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# STATES' INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSIONS (SIECS) AND THE CONDUCT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCIL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A FOCUS ON THE 2017 BENUE STATE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION

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## **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to examine the conduct of local government elections' in Nigeria by states' Independent Electoral Commissions. The paper purposively choose the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 local government council elections' conducted by the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC). The data for this paper is obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The data is analyzed using the arguments of systems theory. The paper discovered that, the political class in Nigeria is not yet determined to allow political institutions to work effectively towards democratic consolidation. It also discovered that, political parties do not respect internal democracy and as such, they covert the political parties into business concerns to market it at any price. It also discovered that the followers are also not making any efforts to hold the leaders accountable to their political actions and choices but rather, they prefer to join the "gang" as long as it profits them. The paper also revealed that elections is a systemic issue that involves many actors and stakeholder and any action or inaction of any of the actors makes or mar the process. Based on these discoveries, the paper recommends that the commission should concretize and strengthen synergy with other stakeholders such as the National Union of Road Transport Workers, Motor Cycle Riders Association and security agencies among others so as to avoid the delays in the distribution of materials and movement of personnel. Political parties should democratize their party primaries so as to reduce the pressure they mount on the electoral authority. The paper finally recommends punitive measures such as cancelation of results, imprisonment of violators of election laws.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Elections, Commission, Stakeholders, System

## **Introduction**

At the core of democracy is the opportunity created for the citizens to make choices on who govern them and how they are governed. This instrument of choice is called election. Elections are institutional devises for managing conflict by determining peacefully, who legitimately rules. Elections are important means of allocating power through competition that determines who loses and who wins, and therefore has the authority to allocate societal resources. The crucial nature of elections in mobilizing

the people towards the governance of their resources and livelihood has made the management of election a critical aspect of democracy and the governance process. The composition, credibility, impartiality and fair posture of the election management body therefore becomes a delicate aspect of the process. Since independence, Nigeria has established electoral management bodies which has metamorphosed from the Electoral commission of Nigeria (ECN) which conducted the 1959 elections to the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) of the 1960 elections, to the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), of the 1979 elections, to the National Electoral commission of Nigeria (NECON) which conducted the aborted 1993 elections to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) which commenced activities in 1998 all charged with the responsibility of conducting the nations' elections. According to Tsuwa (2017), elections must be conducted by a neutral body that is well trained and equipped. The body must show a high sense of professionalism and must be unbiased, bearing in mind that credible elections have to meet three essential criteria of inclusiveness, transparency and accountability. The professionalism of this body as Tsuwa argues is to create confidence in all parties to the electoral process. If political rivals and their supporters do not believe in the professionalism of the electoral process, they are bound to use undemocratic means of acquiring power which will negates the core tenants of electoral democracy.

In acknowledgment of the centrality of an electoral management body, Section 153 of the 1999 constitution as amended gives the powers of conducting states and national elections to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and Section 197 (1) (b) provides for the establishment of the States Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) to organize, conduct and supervise local government elections in their various states. Deriving from this, all states of the Federation are expected to establish states Independent Electoral Commissions that will saddled with the prescribed responsibility.

