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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BVAS AND REDUCTION IN INCIDENTS OF ELECTION MATERIALS' SNATCHING IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

CHUKWUNONSO JOSEPH AKOGWU

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

ABSTRACT

Since the return to democratic governance in Nigeria in 1999, electoral irregularities have significantly hampered successful conduct of credible elections. These electoral anomalies have over the years manifested in the forms of underage voting, snatching of election materials, harassment of electoral officials and voters, ballot box stuffing, declaration of results in situations and locations where elections never held, and trading of voter identification cards for cash during elections. The bid to tackle these challenges prompted a number of electoral reforms by INEC, eventually leading to the adoption of various election technologies since 2011 and the implementation of bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS) from 2021. This study investigated the role of BVAS in tackling incidents of snatching of election materials in the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. The study is qualitative research and it adopted the documentary method of data collection. Findings reveal that the BVAS utilized in the conduct of the election, to a great extent, reduced incidents of snatching of election materials. In order to improve on and consolidate these gains, it's pertinent that Nigeria's electoral umpire should amongst others ensure that advanced cybersecurity protocols are established to protect against hacking and data breaches.

Keywords: BVAS, election, election technology, INEC, voting

Corresponding Author
Chukwunonso J. AKOGWU,
Email: cj.akogwu@unizik.edu.ng , Tel: +2348061118325

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The necessity for regular elections as the basis for selecting occupiers of political offices is anchored on the fact that it is virtually the only means a country can peacefully and acceptably transit from one government or political administration to another. The quality of electoral process is a core indicator of a truly democratic state. Indeed, elections are said to be meaningfully democratic if they are free, fair, participatory, credible, competitive and legitimate. In line with this, Diamond affirmed that:

> elections are adjudged to be credible when they have met these criteria: when they are administered by a neutral authority; when the electoral administration is sufficiently competent and resourceful to take specific precautions against fraud; when the police, military and courts treat competing candidates and parties impartially; when contenders all have access to the public media; when electoral districts and rules do not grossly handicap the opposition;... when the secret of the ballot is protected; when virtually all adults can vote;- when procedures for organizing and counting the votes are widely known; and when there are transparent and impartial procedures for resolving election complaints and disputes (Diamond, 2008, p. 101).

However, over the years, African democratic countries have continued to encounter numerous challenges in the conduct of free, fair, credible, acceptable and transparent elections. Most elections in the continent are marred with gross irregularities, electoral violence and inconclusive ballots among others (Ayoade, 1998).

In Nigeria (Africa's largest democracy) in particular, the country has since independence continued to face plethora of challenges during successive elections, dominant among these dynamic challenges is electoral violence. In order to fundamentally and holistically tackle the numerous challenges bedeviling manual conduct of elections in Nigeria, the country has been copying advanced democracies all over the world who are increasingly deploying modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) voting tools, infrastructures and systems in

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the planning and execution of elections. In with this, Ahmada, Abdullah & Arshad (2015) pointed that "Countries across the globe are increasingly exploring election technologies as a viable alternative to traditional ballot paper method of voting that is criticized of being vulnerable to human related errors and manipulations" (p. 2).

The deployment of technology in different countries of the world to the electioneering process has recorded an enormous impact. In the world today, most electoral management bodies around the world use new technologies with the aim of improving the electoral process. Some of the technologies employed by these bodies range from basic office automation tools such as word processing and spreadsheets to more sophisticated data processing tools, such as database management systems, optical scanning and geographic information systems. Some African countries that have deployed the use of this technique for conduct of election include Uganda, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Swaziland (Eswatini), Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Most strikingly, Somaliland in 2017 deployed the use of iris recognition-based biometric voting systems. This is the scanning of the eye to verify the identity of registered voters before they are cleared to vote. The machines were said to have been under trial since 2015 ahead of the election held on November 13, 2017 (Ogunbamowo, 2021).

The undisputable need for Nigerians to record a free, fair, credible and violent-free election to sustain their democracy led to introduction of series of election technologies such as biometric registration in the 2011 election, the Smart Card Readers (SCRs) in the 2015 and 2019 elections, and Bi-modal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) in elections in some parts of the country in 2021 and 2022, and in the 2023 general elections.

