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Enhancing Electoral Integrity: Attahiru Jega and Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission

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On March 7, 2017, a forum on Electoral Democracy in Nigeria was convened as one of a series on [Democracy and Insecurity in Africa](#) in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois. The keynote address was delivered by Professor Attahiru Jega who, as Chairman of Nigeria's Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), oversaw national elections in 2011 and 2015. In the address entitled, "Building a Fair and Resilient Electoral System: Nigeria, 2010

Follow

2015,” Prof. Jega emphasized the importance of electoral integrity. As INEC chairman, he oversaw extensive improvements in the country’s electoral system.



Attahiru Jega

As a consequence of these efforts, Nigeria had one of the most fairly-conducted elections in its history despite the persistence of the Boko Haram insurgency, severe infrastructure challenges, and the usual intense disputes among parties and contestants. A new party, the All Progressives Congress (APC), competed in the 2015 elections and won the presidency and most legislative and gubernatorial contests.

Prof. Jega’s detailed presentation at the forum was preceded by interventions from several Northwestern faculty and a graduate student, in addition to Ambassador John Campbell, Senior Fellow for Africa Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Provided here is a summary of the proceedings. Prof. Jega’s book-in-progress will be a great resource for the promotion of electoral integrity in democracies worldwide. [1]

John Campbell

In local government elections in South Africa in 2016, the ANC lost control of several constituencies, including Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town. The quality of elections in South Africa differ significantly from those in Nigeria, especially with regard to electoral infrastructure. Unlike Nigeria, the results of elections are almost never contested in South Africa. Electoral institutions are well-established, independent, and well-funded. After the first fully non-racial elections occurred in 1994, they have continued to be conducted efficiently.

Nigerian elections are often treated as “do or die” matters as they are a pathway to wealth and power. A premium is placed on state capture through occupying political offices or building relations with persons holding them. In South Africa, however, there are still many ways to get rich. Nigerian elections are beset with infrastructure difficulties such as inadequate roads and electricity.

Moses Khisa

Under Yoweri Museveni, president since January 1986, Uganda has failed to make progress in advancing electoral integrity. Key challenges are the creation of competent electoral institutions, fair access to the media, and the impartiality of the armed forces. Failures in this area contrast with successes in others. With the exception of the northern region, Uganda has experienced relative stability and economic growth during Museveni's presidency. These are major achievements considering that the country endured decades of rebel activity and civil war. Museveni's tenure also included one of the most effective national responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa.

There is no succession plan, however, for when Museveni steps aside. There has been a decline in the integrity of core institutions such as the judiciary, parliament, and the electoral system. Democratic progress is steadily being rolled back. It can be said of Museveni that, after three decades as the country's leader, he is trapped in power.

Salih Nur

The January 2017 elections in Somalia have been described as an “election-like event,” using a term Ambassador Campbell applied to Nigeria’s 2007 elections. Media accounts emphasized the extensive corruption that took place in the presidential contest won by Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo. The electoral system is not yet openly competitive, and seats in parliament are allocated on the basis of clan identities. Despite their inadequacies, however, these elections should not be categorically dismissed. With the exception of Kenya, Somalia’s elections were the most competitive in the region.

Most countries do not experience fully democratic elections without going through undemocratic ones. The highly touted 2015 election in Nigeria would most likely not have occurred without earlier corrupt elections. Despite the corruption, democracy and state-building are taking place in Somalia. As many scholars have recognized, democracy-building is not possible without state-building.

Richard Joseph

In his widely disseminated address in Accra, Ghana, in July 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama gave a stirring endorsement of that country’s democratic progress. Often cited is his declaration that what Africa needs is not strongmen but strong institutions. One of these institutions, especially since multiparty democracy was restored in 1992, is the Election Commission. Since that date, seven successive national elections have been held, and presidential power has transferred from an incumbent to an opponent on three occasions.

In contrast, after several advances and retreats, electoral integrity in Ethiopia reached a new low in the June 2015 exercises. Incremental opposition gains in previous elections were decisively halted as the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and its allies wrested all 546 parliamentary seats. During his visit to Ethiopia the following month, contrasting starkly with his remarks in Ghana, President Obama called the government of Ethiopia “democratically elected.” While the U.S. president had boosted the cause of African democracy in 2009, in Ethiopia six years later he appeared to sanction the very opposite.

Attahiru Jega

Since the “third wave of democracy” in the 1990s, the formal trappings of democracy, such as regularly-conducted elections, were often installed in Africa without the substantive attribute of electoral integrity.

Elections are now routinely held in most African countries. However, the aspiration to make them “free and fair” has been undermined by gross irregularities with negative consequences for stability, regime legitimacy, and governance. There is little doubt that increasing electoral integrity is central to democratic consolidation, security, and stability in Africa.

Important factors to note:

1. In the Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit, only one African country is ranked as a full democracy, while the rest are classified as flawed, hybrid, or authoritarian. [\[2\]](#)
2. Despite regularly conducted elections, the overwhelming majority of African countries are ranked as moderate to very low in the Perception of Electoral Integrity Index (PEI). See the Africa report [here](#). [\[3\]](#)

Regime type	No. of countries globally	No. of African countries	Index Category
Full democracies	19	1	8-10
Flawed democracies	57	7	6-9
Hybrid democracies	40	14	4-5.99
Authoritarian regimes	51	21	Less than 4.0

The Governance Deficit

It is increasingly recognized that, without quality governance, democratic regimes will not improve the welfare and wellbeing of citizens.