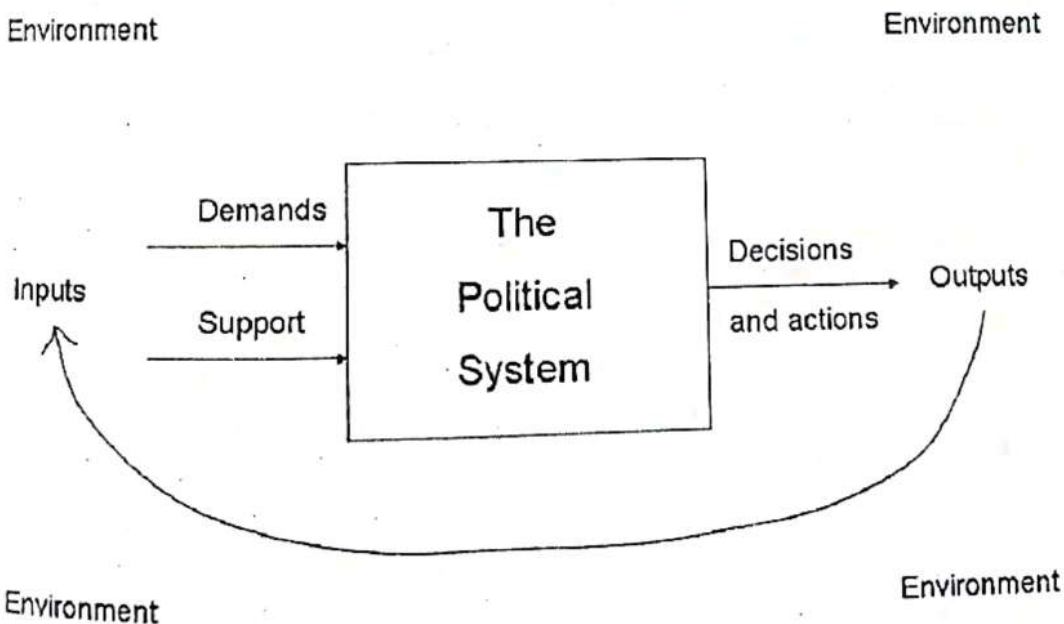
In Benue state, the law for the provision for the establishment of the Benue state Independent Electoral Commission was passed and assented to in the year 2000 and has been variously amended in 2002, 2004, 2007, 2012 and 2018. The establishment law of the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC) apart from giving the commission powers to organize, supervise and conduct elections also provides in Section 4 (c-f) that, the commission can also perform functions such as advising the National Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) on compilation of voter register. It also has the powers to divide or dissolve local government areas into wards for purposes of election into local government councils, to formulate rules and guidelines for qualification and disqualification of any person as a candidate for election as chairman, vice chairman or councilor of a local government or ward in the state. These are among the other various responsibilities that the law establishing BSIEC provides to enable the commission function maximally to achieve its mandate.

It is wont to note that, since the return to civil rule in 1999, and the establishment of the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC), the commission has conducted four elections in 2004, 2007, 2012 and 2017, 2019 and 2022. Some of these elections were highly criticized to the level that they resulted to violent conflicts with their devastating effects on the communities affected, while others were adjudged to

meet the best practices concerning the conduct of elections. This paper therefore seeks to examine the conduct of the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 local government council's election by the commission to ascertain the conditions in which the commission operated, the strategies adopted by the commission and the challenges faced in delivering on its mandate and the credibility and fairness to the election. The paper will also suggest strategies that will strengthen the commission towards more robust conduct of free, fair and credible elections.

### Methodology and Theoretical Framing

The data for this paper is obtained from primary sources of interviews of key participants in the election and secondary sources of textbooks, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, establishment Laws of BSIEC, report of the election by BSIEC and observer groups, newsletters of BSIEC, books and other materials relevant to the issues under discussion. This data is analyzed and discussed using the arguments of system analysis. The arguments of systems theory originated from cybernetics and were politicized by David Easton. While Easton utilized his systemic argument in explaining municipal political events, other scholars such as Morton Kaplan used system arguments in analyzing international events. Other scholars such as Von Bertalanffy and J. G. Miller also used system theory to analyses various aspect of societal behavior. In total, the core arguments of systems theory sees society with the lens of a whole which functions as a whole with the various parts that make up the whole existing in an environment that its events shapes the decision of the system towards particular goals. The diagram below show a graphical representation of the arguments of system theorist.



