

POLICY BRIEF

ON IMPROVING THE CREDIBILITY OF ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

PREPARED BY

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVANCEMENT AND
PROTECTION ALTERNATIVE (WRAPA)**

&

**AFRICAN CENTRE FOR LEADERSHIP,
STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT (CENTRE LSD)**



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BACKGROUND

Nigeria faces significant challenges in ensuring credible elections, combating poverty, and safeguarding civic space. Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) in partnership with African Centre for Leadership, Strategy & Development (Centre LSD) implemented the "Civic Space, Poverty, and Elections in Nigeria"(CISPEN) Project. The project examined the intersections of Poverty, shrinking civic space, credible elections and the engendering of democratic governance in Nigeria.

Elections as a major component of democracy play a crucial role in ensuring the periodic renewal of leadership mandate based on the will of the people. It has been emphasized that "**elections are the core of democracy, the heart of democratic systems.**" For an election outcome to be perceived as credible and reflective of the people's desires and aspirations, it must meet certain defined standards of acceptability.

It is against this background and in recognizing elections as the cornerstone of representative democracy that the project prepared this policy brief on the credibility threshold of elections in Nigeria. We herein identify key indicators, challenges, and strategies for ensuring elections conducted in Nigeria meet international best practices for fairness, transparency, and inclusivity.

The brief takes into account the Nigerian peculiarity by analysing existing frameworks, policies, and practices influencing the credibility of elections in Nigeria. It Identified gaps, challenges, and potential reforms for improving electoral credibility. This report was subjected to a presentation and robust interactive interrogation at a High-level Thought Leaders Conference, Policy Dialogue review and a robust public validation. This presented Policy Brief is an output of the interventions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many of Nigeria's elections since independence have been characterized by dismal and counteracting contours that have individually or collectively undermined the feasibility of entrenching democracy and procuring development in the country. This is because of the stark deficit of the ingredients of credibility in the entire electoral process – from voter registration, issuance of voters cards, the integrity of the voter register, the violent nature of political campaigns to the long hours or days Nigerians queue to accredit and vote and the appointment of election management commissioners. Other problems include the training of actual administrators of the election activities in a given cycle and the way and manner in which election results are handled, especially the glaring discordance between hardcopy results at the polling unit level and the digitally available results on the INEC portal as witnessed in the 2023 elections. The deficit of credibility in Nigerian elections has not only weakened popular choice for democracy, but has also emboldened corrupt politicians, entrenched godfather politics, facilitated state capture processes, disenfranchised citizens, stifled the dividends of governance and created a kleptocratic state.

With the wave of military coups and resurgence of military rule in several African countries and citizens' celebratory acclamation of this disturbing trend in affected countries, it becomes clear that when the people are ready to turn their back on democracy if elections are not credible. To keep to the strict and narrow path of free and fair elections is therefore the pathway towards keeping the military out of politics, especially as the 2027 general elections approach. This brief submits that the main reasons why Nigeria's elections continue to lack credibility is because some Nigerian politicians remain committed to eroding the credibility of our elections. They appear to believe that when elections are credible they will lose. Nigerians need to learn that the essence of democracy is precisely that when citizens feel a candidate is not fit for purpose, their responsibility is to keep them out of power.

WHO IS AFRAID OF CREDIBLE ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA?

From all indications credible elections should inherently do no harm to anybody, it should elicit joy, be a destination of pride and the pursuit of all and sundry. This is what an ideal reality should be, not actual reality in Nigeria. In Nigeria some stakeholders fear credible elections, they fear free, fair and open elections; they fear elections where actual accreditation and voting take place, where the election management body is upright, where the votes really count and are duly counted, where actual election results are recorded and announced, where the rightful winners are declared and where the courts have no cases to handle arising from the polls.

These people are enemies of democracy; they are enemies of the people, of the state and of the nation's development. These people are those we could describe as non-democrats; democrats do not fear credible elections; they embrace, cherish and advance its cause. Democrats are committed to the protection of the people's franchise. For democrats, the acquisition of power is not a do-or-die quest. Nigeria's ambition is to develop democrats that do not elicit ethnocentrism, religious bigotry, voter suppression and inducement, manipulation of voter register, deployment of thugs, touts and hooligans to disrupt election processes or rig elections. We need democrats to deepen and sustain Nigerian democracy.