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While scholars like Amaechi & Ezirim (2021), Olumide (2021), Akinpelu & Adenekan (2021), Oguejiofor (2018), and Onuoha & Akogwu (2019) are of the view that utilization of election technologies is Nigeria's best chance of securing credible elections, fraud-free election system and as well as achieving peaceful or violent-free elections, there are however no study about how BVAS reduced incidents of electoral violence in the 2023 Presidential election.

Against this backdrop, this paper investigated the role of BVAS in reducing incidents of snatching of election materials during the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. The paper is divided into eight sections. Following this introduction, section two conceptualized and contextualized BVAS in Nigeria, section three situated snatching of election materials in Nigeria before the introduction of BVAS, and section four analyzed the experiments with election technologies in Nigeria, its gains and prospects. Section five gave the impacts of BVAS in reducing incidents of snatching of election materials in the 2023 Presidential election**,** and the last section concluded the study and proffered some recommendations

2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS.

2.1. Conceptualizing and Contextualizing BVAS in Nigeria

In recent time, a concept such as BVAS has been increasingly used by the Nigerian government, INEC, civil society organizations, national and foreign election observers, the academia, the media and the Nigerian citizens. As a result, a clarification of its meaning is fundamental since most users of the concept simply take the readers' understanding of it for granted, even when this concept can mean different things to diverse users.

The BVAS can be described as a system that combines fingerprint and face biometrics for identity verification of voters. As explained by a top INEC official, BVAS integrates the three-stage voting process. It is an integrated device that is multifunctional in nature, which serves as Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) during voter registration, voter accreditation on Election Day and also functions as INEC Results Viewing Device (IReV Device) to be used for election

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results upload on Election Day (Ogunbamowo, 2023, para. 1). Integrated into the INEC Voter Enrollment Device, the BVAS combines fingerprint and facial authentication to ensure that the person holding the PVC is the one that will vote.

Having been described as a "technological convergence", the BVAS, which performs the functions of both the Smart Card Reader and Z-Pad ensures fingerprint authentication during the accreditation of voters and eliminate any need for the filing of incident forms (Habib, 2023). While explaining how the idea of BVAS came about, Festus Okoye, the National Commissioner for information of INEC said that "what INEC did is called a technological convergence. An enrollment device is what is being used for the continuous voters' registration. In the Anambra election, this device became the bimodal voters accreditation system which was used to verify the biometrics of the voters. BVAS is a three-in-one device. The smart card reader has been phased out. INEC is embarking on massive voter education via the radio and the television. BVAS is as well used for upload of results" (Okocha, 2021, para. 3).

The use of this type of technology for conduct of elections is not limited to Nigeria. Several countries of the world and Africa have adopted the biometric systems such as BVAS to ensure a fair and efficient election. According to Ogunbamowo (2023), these systems, according to biometric update, include identification solutions for voter registration, voting, tallying and identification. Common modalities include fingerprint recognition, palm vein recognition, iris recognition and facial recognition. Mobile voting systems are also included. It is important to note that biometrics in election processes allow the capture and recognition of unique physical characteristics, whether fingerprints (also hand geometry or palmprints), iris, face, voice, signature, or some patterns of behaviour. A good example of success recorded was from the general elections held in Ghana on December 7, 2020. In a release by Neurotechnology, a company that specialises in high-precision biometric identification and object recognition technologies, revealed that its MegaMatcher Automatic Biometric Identification System (ABIS),

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were used for Ghana's Biometric Voter Management System, providing voter registration, deduplication, adjudication, final voter list generation and verification. According to the release, the MegaMatcher ABIS provided deduplication for a total of 17,027,641 registrants who were eligible to vote in the general election. By matching fingerprints and/or facial biometrics for each registrant name, the system successfully identified 15, 860 multiple registrations conducted by 7,890 unique individuals who attempted to register more than once using different names (Ogunbamowo, 2023).

However, while the voter accreditation system has been praised for eliminating electoral malpractice both in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, there have been some shortcomings in its usage. While it prevents multiple registration, it may not prevent many other fraudulent strategies (NAN, 2022). Talking of other parts of Africa for instance, during the Ugandan elections, the biometric voter identification was abandoned as a result of network failure. According to reports from Uganda, the network problems can be attributed to President Yoweri Museveni, who imposed an internet blackout that cut off access to news, social media, and messaging services ahead of the election (Ogunbamowo, 2021). Also, given the complexity of the biometric voting processes, many electoral agencies require external partners, or private companies, that can assist in effecting the new process seamlessly. However, this often raises new concerns for citizens including protection of voters' data when trusted with a private vendor. Many rightfully want to know what will happen with the personal information and biometric data they provide (Guardian, 2023, para. 8).

