Introduction

The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development deployed eighty observers to the thirty-three states in the country for the Nigerian general election held on the 25th and 26th of February 2023. CJID’s deployment covered the six geo-political zones with an election analysis centre based in Abuja. CJID’s deployment strategy was to ensure a holistic assessment of electoral activities on election day, and verification of information flow during and after the polls.

The new Electoral Act was passed into law by the National Assembly and assented to by the President in 2022. CJID commends the technological innovation that Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced into the nation’s electoral system, which was implemented during the gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun States in June and July 2022 respectively.

While applauding INEC for the early deployment of non-sensitive materials, local production of sensitive materials and distribution to states before election day, our observers reported late distribution of election materials to polling units (PU) in many parts of the country, which naturally resulted in the late commencement of voting in the affected polling units. In a few polling units where the officials and materials arrived early, our observers reported that the election still commenced later than the official voting start time.

We commend the voters across the country for their tenacity and orderly conduct for the most part even after waiting long hours for election commencement, they kept faith with the process until late into the night, and in some instances, into the next day. We noted a flagrant disregard for INEC guidelines by polling officers in uploading results to the INEC Result Viewing
Portal (IReV) in many polling units. None of our observers reported the result being uploaded to the IReV.

Our observers also reported the redistribution of voters from polling units with a high volume of voters to not-so-highly-populated ones led to a situation where voters could not easily identify their polling units thereby inadvertently disenfranchising them. An instance of this was reported in Michika Local Government Area (LGA) of Adamawa State in PU001 of the Produce Market ward.

The 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections was an opportunity for INEC to gain trust and confidence in the electoral system but factors like poor intra-state logistical arrangements, technological shortcomings, non-compliance with electoral guidelines, lack of transparency, and shortage of sensitive materials undermine public confidence in the process and exacerbate the negative perception of the elections.

CJID condemns the violence and disruption of voting at various polling units and result collation centres by political thugs and hoodlums as well as intimidation and harassment targeted at National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) members and INEC staff, observers and journalists.

Key incidents as reported by our observers:

**Voting and Logistics**

Ballot papers got to most polling units around 9:00 am. Only 15 per cent of the polling units observed started election processes by 8:30 am, and about 64 per cent started between 8:31 am to 11:00 am while 21 per cent started after
Observer reports from the FCT, Benue, Plateau, Nassarawa, Kwara, Niger, Imo, Cross River, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Sokoto, Imo and Anambra States showed that voting continued until late in the evening. In Borno State, Biu LGA Sulumthla Ward in PU 2, voting was still ongoing as at 4:04 pm. In Kotangora LGA, Ward 7 PU 3, voting was still on by 5:32 pm, and at 4:07 PM in Bayelsa State Brass LGA Ward 1 PU 20, they was still a long queue of people that were yet to vote.

In some other parts of the country, elections continued the next day, 26th February while other polling units did not have election materials at all. Examples are Awommama LGA in Imo State. This happened due to the late arrival of voting materials and officials to polling units. The most reported incident was the malfunctioning of the BVAS machine during the upload of presidential results. All our observers reported this at every polling station visited.

**Information Disorder**

The Nigerian Fact-Checkers Coalition (NFC), which comprises Dubawa, Africa Check, Fact-Check Hub, Daily Trust, Premium Times, The Cable, the Centre for Democracy and Development, FactsmatterNG, The Insight, and International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), fact-checked about 80 claims surrounding election day activities. The fact-checks were on different subjects ranging from the electoral process to the conduct of voters, electoral violence, experiences and incidents at polling units, and the conduct of politicians. The fact-checking situation was active for six days starting on 25th February to ensure citizens received verified information throughout the electoral and result collation process.

A broad classification of recurring claims fact-checked includes the following: claims on false withdrawal of candidates; old videos recycled to portray
recent events; videos on violence and insecurity; claims on the lateness of electoral officers and disenfranchisement; doctored audio, law enforcement agencies storming polling units to arrest candidates, doctored images, and false compilations of results, false announcements of winning party, among others. These claims emanated from different sources, mostly social media platforms; Twitter and Meta. So far, 19 accounts have been flagged to Twitter for spreading false information.

Further, to fight the spread of misinformation and provide people with more reliable information, Meta partnered with independent third-party fact-checkers that are certified through the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) of which Dubawa, an active member of the coalition, is a part. Through this project, Dubawa has access to a tool that enables the team to rate claims as true or false for Meta’s action. Dubawa rated 271 articles in the recently concluded Presidential and National Assembly elections.

We noticed an increase in demand for fact-checking by members of the public, signalling a good turn in our quest to sanitise the information ecosystem, especially during the elections.

**Security Issues**

Our observers did not report many cases of voter intimidation by security agents except in very few instances. In Bwari LGA of the FCT, Kubwa 5 PU 004, an FRSC officer was reported to have harassed voters for being disorderly, which stemmed from their reaction to his preferential treatment of some other voters.