ELECTION CREDIBILITY DEFICIT IN NIGERIA

Nigeria's elections have always been fraught with fraud – from the very parliamentary elections of 1959, through the 1964 general elections, the 1965 Western regional elections, the 1979 and 1983 general elections, with a moratorium in the 1993 presidential elections, then the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections, realities and instances of manipulations, inducement, falsification, abduction of political opponents, and voter suppression have been

commonplace. This has created a very bad perspective in Nigerians that their votes do not count.

Elections must be credible. But what is credibility? The word credibility in this context means the electoral processes are just, follow due process and truly reflect citizen's choices. Credibility entails openness of the system, the conscious assurance of an all-dimensional involvement of different strata and gender of society, making it such that the system is non-discriminatory, non-judgemental and non-prejudicial, emphasising predictability, certainty, probity, measurability of actions, inactions and reactions vis-à-vis the extant electoral laws and relevant institutional frameworks.

Elections are common but credible elections are scarce; they are scarce not impossible; they are scarce because of the do-or-die approach to power and politics, the zero-sum nature of political undertakings and the unbridled willingness by some politicians to grab power by any means available and possible. This tendency has left trauma, haplessness, regrets and mitigating circumstances behind. Lack of election credibility makes the led to hate their leaders, and the ultimate casualty of fraudulent or flawed elections, elections without credibility, is the Nigerian state and the feasibility of development. This is because among other things, 'when an election is rigged choices of the citizens are invariably annulled and the government that emerges cannot represent, protect and effect the interest and aspirations of the people'.

This means that 'where elections are fiercely disputed, the people's mandate is violently stolen and the electoral process shamelessly corrupted, purported victors would lack the necessary legitimacy which gives a high probability that peace and stability will elude the

country'. Peace becomes a scarce commodity as citizens become disenchanted, disillusioned and determined to correct the anomaly. Where there is scarcity of credible elections it naturally leads to a scarcity of peace. This becomes fundamental because although democracy cannot be installed without elections, not all elections can lead to the installation of democracy or a democratic system.

COST OF CREDIBILITY DEFICIT IN ELECTIONS

Nigeria is already at a crossroad of choosing between whether to devise a bold and courageous path that will ensure a new dawn in our electoral trajectory that enthrones transparency and accountability in the country's balloting system or continue in the path that has created cracks and abysmal contours in our democratic experimentation. There are no doubts of counterproductive ramifications or consequences of having elections that are not credible. The most glaring is that it produces leaders without legitimacy; these leaders in turn formulate policies and programmes which do not enjoy public support; the next reality is that since the leaders and the led are not in any form of cordial synergy, the country will suffer; there will inevitably be a rise in crime and criminality as a tacit vote of no-confidence on the leaders. When there is deficit in elections democracy and development are obstructed because there will be no residue of commitment to stamp out poverty, unemployment, inequality and insecurity eventually takes the front burner.