In Nigeria however, BVAS was introduced amongst others to eliminate electoral violence which for more than four decades have compounded free and fair elections in Nigeria. One of the major indicators of electoral violence in Nigeria is snatching of election materials (ballot box and other materials) by thugs and politicians.

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3.0. Situating Snatching of Election Materials in Nigeria before the Introduction of BVAS

Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, every election cycle, has been fraught with violence which prominent among them is the high incidents of snatching of election materials by thugs and politicians. Based on this, Onyeji (2019, para. 1) noted that "successive elections since the end of military government in Nigeria has been characterized by killings and destruction of property associated with ballot snatching." Also, Uchenna (2020, para. 1) stated that "The Nigeria electoral process is characterized with violent behaviors such as snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, shooting, maiming and falsification of results." Ezeani (2005) again argued that the 1999 and 2003 elections in Nigeria were marred by serious allegation of massive electoral malpractices, which prominent among them is snatching of election materials.

Overall, between 1999 and early 2021 (when BVAS was introduced), snatching of election materials was very pronounced. Some election materials that were commonly snatched during elections were ballot boxes, voting materials, smartcard readers (in 2015 and 2019), and result sheets, amongst other sensitive materials. When snatched, these materials were usually destroyed or manipulated in favour of certain politicians contesting of various political offices in the country. No state of the country was spared from this electoral fraud within the period mentioned. Regarding perpetrators of snatching of election materials, politicians hired thugs to snatch these materials, and according to Akorah (2020), "most times, politicians themselves personally engage in snatching of election materials, aided by their thugs and even some security operatives especially in their ward and polling unit." Table 1 shows some major incidents of snatching of election materials in presidential elections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2019. Snatching of electoral materials (Table 1) is an instance of electoral malpractice which clearly demonstrates that election transparency and credibility was greatly jeopardized from 1999 to 2019. It's worthy of note that the incident began to decline from 2011 onwards because of the adoption of some election technologies, but still in parts of the country where it occurred, it was very pronounced and widespread.

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Table 1: *Incidents of Snatching of Election Materials in Presidential Elections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2019.*

S/N	Year	Location	Election Materials Snatched	Remark
1.	1999	Katsina, Kebbi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Kwara, Lagos, Niger, Oyo, Enugu, Anambra, Plateau, Ondo, Taraba, Sokoto, Abia, FCT, and Delta	Ballot boxes and result sheets	Some INEC officials and voters were injured
2.	2003	36 States of the Federation, and FCT	Ballot boxes and result sheets	At least one hundred people were killed and many more injured as a result of snatching of election materials and other violence that resulted from that election
3.	2007	36 States of the Federation and FCT	Ballot boxes and result sheets	Hundreds lost their lives as thugs snatched election materials in states across the federation
4.	2011	Adamawa, Enugu, Kebbi, Edo, Rivers, Abia, Imo, Lagos, Oyo, Ondo, Ekiti, Plateau, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe, and Zamfara,	Ballot box and result sheets	Over 800 people lost their lives as a result of activities of thugs and politicians who engaged in snatching of election materials
5.	2015	Benue, Kebbi, Rivers, Lagos, Plateau, Bauchi, Ebonyi, Enugu, Jigawa, Ondo, and Oyo,	Smartcard readers, ballot box and result sheets	Many voters and electoral officials were intimidated, injured, or killed by hoodlums and gunmen involved in snatching of election materials.
6.	2019	Lagos, Ondo, Oyo, Akwa Ibom, Ebonyi, Imo, Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa	Smartcard readers, ballot box and result sheets	Many voters and election officials were injured or killed by hoodlums and gunmen were involved in snatching these materials

Source: Compiled by the researcher from National Dailies and Post-Election Reports

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4.0. DISCOURSES

4.1. Experimenting with Election Technologies in Nigeria: Gains and Prospects

Electoral frauds, irregularities and violence are slack to democracies all over the world. This is compounded by the fact that the conduct of free, fair, credible and transparent election is always faced with numerous challenges. In continuous search for credible elections in their respective sovereign states, advanced and developing democracies are shifting from manual conducts of election to electronic conducts of election. As a result, countries are increasingly innovating, exploring and deploying election technologies in their elections. These have greatly helped to minimize electoral fraud and violence in such countries. The increasing reliance on election technologies among advanced and emerging democracies all over the world demonstrates that free, fair, credible and successful election is the backbone of democracy.

