Nigeria's election was nearly derailed by technology, but biometric devices weren't the problem, says researcher

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Technology nearly derailed the conclusion of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. The Independent National Electoral Commission

could not fulfill its promise to transmit election results from the polling units on its result viewing portal (IReV). This led to calls by some political parties for cancelation and fresh elections. The Conversation Africa asked political scientist Abiodun Fatai how Nigeria can improve its election digitization.

Nigeria has been digitizing the voting process for 12 years. How has this worked?

Nigeria started using digital technology in the electoral process in 2011 when the Independent National Electoral Commission introduced the automated fingerprint identification system to stop voters registering more than once.

The permanent voter's card and smart card reader were introduced in the 2015 general elections. At the polling station, a voter's identity is verified by matching his or her biometrics to the voter's card. The voter is then allowed to vote and the votes are counted manually.

In 2022, it introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, which is an electronic device designed to read permanent voter cards and authenticate voters—using the voters' fingerprints—to prove that they are eligible to vote at a particular polling unit. This was used in the Ekiti and Osun states' governorship elections in June 2022 and July 2022. The technology worked to its design in both states and was the basis for an election tribunal sacking the Osun State winner in January 2023.

The commission also introduced the result viewing portal, IReV, to guarantee transparent accreditation and uploading of polling unit results. It said this would enable citizens to view results in real-time on election day. But the results could not be uploaded onto the portal because of technical glitches. This caused some party agents to walk out of the

collation center in Abuja.

Did digital technologies help reduce fraud and promote the credibility of the elections?

It did to a large extent. It has been a long journey since 2011 and we are making improvements. The biometric technology actually worked. It has eliminated multiple voter registrations. If your biometrics are not captured, you can no longer vote. These are improvements. Look at the figures from the states—we did not see the huge figures of voters that were out of proportion to the number of registered voters, as happened in previous elections. The 2007 presidential election was so bad that even the winner, Umaru Musa Yar'Ádua, acknowledged this and set up a panel to reform elections. But the report of the committee, chaired by a former chief justice, Mohammed Uwais, did not see the light of day after Yar'Adua died.

The logistics could still be improved but some of the glitches we saw in the 2023 elections cannot be attributed to technology. They were operational issues. Some of the biometric machines malfunctioned or electoral officials didn't know how to use them.

More importantly, the goal of technology was to enhance the quality and integrity of the elections and reduce electoral fraud. This was achieved.

What are the limitations to digitization?

Technology is operated by humans and so whatever is put in place can always be defeated by unscrupulous people. Technology does not operate in a vacuum. It is apparent that Nigeria doesn't have enough capacity to deploy technology fully.

Nigeria has weak broadband internet, and connectivity is patchy. Some parts of Nigeria are still running on 3G networks when some countries are already on 5G. Some parts of Nigeria are not even connected to the internet.

So, conducting elections in Nigeria by deploying technology is a complex exercise. This was a reason for the commission not being able to transmit results in real time.

Digital elections are not cheap either as technology infrastructure costs a lot. Then there was the issue of inadequate preparation, evident in the late arrival of materials in some voting stations and inadequate training of ad hoc staff in operating the biometric machines. All these must have limiting effects on the elections.

What should Nigeria do to improve digitization of its elections?

The electoral commission must follow the electoral law strictly, especially on the transmission of results in real time. This will enhance the credibility of our elections. The results must also be machine readable, with a clear image, and must be generated from the polling units.

The commission staff must be well trained in operating the machines for elections. Some of them don't have the capacity and skills needed to function in a digital environment. This must change.

Nigeria must also upgrade its broadband networks to improve connectivity. Without these two, the country can't enjoy the benefits of digital elections. There must be forensic screening of staff hired for election duties so that they are not easily compromised. Their integrity

and character must be ascertained.

The country also needs more technical experts to work with the electoral commission than has been the case thus far. It is apparent that the commission lacks enough competent hands to deal with emerging technical issues during the election.

Lastly, Nigerian politicians must allow full digitization of elections. They must embrace and support it.

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