



Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) to Enhance Credibility of Elections

Establishing and maintaining an accurate and credible voter register is a critical component of electoral integrity and the enfranchisement of the people. We cannot talk of free and fair elections if we do not have a credible register to begin with.

The arrival this week of the first batch of 200 voter registration equipment, though a small fraction of the 15,000 units expected before the start of voter registration in November, is nonetheless a significant step in the journey to the March 4, 2013 polls. Some 5,000 kits are expected soon, heralding the start of the training of over 29,000 voter registration clerks recruited by the Commission.

The Agreement for sale and purchase of BVR hardware and software between Canadian Commercial Corporation (CCC) and IEBC/Treasury was signed on September 24, 2012. A down payment of 40% was made on October 5, 2012. The contract involves supply of 15,000 BVR kits and back-end system.

The Financing Facility Agreement (FFA) between GOK/Treasury and Standard Chartered Bank that covers the entire contract is still under negotiation and should be concluded by 26th October, 2012. It was required to have been in place by October 15, 2012 to give an assurance that the balance of 60% of the contract would be paid.

Delays in concluding the FFA have the potential of seriously undermining the Commissions plans for voter registration which are already constrained by existing legal and operational timelines. This impact has to be examined in light of affecting the legal timelines on electoral process.

Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) captures the fingerprint and facial features so that the voter will be uniquely identified during voting. The process seeks to ensure that all those who enroll themselves for the elections are entitled to vote, and to vote only once. It is the process of registering voters electronically and not electronic voting. Voters will still be given ballot papers to mark and drop into ballot boxes; they will not be tapping some electronic gadgets to make their choices. Nonetheless, the system paves the way for electronic voting in the future.

The mobile BVR enrollment kits comprise of digital cameras, finger print scanners and power-back-up systems. In addition to facial features and fingerprints, the system will also capture personal information-name, gender, ID no etc.



The voter registration data captured at polling station is transferred electronically to the central biometric centre or database. This means a voter register is being created directly with every registration unlike in the traditional Optical Mark Reader (OMR) method which requires scanning of millions of registration forms.

The system also provides an audit trail which can be reviewed independently to establish individual accountability and assist in reconciliation of database records. BVR greatly minimizes multiple voter registrations, even though it may not eliminate errors completely. The final determination of suspected multiple registrations is a human judgment call.

Many people wonder why the effort and investment in technology if voting will not be done by the touch of a button. Some people even expect the Commission to conjure up systems that will allow people to vote from anywhere or transact votes with the magic of money transfer platforms. We wish we could. But our pursuit of technology is informed only by the need for it to be useful, relevant and cost-effective.

In introducing technology, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries (IEBC) and its predecessor Interim Independent Electoral Commission (IIEC) pursued technology only to the extent that it helped solve some serious issue, in particular those faced by our predecessor, the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK). We have used technology to address and manage the “pain points” of elections. The major challenge faced by ECK in 2007 was the participation of “dead voters” and delay in transmission of the results.

ECK’s voter register was a product of incremental registration from 1990’s. Obviously people who migrated or died were still in the register, creating a potentially lucrative nugget for electoral fraud. Registering voters afresh, despite the costs and logistical challenges involved, is the right to way go. Such a “green-field register” becomes even more critical considering that the 2010 register of 12.4m was undertaken when we had 210 constituencies. The just published 290 constituencies and 1450 constituency assembly wards means that people and polling stations need a new realignment.

IEBC has courageously steered electoral reforms, overcoming the turbulence that comes with radical change. We have introduced the electronic transmission of results (EVT), an innovation that has seen the by-election and referendum results hit tallying centre screen and TVs “fast and furious”.

Although we never set sail to seek crises, the myriad of by-elections that we have undertaken and to which many held their breath as we plunged into-have made us wiser. The recent meeting

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of over 400 electoral officials, convened with the support of our partners in Mombasa, refined the general election plans and strategies.

We wish to assure all Kenyans that IEBC will do what it takes to build integrity into the process and the people handling elections. But perhaps, it is important to realize that successful elections are not about the electoral management body alone. It takes the support of everyone- voters, government agencies, political parties, media, development partners, civil society etc. They are *our* elections.

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