**Source:** Authors Design (from typical description of system theory), 2019

From this diagram, we can argue in line with Easton (1965) that, a political system has a precise boundary that is prone to changes that determine the decision making process of the system based on the various demands and support that the authority receives. The

outcome of the decisions by the authority if in positive light attract a support behaviour from the environment, while a negative outcome attracts more demands that if not managed carefully may lead to a critical stage that may collapse the system. According to Tsuwa (2010), in pluralist societies, the demands or the support the authority receives stimulate competition among the various groups who have their interest to protect especially in having access to the resources within the boundaries they operate. The ability of the authority to effectively convert the inputs into concrete and acceptable outcome ensures the stability of the system and attest to its functionality, while the failure to do so makes the system dysfunctional and this usually leads to the breakdown of the system.

It is within these thoughts that the applicability of systems analysis in this paper becomes apt. This is because it shows that, all democratic systems are sustained by free, fair and credible elections that are adjudged peaceful. The demand of all citizens is to be allowed to exercise their franchise so as to determine who governs them and the way they are governed. When the authority, this is the electoral body, allows them to do so, they tend to support the whole of governmental apparatus towards democratic consolidation. When this fails and results to sham electoral process, the parties involved withdraw their support to the system and put more pressure on it. A condition that in many cases leads to electoral violence and even disruption of the democratic process.

It is pertinent to argue that, the outcome of the action of the authority is usually affected by the prevailing forces in the environment and the Nature of feedback the authority receives. It is also pertinent to note that, the various groups in the system compete for the various offices that the elections are to give them access to. Within this competition, they put pressure on the authority and supported by their environmental factors and supporters, they await the positive outcome of the decision. It is therefore the responsibility of the electoral authority to aggregate all the demands and function effectively to organize, supervise and conduct free, fair and credible elections that will attract support to the system and consolidate democratic principles.

### **Overview of Elections and Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

For us to appreciate the need for the authority to be professional and effective in conducting elections in such a manner that it will receive support of the electorates, it is pertinent to give a historical account of what happens when the electoral authority is considered to be unprofessional creating room for people to withdraw their support. The consequence is usually electoral violence. According to Tsuwa and Aliogba (2021), electoral violence has been a long-standing feature of the Nigerian political scene. Since the First Republic, violence have often erupted between groups and opposing political parties, arising from political domination that found expression in what may be considered structural electoral violence. This is the sort of situation in parts of Nigeria where certain ethnic groups dominated regions of the Nigerian Federation and employed all means of governance, including local authority to overwhelm other groups at elections. The result, of course, is the violence and mayhem that results arising from claims of electoral manipulation. A few examples of this violence include the violence that erupted in Western Region of Nigeria in November 1965, following massively

rigged Legislative elections where NNDP, led by Samuel Ladoke Akintola, was declared winner. The protracted violence in the Region, which featured, among others inhumane practices, the dousing of opponents and their property with petrol and setting them ablaze, known as "operation wettie" eventually led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Region. The violence lasted for over six months and at least two thousand persons died. In some respects the Western regional violence provided the environment for the first coup d'état in Nigeria in 1966. In Northern Nigeria, the structural domination of the region by the Hausa-Fulani and the ruling NPC had also created similar conditions for violence in the minority areas of the Middle Belt, particularly among the Tiv where the violence was characterized by burning of property and beheading of opponents, known as "atem tough" (Tsuwa 2014).

The periods between 1966 to 1979 and 1983 to 1999 were those of military interregnum in Nigerian political history. The elections conducted in 1979, which transferred power from the Military to civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari was relatively peaceful, despite the contestations of the contestants. This was because the elections were conducted under the watchful eyes of the military and FEDECO was adjudged to be fair and transparent to a greater extent. The 1983 elections which were conducted under the civilian administration of Alhaji Shehu Shagari, once again brought back all the dreaded potential for violence as members of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) pounced on those of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) (Adetula 2007). Once again the situation provided the military with the opportunity to strike in a military takeover that placed General Muhammadu Buhari as the Head of State. He placed such a tight rein over political activity that General Ibrahim Babangida who ousted him believed that he could gain popularity and ensure the longevity of his rule by giving vent to some political activity. This he did by allowing a lengthy transition programme, which incorporated stages of elections into various levels of government. The transition was initially to terminate in 1990, with the elections of a President for the country however, he continued changing the dates until a presidential election was held on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1992. During the transition programme, the various elections held were relatively peaceful until the presidential election, which Mashood K. Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was well on his way to winning was annulled by the Military. This led to protests and violent actions including attempted or actual detonation of bombs in several parts of Nigeria.

