



## **2007: Is INEC Preparing?**

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**The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) is central to the survival of democracy in this country. It stands to make or mar it by how it handles the 2007 general election. Ike Abonyi reports that situation on ground calls for concern especially with the National Assembly handling of issues concerning the commission**

In the history of this country relating to the conduct of elections, the June 12 1993 general election is still being rated as the freest and fairest, not minding that the winner did not exercise the people's mandate even for a day because of the annulment of the poll on June 23, 1993 by the then military President General Ibrahim Babangida.

Even though the chairman of the then National Electoral commission (NEC) Prof. Humphrey Nwosu was disgraced out, he did not fail in the area of ensuring that the electoral commission under his leadership gave the country a free and fair poll. It is therefore not by happenstance that Prof. Nwosu remains in the mind of Nigerians as the man who conducted the freest poll in the history of the country.

All the heads of electoral bodies in Nigeria from independence to the immediate past Dr Abel Guobadia, left the commission virtually discredited at least in the eyes of the people.

The engine of any electoral process is dependent on its electoral body. If the electoral body of any nation is faulty, it may require a miracle for its democracy to be stable. The apparent instability in the nation's polity over the years is not unconnected with the poor handling of elections by the electoral body.

The role of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) in 2003 general elections visibly underscores the apprehension. The commission is on record to have conducted the worst election in the history of Nigeria.

Nothing in the activities of the Abel Guobadia-led electoral body in 2003 poll suggested that it appreciated its independence. Local and international observers report on the conduct of 2003 general elections shows that INEC officials who ought to be umpires were themselves partisan and largely working for the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

The role of INEC in 2003 did not in anyway suggest that it appreciated its constitutional responsibility as enshrined in third schedule Part I (F) which states among others that "the commission shall have power to organise, undertake and supervise all elections to the offices of the President and Vice President, the Governor and Deputy Governors of a state and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and House of Assembly of each state of the federation." The body is also statutorily empowered to register political parties and monitor its activities as well as carry out such other functions as may be conferred upon it by the Electoral Act of the National Assembly.

The ground work for the woeful performance of the Abel Guobadia-led INEC was laid when the Electoral Act 2002 that was to guide the conduct of elections was late in

coming and even when it came it was full of controversies and contradiction. One anomaly in the Act is that three years after 2003 the poll, election petitions are still being heard at the tribunals. In fact, Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra State is facing threat of removal after he had stayed in office for nearly three years. In August, election tribunal nullified his victory and gave it to the APGA flagbearer, Mr Peter Obi. The matter is still at the Court of Appeal in Enugu.

Just last week, INEC was directed to issue a certificate to member of the House of Representatives who won his petition at the tribunal. All these are the fall-out of a hurried electoral Act.

One other thing that prepared ground for the abysmal performance of INEC in 2003 was poor funding.

the Federal Government allegedly starved the commission of fund when it mattered most only to pump in money at the dying minute. The consequence was very clear, the commission's leaders paid more attention to the money and did little in their primary responsibilities.

Political watchers are worried that the same road that did not lead to success in 2003 is being followed again. The government and the National Assembly are at it again. The lawmakers are busying themselves with the largesse expected to come from the third term crusaders and little or nothing is being said about the amendment of the Electoral Act submitted to them since 2004. Even the funding of the commission is suffering because of the alleged delay from the same lawmakers.

An apparently hapless new INEC boss, Prof. Maurice Iwu had in a paper at the 2005 annual conference of the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) in Jos declared that "it is our considered opinion that the time has come for a serious improvement in the voting methods as part of the reform in our electoral process in preparation for the next general elections."

According to the INEC helmsman, "the transparency, accountability, integrity and legitimacy of the institutions, rules, practices and values upon which a society functions are essential determinants of the quality of decision making."

Barely one year to the general election, the Electoral Act amendment is still hanging with the National Assembly. Also hanging with them is the fund.

It is hard to understand why Nigerians prefer last minute rush on vital issues like elections. They have been doing that in sports management until recently when smaller nations like Togo and Angola are going to the world cup but Nigeria will not. There is absolutely no acceptable reason why the Electoral Act and funding of the electoral commission should not be top priority to the lawmakers except for the interior motive of electoral manipulations.

If Prof. Nwosu made a success of his tenure as NEC boss in 1993, it must have been because the then military President Ibrahim Babangida pumped in enough money to him and in time too. Nwosu had all he wanted and made sure he did what was necessary for him.

As electoral body, Prof. Nwosu's publicity machinery was stronger than that of any of the two political parties - the NRC and the SDP put together. Nwosu's NEC was constantly in the press-print and electronic alike educating and mobilising the people for their own roles about two years to the poll.

With just about 12 months to the 2007 general elections, Prof. Iwu's INEC appear to be at the mercy of the politicians at the National Assembly as he await them for both funds, and the necessary legal teeth. He should know that all eyes are just on him to take Nigeria's electoral system to the next level.

The onus rests on the nation's chief electoral officer to let Nigerians know his handicaps now, otherwise excuse tomorrow as to why things did not go well would not be taken when his tenure will be x-rayed. The feeling across the country that

there is really nothing on ground to show the seriousness of 2007 poll should be disabused by the INEC leadership.

It is also necessary to urge all stake holders especially President Olusegun Obasanjo and members of the National Assembly to ensure a free and fair poll in 2007 by putting all enabling thing intact. This they can do by adequately empowering the appropriate organ that will facilitate it which is INEC. Anything short of a free and fair poll for the country in 2007 will not only ruin Prof. Iwu but the entire democratic process. Anybody hoping and dreaming that the charade of 2003 will be replicated in 2007 should not ignore the old saying that once beaten twice shy