



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

AN INITIATIVE OF
THE WOODROW WILSON SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
AND THE BOBST CENTER FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Series: Elections

Interview no.: X 6

Interviewee: Professor Attahiru Jega

Interviewer: Laura Bacon

Date of Interview: 8 November 2012

Location: Washington, DC, USA

BACON: This is Laura Bacon, Associate Director of Innovations for Successful Societies from Princeton University. I am here at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC with Professor Attahiru Jega, chairman of the INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission) in Nigeria. Thank you very much for joining me.

JEGA: *Thank you very much.*

BACON: The first question I would like to ask you is when you were appointed as INEC chair, why did you take the job? What mattered most in your decision to take the job given the immense challenges it posed? Did you think you had solutions or is it just one of those situations where it was impossible to say no?

JEGA: *Well I felt greatly honored that my country wanted me to contribute in dealing with the challenges of conducting free, fair, and credible elections. I felt when contacted that I had the adequate preparations to be able to do the job. So it was not a question of difficulty in saying no, it was a question of feeling honored that my country wanted me to do a difficult job and that I felt adequately prepared to be able to do that.*

I have been a scholar. I have studied Nigerian politics and the elections and I was privileged to have served in the Justice (Muhammed) Lawal Uwais Electoral Reform Committee where we discussed all the challenges of conducting elections in Nigeria and made recommendations about how best to reform the process. So when after that I was now asked to come and chair the Independent National Electoral Commission, I felt greatly honored. I knew it was going to be a difficult job, but with the benefit of hindsight I think I underestimated the challenges. I have no regrets. I think I have done my best under very difficult circumstances.

BACON: Thank you. Now when you came in, the INEC staff itself had a reputation for corruption and favoritism in the past. I understand that you made the decision, some would say the controversial decision, not to do massive layoffs. You decided to maintain most of the staff. You also built a parallel structure of advisors, professors, civil society organizations, so I'm curious, which tasks did you assign to the regular INEC employees and what steps did you take to monitor behavior and reduce corruption?

JEGA: *I would not say that I created a parallel structure but I introduced checks and balances. I also made it very clear to the staff of INEC that when we came in as a new commission that we were going to do things the right way as expected of us, comply fully with the laws and rules and regulations and we expected everybody to comply. We made it very clear that we will ensure that we do not do anything wrong and that we do not expect any staff to do anything wrong and whoever does anything wrong will have himself or herself to blame.*

So basically we created, I believe, a context for doing things right and for ensuring that there is appropriate reward or punishment depending on how people conduct themselves. I think that by being true to our words, by doing what we said, we have perhaps been able to also inspire others to live by good example.

BACON: I'd like to follow up about that management because it is your management of INEC that is known.

JEGA: Yes.

BACON: You mentioned that there were rewards and punishments for good and bad behavior.

JEGA: Yes.

BACON: Could you give some examples of that?

JEGA: *For example, we decided that it is very, very important to review the conditions of service of INEC staff. They are doing very hazardous work. So we introduced insurance schemes to ensure that people are adequately covered. This is not just permanent staff of INEC but including the temporary staff that we employ. So every person doing electoral duty is insured. We took insurance cover for everybody. In addition to that we persuaded the national assembly to pay what we called hazard allowance to INEC staff given the hazardous nature of their work, pending the time when the salaries and conditions of service will be improved.*

As I speak with you now, as part of the process of restructuring and reorganization that we are trying to implement before 2015, we already have a package of salaries and allowances that we are now going to engage government to consider for INEC staff. So that is with regard to motivation.

We also have done everything possible to improve conditions of work because the conditions under which our staff work, particularly in state and local government offices are very, very challenging. There is overcrowding, inadequacy of offices and facilities. We engaged the national assembly and we got funding to build additional offices to refurbish old structures and so on and so forth. So we have improved conditions of work and we are working very hard to improve conditions of service and we have motivated people by ensuring that they have insurance cover for the kind of hazardous job that they do.