In Nigeria however, manual voting since independence has totally failed, causing electoral violence and loss of human lives every election period. For decades, election riggings have greatly undermined the fundamental tenet of democracy in the country, driving the citizens out of the supposed participatory democracy. From historical experiences, there are a huge number of challenges in Nigeria's manual electoral processes. These include poorly prepared or fraudulent voter's registers, inadequacy of electoral materials, (particularly the ballot papers) leading to the disenfranchisement of voters, snatching of ballot boxes from INEC officials, difficulty in transportation of electoral materials (especially ballot papers) after voting has been concluded, electoral malpractices and violence (Salahu, 2015, p.254). Further challenges of Nigeria's manual voting system as noted by Oguejiofor (2018) are "logistical and transportation challenges, disenfranchisement of diaspora voters, inadequate transportation mechanism and security challenges" (p. 197). With a voting population of over 84 million electorates (Ochi et al, 2021). Nigeria invests huge resources in manual voting yet with little or no commendable and

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acceptable election outcome after each election. This no doubt made INEC to start considering looking towards an alternative and more conventional and acceptable system of voting.

As a result of the several inherent security and credibility challenges confronting elections in Nigeria, especially since the return to democratic government in 1999, INEC from 2011 and most remarkably in 2015, tilted towards the use of election technologies for accreditation of voters. Since then, the electoral body has continued to make several attempts to ensure that the nation fully transcends from manual voting to electronic voting in the coming years. The first major innovation towards E-voting was the introduction of biometric registers in 2011 and electronic card reader technology in 2015. This was a practical response to polemics about the quality of existing voter register, the difficulties in registering voters and establishing their identity (Amaechi & Ezirim, 2021, p. 10). The biometric identification technology came with a number of technologically-based reforms which were embarked upon by the leadership of INEC, headed by Prof Attahiru Jega. These include: biometric voter registration, advanced Fingerprints Identification System, customization of sensitive electoral materials such, as ballot papers and result sheets, colour coding of the ballot papers which renders it useless in other constituencies when pilfered or snatched, biometric voter registration, issuance of chip-embedded and machine-readable Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) as well as the introduction of the SCRs (Amaechi & Ezirim, 2021, p. 11).

Because of the persistent technical hitches associated with SCRs which made several eligible voters to be disenfranchised during the 2015 and 2019 general elections, BVAS was introduced by INEC in 2021 to replace SCRs. Although there were some challenges associated with BVAS which included malfunctioning of the device, failure to upload results, and manipulation of the device by election officials, there were however some laudable prospects in BVAS as seen in the 2023 presidential election in the country.

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Overall, scholars are of the consensus that election technologies have brought significant transparency to the nation's electoral process (Nwangwu, 2015; Onuoha & Akogwu, 2019; Amaechi & Ezirim, 2021; Ogunbamowo, 2021, Abiola, 2022; Akor, 2022; Erezi, 2022). For instance, Abiola (2022) noted that "election technologies used in Nigeria's election have sped up the voting process and have reduced the amount of time it takes to count votes. This has necessitated faster and more efficient elections." Collaborating this, Akor (2022) noted that election technologies have helped to reduce errors in the vote-counting process and have increased the accuracy of the election results. They have also made the voting process more accessible to individuals with disabilities, who may have difficulty filing out paper ballots or using traditional voting machines." In addition, Erezi (2022) observed that election technology has increased transparency by providing detailed reports on voting patterns and turnout, making it easier to identify irregularities or potential fraud, and also, it has increased voter confidence, increased voter participation and has made people to have more faith in the electoral process.

No doubt, going forward, the adoption of election technologies in Nigeria's elections will offer a pathway to more transparent, efficient, and credible electoral processes, and will enhance voter participation by streamlining the voting process and building public confidence in the system. In respect to BVAS, proper and effective utilization of the device will eliminate incidents of impersonation and multiple voting, and will ultimately strengthen the integrity of the electoral process. INEC's effective utilization of the device, particularly its ability to transmit election results directly to the central portal in real-time, will foster transparency, and reduce result manipulations and electoral violence.