In 1998, Gen. Abdusalmi Abubarkar established the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) with the mandate to conduct elections that will once again return Nigeria to liberal democracy. The 1999 general elections that brought in Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo into power alongside state governors and members of the states and National assemblies was adjudged to be free, fair and creditable to a greater extent. It is worthy to note that, nationally, the worst of the election violence under the current Republic was the post-election violence of 2011. The elections had two major contestants at the presidential level. Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari of the defunct Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). After the declaration of the results, supporters of General Buhari took up arms and rioted in several Northern states, including Bauchi, Yobe, Zamfara,

Adamawa, Gombe, Borno, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina and Niger. According to Human Rights Watch (2013), about eight hundred (800) persons lost their lives in the violence and about sixty-five thousand persons were displaced, during the twelve days (12) of mayhem that followed that announcement of the results of the elections.

Despite the above national scenario, Ajene (2017) argues that, closer home, in Benue State, our recent memory of the worst election violence took place following the March 2004 local government elections in Kwande local government area. The violence pitched active youth militia of the main political parties that contested the election, which were the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP). At the end of the conflict, when the lives and assets, lost were tallied, official figures, which were by all account's underestimation, reported twelve (12) deaths. Assets valued at about two hundred and ninety-three million, five hundred and one thousand, two hundred and eighty eight naira only (N293, 501,288.00) were destroyed. These losses pale into insignificance, when compared to the losses incurred as a result of disruption to businesses and the extraction of tolls by the militias who mounted roadblocks all over the local government.

Lyam (2006) points out that, some of the many factors that provided the background to the conflict or triggered the post-election violence in Kwande local government in 2004 were identified by the joint Committee of State, Local Government Administration and National Security Agencies to include:

- a. The historical tendency of Kwande Local Government Area to be in opposition to the ruling party in Benue State.
- b. The essentially political motivation of the Crisis
- c. The immediate cause of the crisis was the result of the Local Government Election held in march 27, 2004
- d. Election had taken place in Kwande but BSIEC failed to announce the actual result.
- e. The Committee averred that the announcement of the result at BSIEC office in Kwande as was done in the other Local Government Areas of the state would have averted the crisis
- f. The crisis was fueled by sentiments shared by leaders of the ANPP (Paul Unongo) on one side and (Iyorchia Ayu) the leader of the PDP on the other.

It should be noted also, that other stakeholders, including the security agencies and the judiciary played significant roles in the crisis. According the police Divisional Police Officer (DPO) of Kwande local government at that time, the security agencies never anticipated the violence, its scale and its possible outcomes. He argued that, although the tense environment that was created from the outcome of the 2003 gubernatorial and legislative election had provided enough pointers to the security agencies to take proactive measures, nothing was done in such regards. The failure to do this proved quite costly at the end. People were killed, properties destroyed and the image of BSIEC was battered. From this period, local government elections conducted in 2007 and 2012 witnessed great voter apathy right from the non-participation of political parties to low turnout of voters.

From the above it is very clear that the task before the 4<sup>th</sup> BSIEC commission was not only to conduct elections but to ensure that it gained the confidence of all the stakeholders who were just coming out of a heated 2015 general elections. The commission was also required to guarantee the Benue people of a new “sheriff in town” who was determined to conduct a free, fair and credible elections that will be accepted by all parties concern.

