

Low Voter Turnout and Low Participation of Political Parties Characterized the Conduct of the Mock Accreditation Exercise

Yiaga Africa's Watching The Vote Report on the Observation of Mock Accreditation Exercise Ahead of November 11, 2023, Off-Cycle Elections, Conducted on Saturday, October 14, 2023

As part of the preparations leading to the conduct of the November 2023 off-cycle governorship elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi States, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducted a Mock Accreditation Exercise. The Accreditation Exercise was conducted on Saturday, October 14, 2023, across 27 polling units drawn from the 3 Senatorial Districts in each of the 3 states. The mock accreditation exercise was conducted to test the effectiveness and functionality of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the upload of polling unit results on the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) ahead of the elections.

Yiaga Africa deployed 27 stationary observers to 27 polling units across 26 selected LGAs in the three states (Bayelsa-8, Imo-9, and Kogi-9) where the mock accreditation was conducted. Yiaga Africa's observation efforts focused on assessing the deployment and functionality of the BVAS, data uploaded to the INEC's Result View Portal (IREV), as well as the participation of voters and political parties in the exercise.

Yiaga Africa observed that BVAS was deployed and performed optimally across all of the observed polling units. Further, Yiaga Africa's findings indicated that voter participation and participation of political parties were poor. For instance, only APC and PDP party agents were seen in the locations visited. The APC party agents were observed in 12 polling units PDP party agents were seen in 8 polling units. Also observed was the reluctance on the part of some voters to participate in the mock accreditation. For instance, as some voters were given some inducements before they accepted to participate in the exercise as observed in Ada Open Space Polling Unit (60-01-01-003) in Brass LGA of Bayelsa State. The Electoral Officer was seen handing out N500 each to at least 4 voters before they accepted to participate in the mock exercise. In addition, community members stopped INEC officials from conducting the exercise in Attisa 1 ward, at Peletia Town Hall polling unit, (06-08-01-001) in Yenegoa, they demanded to know why their polling unit was selected for the exercise but the officials decided to leave the polling unit as tension increased.

Key Findings from the Mock Accreditation

1. Arrival at polling units and commencement of mock accreditation: WTV observers reported that an INEC polling official was present in 12 polling units as of 7:30 am. Mock accreditation and voting had begun in 9 polling units by 8:30 am. By 9:30 a.m accreditation and voting were underway in 21 of the observed polling units; by 10:30 am, the process had begun in 26 of the observed polling units.
2. Deployment of polling officials: An average of 6 INEC officials were seen across most of the polling units visited. Of the INEC officials deployed there was an average of 2 women.
3. Presence of security personnel: Security personnel were observed to be present in 20 polling units and no security agents were sighted in 5 polling units. Specifically, there was no security presence in Isinweke Motor Park Polling Unit in Amakohia ward of Ihitte/Mbomo LGA in Imo, Ajetachi (Opp Abuchagi's House) in Anyigba Ward of Dekina LGA, Kogi. Security Agents were not sighted in Itedo Irunda Open Space, in Itedo ward in Yagba East LGA of Kogi State. Similarly, security agents were not seen in Ada Open Space Polling Unit in Brass, and in Asenekiri Town Hall Polling Unit in Amassoma I, Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa.
4. Presence of Party Agents: Across the polling units observed APC agents were seen in 12 polling units, party agents for PDP were seen in 8 polling units, and party agents for LP, SDP, APGA and AA were observed in at least 1 polling unit. There were no agents of AAC, A, ADC, ADP, APM, APP, BP, NNPP, NRM, PRP, YPP and ZLP sighted in all the polling units.

Deployment and Functionality of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS)

5. Deployment and functionality of the BVAS: The BVAS was observed in all the polling units visited and it functioned optimally in all the observed polling units. Before the commencement of accreditation and voting, the total number of accredited voters was shown to be empty in 18 of the observed polling units.
6. Voter processing time using the BVAS: The average voter processing time using the BVAS was between 1-2 minutes in 18 (75%) of the observed polling units, while it took an average of 3-5 minutes to process a voter using the BVAS in 6 (25%) of the observed polling units.
7. Assessing voter's PVCs and biometrics using the BVAS: In all of the observed polling units, the voter's PVC was checked using the BVAS. In 20 (80%) of the observed polling units, every voter's fingerprint was checked using the BVAS. In 19 (79%) of observed polling units, facial authentication was done for voters whose fingerprints could not be authenticated using the BVAS. In 5 (20)% of polling units, a voter was

refused accreditation because the BVAS could not verify his/her PVC. In (3) 12% of polling units some voters were refused accreditation because the BVAS could not verify their fingerprints or authenticate their facial biometrics.

