Assembly elections. It said the 16 deaths occurred across eight states, including Borno - 2, Bayelsa - 2, Rivers - 6, Yobe - 2, Kogi - 2, Ebonyi - 2, Lagos - 1, and Zamfara - 1. This was

disclosed by the Executive Director, Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, and Convener, Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, Clement Nwankwo. Fear of Post-election Violence in Lagos

Given the violence that erupted in some places in Lagos, there was palpable tension over fears of reprisal attacks. This tension was exacerbated by a viral message that was targeted at the Igbos, warning them to stay at home or be harmed. THISDAY checks revealed that the warning was connected to the injury sustained by the leader of the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) during the voter disruption in Ago.

The viral message read: "Information reaching me says that all umu Igbo should be careful how they move at night during this election period. Please I appeal with you, don't leave home too early tomorrow (Sunday) to church, neither come home too late especially for those living in Ago and Okota environs. The OPC head was killed by angry voters in retaliation of the election violence of Saturday and we are getting report that OPC wants to retaliate."

However, as at Sunday, it was certified that the said OPC leader identified as Damola was not dead, rather, was in the hospital recuperating from the injuries he sustained during the fracas.

Suspension of Voting

At Abonnenma, headquarters of Akuku Toru Local Government Area of the state. THISDAY gathered that many voters were scared away from the polling stations by gun-toting hoodlums. Consequently, INEC suspended voting in Bonny and Akuku Toru council areas pending the return of normalcy to the area.

Generally, despite the inherent hiccups and violence in some parts, the entire electoral process has somewhat been commended by many. And as the nation return to the polls on March 2, for the governorship elections, many pundits have called on INEC to see the last election as a litmus test and avoid the pitfalls witnessed recently.