- In Africa, electoral integrity should be seen as essential to good democratic governance.
- Without electoral integrity, public officials will continue to ignore good governance and the satisfaction of the welfare and wellbeing of citizens. These failures will have negative consequences for stability and security.

Between June 2010 and July 2015, I had the rare privilege and opportunity of contributing to the building of a resilient electoral system in Nigeria that can address the overriding concern of conducting elections with integrity.



Nigerians voting in the historic 2015 general election.

The Nigerian Context

- The Nigerian context, while not unique, was exceedingly challenging.
- Nigeria is a country in which, whatever could go wrong, will. From the experiences of military rule to civil war; from oil boom to oil curse; from ethno-religious and communal conflicts to militant insurgencies in the Niger Delta and the Northeast; from a high ranking on the global index of corruption to a very high ranking on poverty amidst plenty.
- Linked to its diversity, Nigeria has a highly polarized political environment, characterized by ethno-religious mobilization and poorly-conducted elections.
- With the resumption of civilian rule in 1999, elections became formal democratic rituals, lacking in integrity. Although the 1999 elections were barely acceptable, the major concern then was to get the country out of military rule.
- The 1999, 2003, and 2007 national elections were increasingly flawed, with the latter considered the worst in Nigeria's history.
- I assumed responsibility for INEC in this chaotic context in 2010.
- In the 2011 election, we gave it our best shot despite the inadequacies. We resolved to build a fair and resilient electoral system with integrity in successive voting exercises.

Building a Fair and Resilient Electoral System

The numerous challenges to be overcome included the following:

1. Strengthening INEC, cleansing its bad image, and making it more efficient and effective.
2. Overcoming persistent electoral fraud. Election results often went in favor of the highest bidder.
3. Ensuring the integrity of the electoral roll
 - The register of voters for the 2011 election lacked integrity. A new register was needed that would be purged of false names.
 - A technology-smart card (contactless chip) and card reader were deployed on election day to authenticate voters.
 - With the card reader, only authenticated persons were able to vote in 2015.
4. Making election-day logistics and procedures transparent, accountable, and efficient.
5. Creating a level-playing field for all political parties and contestants and removing the perception that INEC functioned at the bidding of government and powerful individuals.

6. Safeguarding and strengthening the autonomy of INEC in its relations with all stakeholders including political parties, the legislature, and government executives.
7. Reorganizing and restructuring INEC to improve management.
8. Achieving these objectives required financial autonomy. A key provision was the appropriating of funds to an account in the Central Bank over which INEC would have full control.
9. There was an emphasis on planning and meticulous implementation. A strategic plan was prepared which showed what had to be done, day-by-day.
10. A Citizen Communication Center provided a platform for mobilizing traditional rulers and others to conduct dispute resolution and enhance stability and security.
11. We had open-source software designed to our specifications. Although expensive, such investments were essential if we wished to stay ahead of the politicians bent on fraud.
12. We had to become agents of change in a context in which corruption permeated many aspects of the electoral process.

While meeting these challenges was difficult, it was not impossible. Ballot papers were color coded and numbered. Political party agents had access to results sheets posted at polling stations. Civil society organizations were encouraged to conduct parallel vote tabulations. Technology was successfully used to compile a Biometric Register of Voters despite the discomfort of some development partners about the hurdles to be overcome. International election standards were adapted to Nigeria. Permanent voter cards were distributed that guaranteed the correct identification of voters. Card readers for voter verification and authentication were made available at polling booths. Therefore, politicians were prevented from moving voters around constituencies. In 2015, Nigeria took a major step forward in electoral integrity. We learned from the experiences of others and lifted the bar.

Rachel Riedl

I want to follow up about the integrity and quality of the electoral process. How was citizens' understanding of democratic processes enhanced? How were their vigilance and awareness heightened? There were many logistical and technical details to be grasped. What made this possible? How did INEC overcome complacency among Nigerians about the elections?

Attahiru Jega

President Umaru Yar'Adua, after his election in 2007, acknowledged the problems in that election. He set up an inclusive committee to suggest reforms. I was one of the members. A constitutional amendment, based on its recommendations, and a new Electoral Act, created the environment for reform. My services on the Election Reform Committee increased my understanding of the challenges.

INEC kept civil society organizations informed. A coalition emerged of these organizations devoted to electoral reform. Nigeria's public institutions are weak. This was also the case with INEC, which lacked the competence and capacity even to reform itself. Drivers of reform had, therefore, to be nurtured within INEC. We encountered resistance within the organization based on the usual tendencies of Nigerian bureaucrats. A small team was put together to drive change in the functioning of the organization. It was important also to work with outsiders. We focused on sustaining the capacity for reform and preventing reversals. The public bought into the changes because of the transparency of these efforts and our vigorous outreach.

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[1] Special thanks to Mike Curtis and Northwestern University Information Technology (NUIT) as well as Matt Treavis, Phil Leonard, and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Team of the Blavatnik School of Government for bringing Prof. Jega's live remarks from Oxford to Chicago via video-conference.

[2] [The Democracy Index](#) is an index compiled by the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit that measures the state of democracy in 167 countries.

[3] [The Electoral Integrity Project \(EIP\)](#) is based at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and the University of Sydney's Department of Government and International Relations.