### **BSIEC and the Conduct of the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 Local Government Council Elections in Benue State**

The Benue state government operating as a system succumbed to the pressure of the citizens to conduct local council’s elections that were long overdue in 2017. To this effect, the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC) was mobilized by the state government to carry out its responsibility as provided by law. According to the official report of the commission (2017), the conduct of the election by the commission was governed by the following laws;

1. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 as amended.
2. The Electoral Act 2010 as amended.
3. Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC) Establishment Law 2012 as amended.
4. The Benue State Local Government Law 2002 as amended.
5. Guidelines and manual issued by the Commission to guild the conduct of the 2017 council’s election.

With these legal backing, the commission began the process of responding to the demands of the citizens to conduct free, fair and credible local government council elections in the state. In order for us to appreciate the functionality of the electoral authority in the 2017 Council elections in Benue State, it is important for us to first understand the following prevailing environmental conditions in the state during the build up to the election.

#### **a. The impact of the Economic Recession**

The Nigerian economy had experienced recession in recent years, this recession reached its peak. Between 2014 and 2017 which was the build up to the 2017 local government election. The recession was high to the level that most states including Benue could not fulfil their governmental obligations including the payment of workers’ salaries and pensions. According to The Nation Newspaper (Sunday August 5, 2018), workers in Benue state civil service including local government staff and teachers had outstanding salaries arrears ranging from seven to eleven months between 2014 to 2017. This situation coupled with the high level of unemployed youths in the state created a large army of disgruntled persons in the state. For majority of Benue indigenes, their inability to cater for their families rendered all rational explanations of democracy and the need for electoral process meaningless. The outcome of this and its implication on the council elections was in two folds. One, some showed great apathy to the electoral process and considered it as a venture for the elites who were trying to extend their tentacles to more

resources of the society. Two, others showed militant attitude towards the process by responding negatively to the workings of the electoral authority insisting that the resources released to the commission would have been deployed to the payment of salaries which the state government was owing its staff.

**b. The Security Environment in the State**

In the build up to the June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 local government council's election, the security situation in the state became a major threat to the conduct of the Local government elections. The continuing threat of attacks by Fulani militia herdsmen in several parts of the state, the activities of cultist and criminal arm gangs who emerged as a result of the failure of the Benue State government amnesty programme made the state highly volatile and needed serious consultation to create a conducive environment for the conduct of the election.

**c. The Political Culture of Vengeance and Toxic Campaign Language**

Benue state has experienced a unique form of political and campaign culture. This is based on the nature of campaign language, political songs, issues discussed and aggression to political opponents. The campaign language in the State are more tailored to hate speeches, a situation where civilized discussion of policy issues and alternative programmes give way to inflammatory language of insults and name-calling. According to Tsuwa (2014) politics in Tivland does not operate on ideology and decorum, it operates on belly politics situated within the matrix of destruction of perceived opponents. People are specially employed to castigate and blackmail others for the sole reason of de-marketing them. This is exacerbated by the technological revolution that made social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp available for easy circulation of not only fake news but violence instigating messages.

In the build up to the June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 local government election, this situation was heated up because the two leading political parties in the state had not shed off the hostilities of the 2015 electioneering. The PDP lost the governorship seat to the opposition APC in 2015, the outgoing governor, Rt. Hon. Gabriel Suswam of the PDP also lost his senatorial bid to Sen. BAI Gemade of the APC. According to the NewsFact Newspaper of 6<sup>th</sup> March, 2016, the APC government under Samuel Ortom began a retaliatory mission against members of the PDP whom he believed maltreated and humiliated him during the party primaries while in PDP and other APC members during their reign. Many of those interviewed but asked that their identity be concealed argued that, Samuel Ortom believed that he was denied the gubernatorial ticket of the PDP by Gabriel Suswam and Ortom had remained very angry and sought to revenge.