With regard to punishment, obviously we try to be very strict in terms of compliance with rules and regulations but we subject everything to due process. There is no arbitrariness. We don't just fire people. We take them through the process. They have the opportunity to defend themselves. But once it is established and there is evidence that somebody has done something wrong, we do not hesitate at all in taking the appropriate sanctions that are permissible under the rules and regulations.

By doing that I don't know if you can call it carrot and stick, but by ensuring compliance with rules and regulations and also motivating people, we have been able to do all these remarkable things that we have done that are being commended with virtually the same staff that conducted the 2007 election. Which means that even though there were some bad eggs that had given INEC a bad name, the majority of the people are honest people, hard-working people, trying to do a very difficult job and all they needed was adequate motivation and direction and support. I am glad to say that the national commissioners in INEC work very, very closely with me to be able to give that leadership to the staff in INEC.

BACON: Thank you. I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about some of the advisors, some of the people you surrounded yourself with.

JEGA: *When I was coming into INEC as the chairman, of course I felt that I would need all the support that I could get. I was coming into a new organization and I*

needed capacity to be able to quickly study situations and get recommendations and be able to take decisive decisions effectively. So I looked for people that could assist me, technical advisors. I was able to get the support of the UNDP Joint Donor Basket Fund (United Nations Development Program) to fund those people to work with me.

I brought in six staff into my office. I have a technical adviser, I have a special assistant, I have a personal assistant and I have a chief of staff who handles budget and other accountability procedures. I have a press person, chief press secretary who handles my relationship or INEC's relationship with the media. That has been very, very useful. Two years down the line it is clear that these people have added tremendous value in the organization and I am glad that the UNDP is considering continuing the support to ensure sustainability and to ensure that we consolidate the gains of the last two years.

BACON: Was this a new structure? Did the prior INEC chair have the same support?

JEGA: *Yes, the prior INEC chair was also free to bring in people into his office but he had different designations and different caliber of people that he brought. I chose those I think could give me the best and I have no regrets.*

BACON: Was there an application process or did you chose people you knew?

JEGA: *I had discussions with people who made recommendations and I looked at the CVs (curriculum vitae) and I did interviews, personal interviews and on the basis of that did a selection. There was no time to advertise and to do all that kind of thing. I needed people who were trustworthy, people who were competent and effective and people who had integrity. Once I was able to choose those from the pool and frankly I am very happy with the choice, no regrets at all.*

BACON: What was the dynamic like between those advisors and the rest of INEC?

JEGA: *Of course it is natural that when outsiders come into an organization they will be perceived with suspicion. There will be antagonism or friction, but I told them that look, you are here to do a job and that job is to help me preside over an informed INEC that can bring about free, fair and credible elections. So don't bother or care about other relationships, be concerned about your relationship with me and what you deliver as your input. I think it has worked.*

Obviously initially there were all sorts of suspicions and concerns and worries but I think over time people have come to appreciate that these are patriotic Nigerians who are here to help improve INEC and who have given their best in the process.

BACON: Thank you. Do you have any observations about how to make political party consultative mechanisms work? Is it all a matter of the commissioners' political skill or are there some incentive systems or procedures that other countries could usefully copy?

JEGA: *I think that there are two ways in which we can improve consultations and dialogue in our relationships with political parties; that is between the election management body and the political parties. That is—an improved relationship is absolutely necessary in bringing about free, fair and credible elections. The first way to do it is to encourage the political parties to have a common platform through which they meet periodically, share ideas, exchange ideas and we*

learned from the experiences of other countries, especially Ghana, and we facilitated the establishment of the Inter-Party Advisory Council, IPAC.

Before the 2011 elections—in 2007 political parties before the election signed a Code of Conduct. So we also encouraged them to sign a code of conduct and after they signed the code of conduct, as part of the provisions of the code of conduct they also committed themselves to establishing the IPAC. So the IPAC has been established and we now use it as a platform for constant engagement and discussions and consultation with IPAC as representatives of political parties.