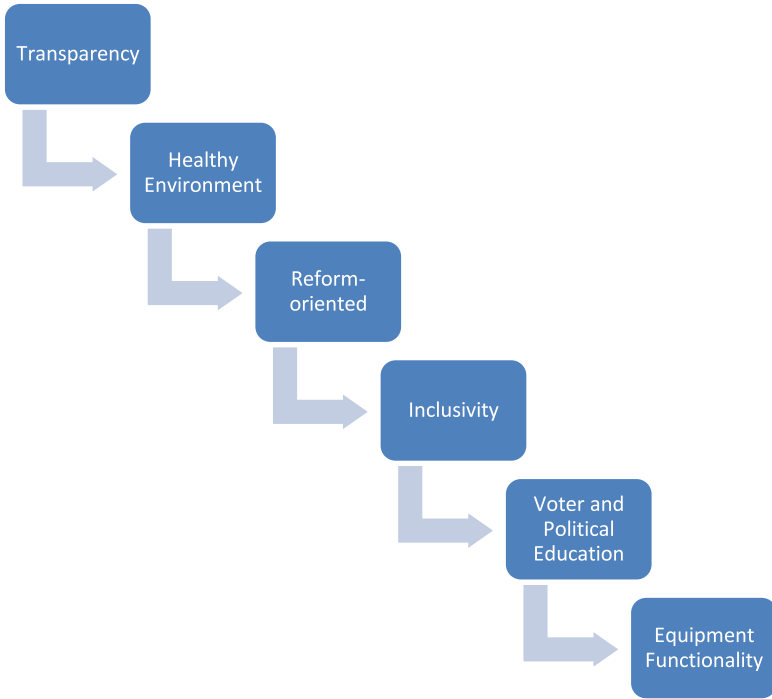
ELECTION CREDIBILITY BAROMETER

What barometer can we then use to measure credibility of Nigerian elections? The proposed barometer is what is tagged the THRIVE Index. The THRIVE Index represents an acronym which stands for Transparency (the electoral process must be seen from the onset to the declaration of winners to be open, accessible, transparent, where the critical stakeholders especially the Election Management Body, are accountable, responsive and responsible in the administration of the

election exercise), Healthy environment (this has to do with security for all, reduction in the combustibility or volatility of the election environment by implementing early warning systems that could identify hotspots before elections and nip them in the bud).

Reforms (the electoral Act and ancillary regulations must be periodically strengthened to meet the demands of the time), Inclusivity (the election process must be such that engenders accommodation of women and new voters, protects opposition candidates and enables persons with disability, PWDs), Voter and Political Reorientation and mobilization (this is very key as there is so much misinformation, disinformation and dis-orientation of both the voting public and politicians – there must be constant plan and strategy to change this mind-set for good), Equipment functionality and availability (one of the greatest obstacles to credibility of elections in Nigeria is poor logistical arrangement; from delayed arrival of equipment to malfunctioning, realities that are often exploited by perverted politicians to rig the process).

Figure 1: The THRIVE Index



The THRIVE Index could be used as a guiding framework for future elections in Nigeria and begin to create and cultivate a culture of trust, truth and triumph (The 3 Ts) in election credibility.

POLICY ACTION

Election credibility is the bastion for democratic consolidation and voter enthusiasm. How do we ensure that Nigeria's 2027 and future elections are credible? The brief has put forward the THRIVE Index which entails Transparency, Healthy environment,

Reforms of extant laws, Inclusiveness, Voter and political education and Equipment functionality. Against this backdrop, the following policy action plans are suggested:

- i. That existing constituencies should undergo new demarcation and delineation to create more polling units (doubling the existing 176,974 polling units) that will make voting centres closer to the people, convenient and much more accessible.
- ii. The use of transparency and accountability checkers to gauge the operational credibility of the key stakeholders (INEC, Political parties, media, security personnel and voters) in the election enterprise in Nigeria – the checkers should include things like how open, convenient, accessible, inclusive and friendly, professional and helpful the voting system is at the level of the polling units.
- iii. The establishment of election offences mobile court and creation of election citizen monitoring and observatory mobile number for easy and direct reportage of election malfeasance like activities of thugs, colluding stakeholders, voter suppression, ballot box stuffing, and violence, etc.
- iv. The law should be guaranteed to ensure the conduct of all elections in one day to avoid to continued subtle disenfranchisement of many because of lethargy or voter fatigue.
- v. Logistical preparedness must be revised; transportation companies that are deployed must be made to sign undertaking or memoranda of understanding that are justiciable in the case of breach of contract.
- vi. Civil Society Organizations with vast experience in election matters should be engaged in the training and retraining of election workers and in election

monitoring. INEC as an impartial player in the election enterprise could use any measure legal to execute and achieve its mandate.

- vii. Traditional rulers and religious leaders should be co-opted in sensitization campaigns and appeals to the consciences of all stakeholders involved in the election business.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has established that elections are useful only when they are credible. Credible elections is the pathway to the consolidation and sustenance of democracy. Therefore, the task to ensure that credibility is entrenched into the electoral process in Nigeria becomes an issue of national emergency. One vital area that must be considered in all of this is the necessity to carry out intense and intentional voter and political education to re-orientate and re-educate the electorate and major stakeholders on the urgency to have credible elections in the country. The culture of being afraid of free and fair elections, a culture that is borne out of non-democratic traits and tendencies must also be consciously dislodged, or at any rate reversed. Since we cannot operate a democracy without democrats, the voter and political re-education must focus on exposing Nigerians to the tenets and precepts of what it means to be a democrat.

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