



“Nigeria: The April 2011 Elections and Beyond”

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*Remarks by Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh, NDI senior associate for Africa
At the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies*

Thank you Peter for those kind words of introduction. It is a real pleasure to be here and for NDI to co-host this roundtable with SAIS and CSIS.

The purpose of this event is two fold: first to hear and learn first hand from the principal actors, about the conduct of the Nigerian elections of April 2011; and second, to share experiences and lessons learned from various experts who have been keen observers of Nigerian politics and elections for several decades, and had the benefit of being in-country during the elections.

This time slot was reserved on the program so I could make a few remarks around the keynote address of our distinguished guest speaker. First I want to sincerely thank the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Professor Attahiru Jega for his illuminating and very informative presentation.

Even as he has recounted the successes of the commission in conducting credible polls in April 2011, he was also very frank and honest in admitting the shortcomings of the electoral process and areas that still need improvements to get the electoral process in Nigeria to the level where Nigerians want it to be and so deserve.

At the same time, and in typical Professor Jega fashion, he has been very modest in not stating that a year ago, before he took on the reins of INEC, many Nigerians and Nigeria watchers saw the task as herculean and almost unachievable. In fact, I am reliably informed that upon his appointment, many of his friends didn't know whether to call and congratulate him for the appointment or rather to send messages of condolences.

And yes, we must admit that INEC could not have pulled this off without his leadership and the integrity and reputation of fairness and independent-mindedness that he brought with him to the commission.

Other factors also contributed to the success of the elections including more intense engagement by political parties and civil society organizations to safeguard the credibility of the polls, and a heightened commitment and dedication by millions of Nigerian citizens that turned out to vote peacefully on election day, and took steps to ensure that their votes were counted and their voices heard.

About a week ago, one of the Nigerian newspapers carried a story about young Nigerian students from some of the States in South West Nigeria who met to form an exploratory committee of “Jega for president in 2015” with a little caveat which read “...if the chairman wanted.” Of course, we know Chairman Jega is not thinking along those lines; however, the beauty of the story for me was that it captures to a large extent some of the feelings we picked up in Nigeria in April 2011 – feelings of a nation longing to get its elections right, especially after the very flawed elections of 2003 and 2007. The national outcry for electoral reform after 2007 seems to be making headway in the national psyche of the country.

So, the 2011 elections have to be understood in the context of a national rebuke of previous failed elections since the return of civilian rule in 1998 / 1999, and a determination among Nigerians across the board to have better elections.

You may remember that late President Yar’Adua upon taking office in 2007 declared his determination to prioritize electoral reform and subsequently set up the electoral reform committee chaired by retired Chief Justice Uwais, former CJ of the Supreme Court of Nigeria. That President Goodluck Jonathan pursued that promise by appointment Professor Jega as chairman of INEC, and further sent bills to the National Assembly of Nigeria to enact some of the reforms into law.

In the lead up to the elections, candidate Goodluck Jonathan, to his credit, also made two significant statements: 1) that he would accept the outcome even if he lost the election; and 2) that Nigeria needed to get its elections right, if it aspired to continue playing a leadership role in the region and on the continent as a whole.

Rather than revisit the whole process of how we got to April 2011, I would like to highlight four factors which Chairman Jega should also have mentioned:

- a) INEC’s open door policy and its embrace of other Nigerian stakeholders, notably Nigerian civil society organizations that created an enabling environment in which these citizen groups would undertake some of the most innovative methodologies in enhancing their monitoring of various aspects of the electoral process, including a parallel vote tabulation which my colleagues will talk about on the second panel.
- b) His / INEC’s desire to protect the rights of citizens and make their votes count. INEC’s position in favor of the “Vote and Wait” initiative, which meant that upon casting their ballots, voters could wait around the polling sites till the end of voting so as to be present for the counting and tabulation of results sent a clear message that INEC had nothing to hide. It was also made it difficult for those that have disruption elections in the past to undertake some of the egregious malpractices such as ballot stuffing, ballot box snatching or falsification of results that happened frequently in the past.

- c) The third was the administrative decision to hire over 200,000 youth corpsers as ad hoc INEC staff. These are young men and women, university graduates on national service, who had not been tainted by partisan politics in the constituencies to which they were deployed, and who therefore conducted themselves very professionally and effectively in serving as poll workers. They also have become a reservoir of goodwill and patriotism, and the foundation upon which to build a new breed of honest and efficient poll workers going forward.
- d) The decision to cancel voting on April 2, after INEC discovered that materials had not been delivered in all polling sites.

However, as the NDI delegation stated in its preliminary statement after the April 16 presidential poll, “democratic elections are not simply a technical exercise and their success does not rest with the electoral authority alone.”

It is my hope that other Nigerian institutions would play their part to ensure that the gains that have been made this April 2011 can be consolidated to strengthen the electoral process in Africa’s most populous country. Most notably:

I would recommend that the executive and legislative branches of government take another look at the Justice Uwais report and find ways to implement more of its recommendations. The creation of an elections offenses commission would free INEC from the task of investigating and litigating criminal conduct around elections. The creation of a political parties registration commission would free up INEC from being pulled into the kind of litigation with political parties and candidates as is the case even as we speak with regards to who is the PDP gubernatorial candidate in Enugu State, etc.

Political parties would also need to foster internal democracy, especially with regards to candidate nominations and also a public demonstration of their genuine attachment to peaceful participation in elections.

Only through these collective efforts can we guarantee that the positive trends coming out of the 2011 are maintained and strengthened, in order to provide the much needed “promise of setting a new standard for integrity in Nigeria’s electoral process.” INEC and other Nigerian stakeholders should commit to starting preparations for the 2015 elections now.

Thank you.