The second one is periodic organization of meetings with all political parties. Preceding the 2011 registration and elections, we found that broad consultation very, very useful and effective. For example when we had to postpone the April 2nd election we called political parties, explained to them why we did it and agreed with them about the date that we rescheduled the elections. Any time there is a problem we call them together, we discuss what we are planning to do and explain things to them. If there are any reservations we hear what they have to say. Of course the decision is always that of the commission in terms of conduct of election, but that input has always been very, very useful. It helps to overcome rumors and suspicions and fears and to assure political parties of our neutrality and impartiality and to get their buy-in into some of the reform processes that we have introduced.

BACON: Sure, and to follow up on the code of conduct, can you explain how it might have evolved between 2007, 2011 and leading into 2015?

JEGA: *What we did was to take—when we came in we took the 2007 code of conduct and then we got consultants with the support of the Commonwealth Secretariat and the UNDP. We looked at it. We also tried to bring in good practices, learning from the other African countries. So those consultants helped us to develop an improved draft, which we looked at as a commission. Once we approved it then we called representatives of all the political parties to a retreat and presented the new draft to them. We asked them to look at it, make input. Then after that they gave us also I think about a week also to go and do the corrections. We called another meeting where everybody signed. So virtually all the political parties actually signed the Memorandum of Understanding.*

BACON: Will you be strengthening it more leading up to 2015?

JEGA: *Of course, we will subject it to another review before the 2015 election.*

BACON: Could you discuss any security measures that INEC took in 2011 that you considered especially valuable? I know there is that inter-group meeting.

JEGA: *Right.*

BACON: Were there any security measures that proved less useful or disruptive?

JEGA: *Frankly the measures we took through ICCES, the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security, added value tremendously. I can't think of any specific security measure that we took that was not value added. Frankly I can't think of any. But that doesn't mean to say that there were no security challenges, there are always security challenges. We wanted for the April elections to have at least three unarmed policemen per polling unit in order to help restore, I mean bring order and minimize rowdiness in polling units because a polling unit is to*

have an average of 500 voters. Unfortunately because the police are challenged by the numbers we were not able to achieve that but I think we were able to achieve at least an average of 2 per polling unit.

I think I can mention measures that were very, very effective. The Air Force for example helped us with helicopters to move personnel and materials to inaccessible areas, that has been very, very useful. In fact by the time we did the Edo election in July of 2012 we even found the need to use aerial surveillance because of concerns about security in Edo state. The presence of the Air Force helped a lot in terms of reassuring people that—normally the worry is that visible security presence may be disruptive in an electoral process but in our own experience in Nigeria we found that visibility of security presence may actually be reassuring to the electorate and make them comfortable to come out and vote.

BACON: Do you plan to retain what I believe you called the open secret ballot system and could you supply some details about the origin of that system and the difference between the open secret ballot system and the system in place in previous elections.

JEGA: *The open secret ballot system was a system introduced by the commission under the leadership of Professor Humphrey Nwosu in 1992. What we have done is we modified it and used it for the 2011 elections. The whole idea is to find ways of preventing fraudulent activities at polling units on Election Day. The persistent problems when we came in which bedeviled previous elections were that people were moving from one polling unit to another voting. They would vote here, then they would move to another place and vote and move to another place and vote. We felt that we have to minimize the possibility of people moving around our polling units.*

So we introduced in this modified open ballot system a period of accreditation and then a period of voting. That contrasts with the traditional method that is universal which is you open polling stations at a particular time and you close at a particular time and anybody can come within that period to cast his or her vote. In the system that we introduced you have to be in the polling unit between say 8 and 12 for accreditation. If you come 8 you are accredited. You can go somewhere but then you have to come back by 12:30 and join the queue because everybody accredited at the polling unit must be there and they must vote at the same time.

By doing that voting is taking place simultaneously in all other places so nobody will finish here and go to another place and do it. As soon as the voting is done results are tabulated. They are counted and they are posted at the polling unit. That also prevented another fraudulent activity of the past in which people will now hijack election materials before they reach a designated coalition center.