4.2. The Role of BVAS in Reducing Incidents of Snatching of Election Materials in the 2023 Presidential Election

The introduction of BVAS and the subsequent Electoral Act of 2022, which provided that election results will be transmitted from the polling units direct to INEC Result Viewing (IREV)

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portal, meant that there was no longer need for electoral officers to carry ballot box, results and other sensitive materials around after election. This also meant that carting away with election materials by thugs and gunmen now has little or no implication to the eventual outcome of elections. BVAS has been referred to by many as a game changer. This is in relation to its ability to curtail electoral irregularities and electoral violence. It is argued that because the BVAS is deactivated from the backend, if snatched on election days, the device will not be able to be manipulated. This greatly reduced the incidents/cases of electoral violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

To be sure, during the Nigerian presidential election of 2023, there were incidents of snatching of election materials, but these cases were very minimal when compared to what used to be the case in the previous elections. For instance, the 2023 presidential election recorded only few polling units where snatching of election materials took place. This was unlike what used to be obtainable during past presidential elections across Nigeria where snatching of election materials was rife and took place in almost all polling units in every local government area across the federation. During such incidents as witnessed in the past, hundreds of lives were lost, several people were injured, and property worth millions of naira were destroyed as a result of the thugs' resolve and attempt to snatch and escape with election materials. In the 2023 presidential election however, snatching of election materials was only reported in parts of Lagos, Osun, and Rivers states, where hoodlums carted away ballot boxes and chased away electoral officers (Adebayo et al, 2023).

In that election, BVAS was snatched by thugs from electoral officials in polling units only in ten states, namely: Akwa Ibom, Delta, Katsina, Niger, Bayelsa, Edo, Enugu, Kogi, Ogun, Taraba, Rivers states and FCT (Cable, 2023; Guardian, 2023; Vanguard, 2023). In most of the polling units where the BVAS were snatched, they were either recovered or replaced, and accreditation and voting continued (Aworinde, 2023, para. 4). Overall, there was a dramatic decline in

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incidents of snatching of election materials. As a result of this, the election recorded minimal fatalities and property destruction. This is particularly unprecedented in Nigeria's presidential elections since the return of democracy in 1999.

5.0. **Conclusion and Recommendation.**

The utilization of BVAS in Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections remarkably marked a significant advancement in the nation's electoral process, fostering greater integrity, transparency, and efficiency. By ensuring more accurate voter verification and reducing instances of fraud such as snatching of election materials, impersonation and multiple voting, BVAS considerably addressed longstanding issues that plagued previous elections in the country, particularly since 1999. Overall, the successful deployment of BVAS demonstrated its potential to transform the conduct of elections in Nigeria, setting a new standard for electoral credibility and laying a foundation for future improvements in democratic governance. Not minding the gains of BVAS, there were some challenges identified with the election device during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. In order to ensure the recorded gains of BVAS are sustained, improved upon and consolidated, this paper recommends the following:

- Comprehensive training and capacity building should be prioritized for all electoral officers. This includes the implementation of detailed training programs that cover the technical operation, troubleshooting, and data security aspects of BVAS. Regular refresher courses should be conducted to ensure continuous proficiency, and simulation exercises should be organized to provide hands-on experience. By doing so, electoral staff will be better prepared to manage the accreditation process efficiently and effectively.
- Extensive public awareness and voter education campaigns should be launched. It is essential to educate the electorate about the BVAS process, its benefits, and what to

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expect on election day. This can be achieved through nationwide information campaigns using diverse media platforms, community outreach programs involving local leaders, and interactive sessions like town hall meetings and workshops. Increasing voter awareness will enhance transparency, build trust in the electoral process, and encourage higher voter participation.

- Strengthening security measures for the implementation of BVAS is paramount. Advanced cybersecurity protocols should be established to protect against hacking and data breaches, and robust physical security measures should be put in place to secure the devices during storage, transportation, and use at polling stations. Additionally, a comprehensive incident response plan should be developed to address potential disruptions or technical failures, ensuring the continuity and integrity of the electoral process. These measures will safeguard the BVAS infrastructure, ensuring credible and secure election outcomes

Competing Interest

The author had declared that no conflicting interest existed regarding this paper.

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