It was based on this that on assumption of office, the Samuel Ortom government immediately set up a commission of inquiry popularly known as the "Kpojime Panel" to investigate the activities of Rt. Hon. Gabriel Suswam's administration between 2007 to 2015. The panel found Rt. Hon. Gabriel Suswam and 52 of his political associates guilty of embezzling over 107 billion naira belonging to the Benue state government. Suswam and many of his associates were detained severally and were also banned by the Kpojime Panel from holding public office for ten years. This did not go down well

with all members of the PDP and they were determined to repay the APC given any slit opportunity. The APC on the other hand captured power in the state for the first time and most of her members were determined to see those of the PDP punished for “wrongs” they did to them during the 16 year reign of the party. Consequently, the political culture of revenge and counter revenge ensued between the two major political parties. When preparation for the local council elections commenced, the atmosphere became charged with exchanged of foul language, blackmail and threat of thuggery.

**d. The Disorganized State of Political Parties**

There is no convincing evidence that the major political parties in Nigeria and those that were expected to contest the 2017 local government elections in Benue state were sufficiently organized to undertake disciplined nominations of candidates as well as mobilization, enlightenment and control of their members to participate in the election. For instance, the ruling APC was factionalized on the bases of old and new APC. The old APC were those who transformed from ACN to the APC and consider the leader of the party Sen. George Akume as “almighty”. Majority of this group were not comfortable with the New APC who decamped from PDP with Governor Samuel Ortom into the APC. There was therefore a struggle for supremacy in the control of the political structures and appointments. This struggle manifested in the build up to the elections as each of the two groups wanted to have firm control of the local government authorities that would be elected. Consequently, the primaries were therefore tailored along these lines and became rancorous in many local governments resulting to over 51 pre-election court cases. Another consequence of this was the pressure it mounted on the electoral authority as each group wanted to foist its list of nominated candidates on the commission.

Aside the contradictions in the APC, the major opposition party, the PDP was also factionalized between the Ahmed Markafi and the Amodu Sheriff Factions at the national level. In Benue state, the Markafi group that was solid on ground and sponsored by former governor, Rt. Hon. Gabriel Suswam was led by Sir. John Ngbede, while the Sheriff faction which according to the state publicity secretary of PDP, Mr. Bemgba Iortyom was sponsored by the APC government in the state was led by Hon. Dan Ale. According to Tsuwa (2018), the contestation between the two factions on which of them has the legal backing to participate in the election was challenged in court by the Sir John Ngbede led group. Two weeks to the elections, the court ruled in favour of the Hon. Dan Ale group. Two days after the ruling, Hon. Dan Ale wrote a letter to the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC) informing the commission that his party, the PDP will field candidates in only six local governments out of the twenty three local governments in the state. This meant that, the PDP as a party would not be fielding candidates in seventeen local governments for the election. This automatically gave the APC confident in winning the elections as the other opposition parties were very weak.

Also interesting to note is the romance of the Hon. Dan Ale faction of the PDP and the other smaller political parties such as the AD, SDP, ACPN, Labour Party, AA and UCPN with the state government and the ruling APC. While the commission was counting on these parties to provide robust opposition to the ruling APC, the commission

discovered to its bewilderment that these smaller parties were sponsored by the governor through the office of the secretary to the state government and the adviser to the governor on political affairs. According to Lady Kate Ijogi, who was in charge of public affairs at the commission headquarters, the commission was shocked when on arriving government house to brief the governor on the challenges particularly security faced by the commission, they met the chairmen of the opposition parties with the governor. Their sole aim was to pledge their support to all the candidates of the APC in the election. According one of the party chairman who claim anonymity, they were in government house to also promise the governor that they shall starve their own candidates of funds to prosecute the elections so as to pave way for easy victory for the APC. According to Bar. James Ochojila BSIEC commissioner of operations, this romance accounted for the unnecessary pressure and misleading information these political parties were issuing to their candidates and the public. A situation which made the commission to spend extensively on continuous voter education and mobilization to ensure winning the confidence of other innocent stakeholders.