So really it is an unorthodox system, if I can put it that way, but it has helped tremendously in bringing about credibility of the process because it minimized opportunities for fraudulent activities during the election. It is inconveniencing to many, particularly elite voters because it would require people to be at the polling unit for longer periods than is the case in a normal voting system. But we said it is a price that has to be paid for an improved electoral system and democratic system.

BACON: Two follow-ups on that. One is how did you indicate that someone was accredited? I understand that you use indelible ink when someone has voted.

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- JEGA: Yes.
- BACON: Was it the same for the accreditation?
- JEGA: *Yes, for the accreditation actually we used two cuticles. The first one on the left for accreditation and then the second one on the right for voting.*
- BACON: And the second one, you talked about the accreditation period and then the voting period.
- JEGA: Yes.
- BACON: My understanding is that a lot of the voters stayed for the counting period as well and took pictures with their mobile phones and helped kind of cross check and double check the counting, is that right?
- JEGA: *Yes. People are allowed to stay after the voting to witness the counting if they so desire. Obviously it added credibility to the process because everybody was there and they voted. So as soon as the last person on the queue has voted, then the results are counted. So it enabled people to be present and to see the result in their own polling unit and it added credibility to the process.*
- BACON: Were you the one who helped modify that or did you do it as part of the team that this—?
- JEGA: *It is a team effort; it is the commission. We have a commission of twelve commissioners plus myself as the chairman, so really it is a decision that we took as a commission and issued guidelines for the process.*
- BACON: And this is what you thought would work best for this round?
- JEGA: *Yes, we thought it was best for the country. The initial major concern with the system was actually a security concern. Security officials were particularly concerned that people would be in the polling unit in large numbers for a prolonged period of time and they were worried that they could become irritated and a crisis may develop. But we insisted that that was the only way to have a credible process. When we did it it turned out that people actually turned it into a festive occasion. It was full of pleasant moments and interactions, no tension at all and no conflicts.*
- BACON: Great, just to make sure we get this accurate, you said in 1992 the system was established but it was modified.
- JEGA: Yes.
- BACON: What were the primary differences between the systems?
- JEGA: *In 1992 when the system was introduced you come within the same time period and do accreditation and voting. So they would say everybody should be at the polling unit let's say latest by 12 o'clock. So accreditation will be done and voting will be done simultaneously. But what we modified is to separate the time of accreditation from the time of voting. That really was the major difference between 1992 and 2011.*

- BACON: You spoke about this some today but what are some of the major changes you would like to implement in planning for the next election and what steps do you plan to take to overhaul INEC itself?
- JEGA: *We have already taken decisions about overhauling INEC. We have already reorganized INEC. We now have a trim structure. We have reduced the number of departments and divisions and units. We believe that now we have a more trim and efficient structure. Also we have aligned functions and responsibilities. Where there were duplications in departments or units previously now we have ensured that those duplications are removed.*
- The next thing we are going to do is what we call putting square pegs in square holes in terms of the manning levels. So we will pick from the pool and put the right people in the right places. Again staff were concerned that this kind of exercise may result in what is called retrenchment or disengagement of staff. But we believe that there are creative ways of doing this and that it may not necessarily result in that massive disengagement of people that make staff concerned.*
- Once we do the alignments we can move people into the appropriate positions. If we have to disengage people they have to be people who really deserve to be disengaged. But I'm sure that will be minimal.*
- BACON: You mentioned—we're very interested in how different reform leaders both borrow ideas and then also export them to other places. You mentioned looking at Ghana in terms of party consultation I believe. What lessons did you take from other countries, especially African countries? Also, what lessons or best practices or innovations do you believe could be usefully used elsewhere?
- JEGA: *What we have done with the voter registration process has been very useful in many countries both at the regional level, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) level and other countries are interested in learning how we have done it. The major thing about our voter registration process is using appropriate technology and using open source resources and not being dependent on vendors. So that has been very, very useful and many other countries are trying to learn from our own experiences in that regard.*
- What we were also learning from other countries, we are trying to learn, Kenya has recently done a successful constituency delimitation exercise and we are trying to learn from them. Recently, during this visit I had discussions with the chairman of the Kenyan Electoral Commission and he is sharing some information that will definitely assist us as we proceed with our own constituency delimitation exercise.*
- So certainly there is a lot to learn from one another and to adapt or adopt in improving our processes. I mentioned in my lecture that we had what we called knowledge-sharing conference in March of this year where 25 election management bodies (EMBs) from all over Africa were represented. It was very, very useful. We heard what others are doing, how they are doing it. They listened to what we are doing, how we are doing it and there is a lot for each to learn, for us to learn from one another.*
- BACON: Absolutely. You mentioned that your registration process was especially interesting to others and the use of appropriate technology, open source data. Are there any other innovations that you all did that people were interested in?

