



Transition Monitoring Group

(A Coalition of Human Rights, Non-Governmental and Civil Society Organisations)
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Continuous Voter Registration Process - An Imperative for Genuine Elections

*Being statement by the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) at the Press Conference
Held at the Pioneer Hotel, Abuja on Friday, February 13, 2004.*

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press,

On behalf of the entire members of the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), I wish to welcome you to this Press Conference on the preparations towards the 2004 Local Government elections.

This Press Conference is necessitated by the poor management, by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the various State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), of the processes leading to the Local Government Elections, which form the foundation for democratic elections all over the world. The TMG is concerned that the poor management of the preparatory stages of the elections has resulted in substantial flaws in the electoral process as well as grave breaches of the provisions of the Electoral Act 2002. As a result of this, we believe that the outcome of the local government elections to be held all over the country in March cannot represent the will of the people.

The reasons for our view are as follows:

Voter registration process

The Transition Monitoring Group and other organizations which observed the Voter Registration exercise of 12th to 21st September 2002 and the subsequent registration validation exercise in January 2003 concluded that the processes were marred by inefficiency, confusion and corruption. Consequently, in spite of the massive turnout of Nigerians eager to exercise their legitimate constitutional rights, a substantial number went home disappointed, unable to register.

With the 2003 elections concluded and the flaws and manipulations acknowledged by all stakeholders, the nation's attention has shifted to reforms that will prepare the country for the conduct of substantially freer and fairer elections in 2007.

No doubt an efficient and credible voter registration process is one of the key elements of a true Electoral Reform Movement.

However as events appear, INEC, which by provisions of the “Guidelines for Registration of Voters”, issued by the Commission in exercise of the powers conferred on it by Section 78 of the 1999 Constitution and Section 15(e) of the Third Schedule to the Constitution as well as Section 1 of the Electoral Act 2002, is mandated to commence a continuous update of the Voters Register three months after the elections, is yet to carry out its responsibilities.

Nine months after the conclusion of the general elections in May 2003 and less than six weeks to the Local Government elections, eligible Nigerians who have attained the age of 18 are yet to be registered, while those excluded during the September 2002 and January 2003 registration processes have similarly not been registered. The names of those who died after the 2003 elections are yet to be expunged from the register. Thus the various State Independent Electoral Commissions are planning to conduct elections that would disenfranchise thousands of Nigerians willing to participate in the process.

SIECs nationwide will be conducting Local Government Elections in March with Voters Register not updated, which negates the provisions of Section 1(1) of the Electoral Act, 2002.

Under part 11 of the Guidelines for Registration of Voters issued by INEC titled: Update of the National Register of Voters, it is stated in Paragraph 10 that:

- (a) The Commission shall within 3 months after the general elections commence a *continuous* update of voters register throughout the country.
- (b) Such update of voter registration shall end 60 days before any General Elections or 30 days before any bye-election.
- (c) For the purposes of the update of the register of voters, the Commission shall open a register at every Local Government Area Council office of the Federation.
- (d) Updating of the register shall take place between the hours of 9am and 3pm daily on working days.

The conduct of periodic voter registration processes in the past has promoted fraud, inefficiency and the disenfranchisement of many citizens. Such periods also witnessed dramatic mobilization and deployment of huge numbers of ad-hoc electoral personnel and financial resources by the government. Additionally, political parties and political heavy weights also demonstrated their capacities to outwit one another in the political process.

On the other hand the Continuous Registration process offers enormous advantages for Nigerian’s electoral process because it is a method that emphasizes the admittance of potential voters on a regular basis by the registration agency, usually devoid of fanfare and strategic deployment of human and financial resources.

Were the provisions of the law complied with, the Continuous Registration of voters by INEC would have eliminated most of the problems that the periodic voter registration creates or is unable to solve:

- It would have reduced to the minimum, the disenfranchisement of citizens, since citizens could have registered at appropriate and convenient periods as voters.
- The Continuous Voter Registration process has the potentials of solving the problem of the length of time required for the preparation and validation of the voters register which the Periodic Voter Registration has. This would have ended the controversial debates about the length of time needed to produce credible registers.
- Continuous Voter Registration would always make available to the public credible, reliable, valid and up-to-date voters registers.
- Continuous Voter Registration would have made the practice of inflating the register with fake names less attractive financially, since the perpetrators have to be engaging in these ventures all the time. During the PVR exercises, political parties try to outwit each other by buying from INEC registration officers, registration materials with a view to either increasing their voting power or preventing their competitors from assuming electoral dominance in specific constituencies. This would have been minimized.
- The CVR process would have eliminated the “quick fixing method” of mobilizing funds for a special exercise. This is because the suggested approach will have to make adequate and comprehensive budgets for INEC to take care of this exercise and other responsibilities.
- The CVR process would have reduced the pressure on INEC staff and the prospective registrants who have to go through the lengthy, time consuming, exhausting and agonizing process of registration, which combines both the manual and the computerization approaches.

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Press, I’m sure you will agree that the advantages of Continuous Voter Registration are manifestly clear. It is therefore incomprehensible to us, given these obvious benefits, why the INEC failed to comply with the statutory requirements by embarking on the process, which it should have ideally started six months ago.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

In our press conference addressed on January 15, 2004, the TMG expressed concern that the processes leading up to the elections have been lacking in transparency and fairness in many states. The TMG also condemned the uncertainty, confusion and manipulation, which have attended the preparations for the elections. It is worrisome to observe that there has been no improvement in the situation and that in some states, things actually appear to be getting worse.

In particular, the TMG is concerned about the incessant changes in dates and the confusion surrounding the planning towards the conduct of Local Government elections in Plateau State. We condemn any strategy that would prolong the running of the affairs of the various Local

Governments in Plateau State and in any part of the country as a whole through undemocratic and unelected Caretaker Committees.

We also condemn the exclusive tendencies being exhibited by the various State Independent Electoral Commissions in relation “to other” political parties. Democracy is about choices and the people’s right to choose. We also condemn the monetization of the electoral process through levies imposed on candidates of the local government elections.

Conducting elections that are unopposed by other political parties or boycotted by political parties and the electorate would be detrimental to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

We therefore recommend the following:

- (1) That all SIECs publicize the timetable for the elections in their states to ensure awareness and participation of the electorate.
- (2) That SIECs, as impartial umpires in the electoral process, conduct their activities according to the rule of law, in accordance with due process and transparency to gain the confidence of all stakeholders in the election process.

Finally, we call on all Nigerians to be vigilant to ensure that the “peoples will is central to the Local Government elections process”. The TMG will deploy at least 5,000 observers across the country to ensure that your votes count. The struggle to ensure that the peoples’ will is central to the electoral process continues – and we will get there some day.

Thank you for your attention.

Angela Odah (Mrs.)
National Coordinator