### **BSIEC and Preparation for the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2019 Local Government Council Elections**

Within the above environmental circumstances, the electoral authority was expected to deliver on its mandate of conducting a free, fair and credible election. The Benue State Independent Electoral Commission (BSIEC) therefore became the center of attraction before and after the nominations were completed. The capacity of BSIEC to be neutral and meet all its target goals through effective, efficient and accountable management of the system became the major source of concern. Realizing this, BSIEC coordinated its activities in the following ways so as to overcome the challenges and deliver on its mandate;

#### **a. BISEC Internal Organization and Innovations**

For effective operation, the commission assigned administrative and supervisory roles to members of the commission. Members of the commission here means the Chairman, secretary and commissioners appointed by the provision of section 197 (1) (b) of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Table 1 shows the members of the commission and the various responsibilities assigned to them by the chairman.

S/No	Name	Designated LGA Supervision	Designated Office Responsibility
1	John Tor Tsuwa PhD	Konshisha, Ushongo, Kwande, Vandeikya	Chief Executive/ Chief Electoral Officer
2	Rt. Hon. James Ochojila Esq	Apa, Agatu, Ohimini, Otukpo	Operations/Field Services
3	Hon. Chief. Alexander A. Nyoonyegh	Logo, Katsina-Ala, Ukum	Research, Statistics, Planning and Documentation
4	Hon. Igba Samuel Asemave	Gboko, Buruku, Tarka	Finance
5	Hon. Austine Ike	Obi, Oju, Gwer East	Works, Transport and Maintenance
6	Hon. Lady Kate Ijogi	Ogbadibo, Okpokwu, Ado	Information and Public Relations
7	Hon. John M. Shishi Esq	Makurdi, Guma, Gwer West	Secretary to the Commission, Legal and Security Services

*Source:* BSIEC Report on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 Local Government Council Election.

According to Ochojila interviewed on the 13<sup>th</sup> July, 2019, with this internal organization, and the reorganization of departments at the commission's headquarters, deployment of new heads of departments and local government electoral officers, the commission began consultation with critical stakeholders in the electoral process. The purpose of the consultation was to conscientise the electorates on the mandate and determination of the commission to achieve same, build confidence in the electoral process, enlighten the electorates and encourage politicians and political parties to play the game according to the rules. After the consultation which covered traditional institutions, security agencies, political parties, non-governmental organization and media houses, the commission members embarked on a sensitization tour of their assigned local government areas. According to BSIEC report 2017, after the tour of local governments' areas, the commission had several stakeholders meetings at the various senatorial headquarters of Katsina – Ala, Gboko and Otukpo. At the end of the consultations, a stakeholders meeting was held in Makurdi and the election time table was release and ban for campaigns lifted. This gave the parties and their candidates the opportunity to obtain forms and prepare towards the Election Day of 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017.

**b. Training and Deployment of Election Officials and Materials**

Critical to the conduct of elections is training and effective deployment of election personnel and materials. According Dodo Terlumun interviewed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2019, the commission for the first time developed a dedicated website and introduced the process of E-recruitment of adhoc staff. This to him created opportunity for only qualified persons to be recruit without favoritism. He argued that, after the recruitment, the commission embarked on the training of all categories of staff with the support of

International Foundation for Electoral System (IFES). Table 2 shows the category and number of staff trained by the commission and deployed during the election.

S/No	Category of Staff	Number
1	Electoral officers	23
2	Local Government Returning Officers	23
3	Word Returning Officers	276
4	Supervisory Presiding Officers	552
5	Presiding Officers	3691
6	Poll Clerk	3691
7	Poll Orderly	3691

**Source:** BSIEC Report on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 Local Government Council Election.

The above table shows that, to meet the demand of the system for free, fair and credible elections, BSIEC trained and made adequate deployment of staff to the field on Election Day. While all the Local government returning officers were professors and senior lecturers from tertiary institutions, ward returning officers were senior civil servants and staff of federal agencies. In all, a total number of 11,947 staff were deployed to the field for Election Day activities. This is aside the security agencies derived from the military, police, Nigerian Civil Defence Corp, the Federal Road Safety Commission and the Benue State Vigilante Group.