JEGA: *Yes, I think the issue of coordinated approach to security has also been—we have seen interest in that by many other EMBs. In fact, many people used to think that security agencies have no role in elections, just like we saw here in the US. You have elections with no police, no Army, nobody. Yes, but context, our contexts are different. Many of our countries are post-conflict societies trying to democratize or countries that are bedeviled by systemic security challenges. Like in Nigeria Boko Haram or insurgency in the Niger Delta area or incidences of armed robbery and abductions and so on. Once there is large presence of small arms in many of our continents they tend to compromise security and if people have to come out and vote leaders that are credible you have to ensure that they are secure as they discharge that responsibility.*

So the security has to play a role in context in countries such as ours. So the model we have of a coordinated approach to security seems to attract the attention of other countries; those who are thinking that security agencies have no role are beginning to see that there may be a positive role for security forces in organizing elections in countries such as ours.

BACON: Very interesting. Does anyone else use the open secret ballot system that you know of?

JEGA: *No, I think we are unique.*

BACON: It is Nigeria-specific.

JEGA: *We are unique. That is also one area that so far nobody has shown any interest in. But it has helped us deal with our problems. It is useful. Nobody is saying we should change it. With time we may have to go back to the normal system but we need to stabilize and ensure that things are done normally but right now it has served us. Nobody is complaining about it. A few people are saying it is too cumbersome, it is time consuming, but nobody doubts the fact that it is credible and it ensures that the results are transparent and credible.*

BACON: The modifications you made, they didn't require legislative support?

JEGA: *No, it was a policy change.*

BACON: It was a policy change.

JEGA: *All we had to do was issue guidelines and regulations because the constitution has already given us the power to issue guidelines with regards to operational and logistical matters in elections.*

BACON: Wonderful. Professor Jega you have been extremely generous with your time and your insights and I just want to give you a final opportunity to reflect on either anything if you could go back in time that you would do differently or any other reflections you'd like to offer.

JEGA: *To be honest, I recognize that there is room for improvement in whatever we do. I recognize that the process in Nigeria is still not perfect but I recognize that we have raised the bar and I urge my compatriots not to throw the baby away with the bath water, that we should consolidate on the gains and keep on improving the process.*

If there is anything I can do, it is only to improve on what we have done so far. I don't think we have done anything that we have regretted as a commission or

that was fundamentally wrong that we think we should change it. But we are constantly reexamining our methods, our procedures, our regulations and refining them and improving upon them and learning from the experiences of others so that we can keep on improving and keep on raising the bar.

The fundamental challenge is not to allow a regression, going back to bad practices or those bad practices of the past but to keep on raising the bar, keep on improving the process.

There are a few things I can do better. I would want to engage the political parties more. When I say I, I mean the commission. We need to engage the political parties more, to have more dialogue, more meetings, keep on ensuring and building trust and confidence. We need to engage civil society organizations more. We need to engage the legislators more, both for the continuous change to the legal framework as well as for funding in order to be able to do all those things that really we need to do but which cost money.

So these are areas that I would want to see improvements in the future.

BACON: Is there anything else you'd like to offer?

JEGA: *Thank you very much.*

BACON: Thank you.