Most of the security concerns we noticed in the election were largely a denial of our observers access into state collation centres. For instance, Kwara Central Senatorial Collation Centre denied access to our observer stating that his observer tag only bears “field” and not “collation centre”. At the Sokoto
South Senatorial District Collation Centre, an observer was escorted out of the collation centre by an officer of the Department of State Services (DSS) despite verifying his identity as a media observer.

At the Edo State INEC headquarters, CJID’s media observer was also kicked out by the Chief Security Officer who claimed that the organisation was not on his list of accredited observers and those to be allowed in.

Also, some men of the State Security Services (SSS) accosted our observer in Lagos State, seized his phone, and deleted some files containing images and videos taken in the line of duty from the phone. The observer was accosted at some minutes past 11am in Shomolu LGA. The SSS men (dressed in black and heavily armed) abruptly stopped the driver of the car our observer boarded and ordered all passengers to alight from the vehicle without any explanation for why they were stopped. This harassment happened despite proof of being an election observer.

**Attacks on Press Freedom**

During the election, we were informed that Haruna Muhammed of WikkiTimes was taken into custody by the Nigeria Police in Bauchi State while in the line of observation duty.

As reported by the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), some journalists were attacked by youths at Liberty-Oke Road in Oyo State while going about their election duties. One of the vehicles attacked by the youths was occupied by NAN crew members who were moving around the city to monitor the elections.

In the North East, Mr Inuwa Mohammed an election observer deployed by CJID narrowly escaped being lynched by political thugs in Darazo Local Government
of Bauchi Central, Bauchi State.

In the Federal Capital Territory, Mr Dayo Aiyetan, the Executive Director of ICIR, was assaulted by political thugs and miscreants at Agwai Fulani Town Hall in Gwagwalada for recording irregularities at the polling unit as the INEC officials were almost attacked. His Permanent Voters Card (PVC), driver’s license, wallet, and other valuables were carted away.

In Ebelebiri, three journalists covering the elections in Bayelsa State were assaulted; phones seized, cameras broken and prevented from carrying out their duties. The State Correspondent of Daily Post, Mr Akam James, was assaulted around the voting area while taking note of the voting processes in Ebelebiri Community Ward 05 PU 19. Also beaten were the Publisher of Upfront News Magazine, Mr Princewill Sede and the Managing Editor, Mr Jeany Metta. A reporter of TVC, Mr Joe Kunde and the cameraman, Mr Miebi Bina were chased out of the community.

In Ondo State, Radio Nigeria Journalist, Mr Isaac Afolabi was quizzed for hours by officers of the Nigerian Army stationed at Iju Itaogbolu axis of Akure North LGA.

**Insufficient Election Materials**

Our observers reported cases where election materials were undersupplied to cater for the number of voters. In Hawul LGA of Borno State in PU Dispensary, 006 of Bulingwi Ward, the ballot papers were short by 925 units to meet the needs of the PU. In Benue State, Makurdi LGA PU 31 in Bar Ward, there were insufficient ballot papers with only 300 ballot papers where 540 people were registered.
Election Results

Our observers noted gaps in the result collation and declaration process. At the INEC LG Collation Centre in Aba South in Abia State, it was reported that the manual sheets were not signed by any of the party agents. This resulted in the cancellation of some results.

At the Akwanga LGA of Nasarawa State, the collation was done without the approval of party agents, observers and police at the LGA Collation Centre. The District Police Officer (DPO), party agents, and observers did not approve the results after they had been compiled. Before the results were transferred to Lafia, the state capital, the returning officer for Nasarawa North Senatorial District Centre refused to approve the heavily-altered results. At the time of the incident, the police took the returning officer of Akwanga LGA for further questioning and investigation.

Recommendations

- INEC is advised to thoroughly revamp its operations for the governorship elections to regain the trust and confidence of Nigerians in its ability to conduct credible elections.
- INEC is expected to strictly comply with its guidelines and with all the provisions of the Electoral Act 2022.
- The Police, Armed Forces and security agencies should strongly commit to upholding law and order, freedom of expression, freedom to perform civic responsibilities, civil liberties and human rights of all Nigerians.
- Thuggery, intimidation, harassment, destruction of election materials and all forms of violence must be completely discouraged by political actors, and where evidence abounds of the culpability of political actors in any of such violent acts, the same should be arrested and prosecuted.
Conclusion

Generally, the 2023 Presidential and National Assembly election was adjudged to be marred by various irregularities and discrepancies including INEC’s partial compliance with the provisions of the Electoral Act 2022 relating to the use of BVAS and IRev. Although INEC deserves praise for conducting the elections on the stipulated date, the aforementioned problems continue to threaten the credibility of the results.

This is particularly true for the over 10.5 million newly registered voters, who are mostly young Nigerians who are grossly dissatisfied with the just-held elections due to a lack of transparency in the collation and transmission of results, violence at many polling units, harassment by security agencies, poorly trained elections officers, which revealed the ill-preparedness of INEC, among other issues.

We call on INEC to take all necessary steps to ensure a smoother, free and fair conduct of the upcoming gubernatorial elections thereby restoring hope in our nationhood and democracy. We hope that all stakeholders will continue to engage with Nigerians during and after the elections while encouraging participation in building a truly democratic process that we hope will endure, sustain and flourish.