It is worthy to state that, the staff deployed to the field were adequately equipped with the needed materials for the election. In synergy with BENGONET (an umbrella body of all NGOs in Benue state) and election observer groups, the commission established two situation rooms, one at Doo Palace Hotel, Makurdi and one at the commissioners' headquarters to respond to bit by bit field challenges. In the area of election materials, the commission procured both sensitive and non-sensitive materials for the election. The non-sensitive materials ranged from nomination forms to posters, envelops, life jackets, stamp pads, election pads etc. While the sensitive materials included ballot papers, results sheets, indelible ink, ballot box seals among others. According BSIEC report (2017), the non-sensitive materials were dispatched to the various local governments two weeks before the election and the sensitive materials were dispatched a day to the election and accompanied by security agencies. Movement of sensitive materials from the commission's headquarters commenced by 9am of Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2017, and by 4pm, all materials had arrived at the various local government offices of the commission for onward distribution to the various council wards. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017, elections for councilors into the 276 legislative houses and for chairmanship into the 23 local government councils were conducted.

According James Aper an accredited BENGONET member who observed the election in Zone B senatorial district of the state, the organizational ability of BSIEC, prompt and adequate release of materials facilitated the smooth conduct of the election and its peaceful nature. He argued however that, there were some delays in moving materials to some remote areas particularly in the interiors of Guma and Gwer West

local government areas. This delayed the commencement of elections in some of the remote areas in the zone.

It is worthy to note that BSIEC had decentralized the announcement of the results. At the end of the election, councillorship results were announced at the ward level while the chairmanship results were announced at the local government levels all by the recruited ad hoc staff. The Local government returning officers who announced the result according to BSIEC guidelines proceeded to the commission's headquarters to submit their final results sheets that were signed by the agents of all the parties involved in the election. According to the official reports of CSO's and Coalition of observer groups, BSIEC results were accepted by the public because of the decentralization process which showed a high level of transparency as the commissions headquarters did not dictate the outcome of the elections.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

This paper had examined the mandate of the Benue State Independent Electoral Commission to conduct local government council election with particular focus on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2017 local government elections in Benue state. This paper concludes that, elections are critical to democratic practice and governance. It also concludes that, credible local government elections central to bringing political legitimacy, governance and development closer to the people. It also conclude that, the Nigerian constitution 1999 as amended gave the constitutional powers of conducting local government elections to the States Independent Electoral Commissions. The paper also concludes that, despite the challenges confronted by BSIEC during the conduct of the June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017 local government election, BSIEC commitment to the principles of free, fair and credible election was achieved due to the commissions organizational prowess, introduction of technology, inclusivity of other stakeholders, establishment of situation rooms for prompt response to challenges, provision and utilization of requisite human and material resources.

Despite the success recorded by BSIEC as attested to by BEGONET and other observer groups, the paper discovered some challenges faced by BSIEC and argued that to lessen the burden of BSIEC in subsequent elections, the commission should concretize and strengthen synergy with other stakeholders such as the National Union of Road Transport Workers, Motor Cycle Riders Association and security agencies among others so as to avoid the delays noticed in the movement of materials into the rural areas. The paper also recommends that, political parties should democratize their party primaries so as to reduce the pressure they mount on the electoral authority especially their struggle to replaced candidates not favoured by political godfathers after party primaries. The paper also recommend for penalties for those who violet election guidelines particularly on the conduct of supporters of candidates who use foul language, fake information and violent means during the electioneering process. Finally, political party's leadership should be recruited from people of high moral standing to ensure that they do not turn the parties into business ventures.

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