Polling Units Level Results Transmission

As part of the trial run of the BVAS, INEC polling officials uploaded sample polling unit-level results to the INEC's online results viewing portal (IREV).

- In 19 (79%) polling units, INEC officials obtained the number of accredited voters on the BVAS and recorded them on form EC.8A
- In 18 (75%) of the polling units, the presiding officer used the BVAS to scan/take a snapshot of the results sheet (Form EC 8A).
- In 17 (71%) of polling units, the presiding officer attempted to transmit/send the results image to the INEC's online database (IREV)

Close of Mock Accreditation

- The mock accreditation exercise ended before 2:30 p.m. in 10 (42%) polling units and by 3:00pm, all polling units had ended the accreditation exercise.

Status of the Results Posted on the IREV

While there was an attempt by INEC polling officials to upload the polling unit-level mock accreditation results data on the IREV, Yiaga Africa observed inconsistencies in the results sheets that were posted on the IREV.

- In Kogi, Yiaga Africa observed that instead of using form EC 8A to record the results, some INEC polling officials completed and uploaded form EC 40(G) which is supposed to be for records of locations where elections were not held or cancelled. This was observed in the LGEA School Polling Unit (22-02-14-009) in Ganaja Village, Ajaokuta, Open Space Ofiji (22-07-04-006) in Ukwaja ward, Idah LGA and Itedo Irunda Open Space (22-20-09-007) in Itedo ward, Yagba East LGA.
- Similarly, in Imo, polling officials completed and uploaded for EC 40(G) instead of form EC 8A in Central Sch Amaraku (16-09-01-002) in Amaraku, Isiala Mbanu LGA, in Aghazi Square (16-14-01-003) in Onusa ward, Nkwere LGA and in Umuogide Oforola (16-27-01-019) in Avu/Oforola ward in Owerri West LGA.

Assessing the Conduct of the Mock Accreditation Exercise

- 39% of observers reported that they were very satisfied with the

conduct of the mock exercise, 46% of observers reported that they were satisfied with the conduct of the mock accreditation exercise and 4% of observers reported that they were not satisfied with the conduct of the mock accreditation exercise citing poor participation of voters and poor communication by some INEC officials as the downside of the exercise, which may not have provided the opportunity to fully assess the functionality of the BVAS in some polling units. Yiaga Africa observer in Crowther Memorial Sabon Gari Polling Unit in Lokoja A ward, in Kogi, reported that some voters who were bearing the PVC of the polling unit but whose names were not on the voter register were not allowed to be accredited, these are likely voters who may have been reassigned to another polling unit and have not been informed.

Recommendations:

1. INEC should conduct an assessment of all BVAS and make the readiness status report publicly available ahead of election day deployment.
2. The commission must continue to emphasise to its staff, the importance of uniformity in the application of its guidelines across all polling units especially in the management of the results transmission.
3. Security agencies must ensure the total deployment of security personnel across all phases of the electoral process to protect the integrity of the process and inspire citizens' confidence.
4. Political parties must be intentional in the engagement of every component of the electoral process to promote an accountable and inclusive electoral process.
5. Citizens are encouraged to remain resilient and active participants in the electoral process in order to promote an accountable and transparent process.
6. We encourage CSOs to continue to prioritize gate-out-the-vote campaigns to improve citizens' participation. CSOs should also prioritize observing all aspects of the electoral process to enhance transparency and increase public confidence in the electoral process.

Conclusion

Yiaga Africa commends INEC and all stakeholders who participated in the exercise. It is our considered view that their participation, observation and recommendations will no doubt help to facilitate a seamless process on election days. Yiaga Africa sincerely appreciates the Watching the Vote citizens observers who observed the process for their commitment to credible elections.



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