



## Nigeria's 2020 Gubernatorial Elections – Conducting electoral training during the Covid-19 pandemic

[\*\(Listen to the podcast published on 7 December 2021\)\*](#)

Transliteration with Ibrahim Sani, Independent National Election Commission of Nigeria (INEC)

**International IDEA message:** *Hello listeners, this podcast is hosted by International IDEA. In the next minutes we will help you make sense of what's happening today in democracy worldwide.*

**David Towriss:** Hello and welcome to **Peer to Peer**, International IDEA's Elections podcast series. Peer to Peer is co-hosted by me, [David Towriss](#), and by my colleague, [Erik Asplund](#). Together we speak with practitioners from around the world to share knowledge, experience, and good practice. This part of our series focuses on training, education, and research in electoral administration. Each episode includes a guest who provides insights on how the Election Commission in their country prepares frontline workers for Election Day operations and how it provides voters and other stakeholders with the information that they need to make the election a success.

This week we are taking a deep dive into education and training during the Covid-19-pandemic and will be focusing in particular on preparations for two gubernatorial elections in the Nigerian states of Edo and Ondo. Our guide is Ibrahim Sani, Senior lecturer in Comparative Politics at Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto and Director of Research at the Electoral Institute and the Independent National Election



Commission of Nigeria (INEC). Welcome, Ibrahim, and thank you very much for joining us for this important conversation.

**Ibrahim Sani:** Thank you for having me.

**00:01:38**

**David:** And as with all our conversations, I would like to begin this one by asking you to take me and our international listeners through the electoral administration system in your country. Could you please give us a very brief summary of the body, or bodies, responsible for the management of Nigeria's elections, focusing particularly, if you could, on their mandate and structure?

**Ibrahim:** Thank you very much, David. To begin with the Independent National Electoral Commission as it is known now, INEC, in Nigeria, is mandated by the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, as amended to conduct elections into all elected positions in the country. It is headed by a national chairman, currently by Professor Mahmood Yakubu, together with twelve other national commissioners that serve as the Commission. The Commission has a secretary who is nominated from, or appointed by, the Commission from the major team of the civil servants that made up the Commission staff. So, under the Commission is the Electoral Institute, the one that I am working in now, and is headed by a director general.

And then under the DG office, there are two departments, the Research and the Communication department, and the Training department with an *[several inaudible words]* office attached to the office of the DG. Now there are other departments down the structure under INEC, for example the key ones: we have Operations, we have Finance, we have Procurement, we have a Voter registry, we have ICT, we have Election Party Monitoring, we have a Planning & Monitoring department, we have ICP international protocols, and LGA offices -- these are the major departments of *[inaudible]*, and recently two were added, we have the Alternative Dispute Resolution department and then the Litigation and Prosecution department.

**David:** If I may, we are talking about a single election management body and as our conversation progresses, we are going to talk a little bit more about the Electoral Institute and the Electoral Institute forms part of the Electoral Commission, or INEC, is that correct?

**Ibrahim:** Yes, yes.

**David:** Yes, OK, and the INEC is carrying out the education and the training set of mandate, or assisting the Electoral Commission in conducting that part, of its mandate. Is that right?

**Ibrahim:** The Electoral Institute is the training and research arm of the Commission. Whenever there is an election, the training for electoral personnel, ad hoc staff, those that are mandated to conduct the field work of conducting election at the field (I am referring to the polling unit now), the Institute is responsible for training them. So, the training department in the Institute, and the Institute, are mandated by the



Commission to train all electoral staff that are required one election, either at the national level, for example, now that we are preparing for 2023 general elections, all the personnel that are required to man the polling units that we have, had to be trained by the Institute. Same thing with the election in context now is Edo and Ondo, it was the Institute that actually trained all the personnel required for the election in both Edo and Ondo states.

**David:** Really interesting, OK. Thank you for clarifying that for us. Does the Institute's work extend to the training of stakeholders who are not members of the Commission, whether they are ad hoc or permanent? I am thinking of, for example, the media or members of the security agencies, does it extend to those stakeholders as well?

**Ibrahim:** Whenever there is a training requirement from a given institution that has to do with elections, for example, if it is a political party, they will send their requirement via the Election and Party Monitoring department. And say it is now communicated to the Institute, the Institute now provide the manpower, and train the party agent, for example. Now if you talk about the security agents, they are responsible for providing security during the election period, it is also the Institute that trains the security personnel for the conduct of elections, whenever it is time for an election. So, in response directly to your question, the response is like this, the Institute train all personnel that are required to be trained, either for us as ad hoc staff of the Commission, or those that are to serve, for example, as security personnel for the election. The Institute trains them, including the party agents.

**00:07:47**

**David:** Thank you. Now, our conversation today is focused on the preparations for the Edo and Ondo governorship elections, which took place on the 19th of September and the 10th of October 2020, but before we delve into the details of those preparations, I think it is worth reminding our listeners of the global Covid-19 context of the elections at that time. So, preparations took place when the pandemic was still in its infancy. International IDEA data shows that in April and May, and then again in September 2020, more elections were being postponed than were being held. So, consequently these administrators of these elections did not benefit from the best practice that has subsequently emerged. Returning to Nigeria, how prevalent was Covid-19 at this time?

**Ibrahim:** The audience would recall that the first Nigerian case of Covid-19 was confirmed on 28 February 2020 and from there on, like all other places across the globe, the figures and the number of cases kept rising and the same trend happened in Nigeria. And close to the period of the elections in September, and October, in the case of Edo and Ondo, the confirmed cases in Nigeria headed to the figure of 55,000 in terms of confirmed cases, and then about over 1,000 plus death cases. And therefore, it becomes very urgent and demanding for the Commission to come up with an active and strong position of how the two elections could be held without much casualty. Of course, the Commission came up with its policy on the corner of election under Covid-19 and on that basis, the arrangement for the conduct of election is set and from there on the Commission was able to control the election for these two states with much less casualty in terms of Covid contraction.



**David:** Thank you, Ibrahim. So, you paint a picture of rising case numbers as was seen across the world, was there ever any prospect of these two elections being postponed? As I mentioned earlier, you know, many of these many elections around the world were being postponed. Was there any prospect of that happening in Nigeria?

**Ibrahim:** I think, for Edo and Ondo that was not much of an issue for two obvious reasons, I mean, the first is that we had some by-elections that the Commission had to conduct before the Edo and Ondo, for example *[several inaudible words]* about 15 cases of violations were *[inaudible]* before the Edo and Ondo *[inaudible]* elections, and the Commission had to look into those by-elections and kept on postponing. And on that basis, the Commission has learned over time on how and the best way to approach the issues *[several inaudible words]* it is due to have the two governorship elections, the Commission has already prepared in terms of how and the best possible ways to go with the election and it is executed as on the basis of the arrangement it has set up to conduct the elections. Of course, in collaboration with other organizations in the country, I am referring to strictly here, the presidential task force committee and the NCDC, the National Centre for Disease Control.

**David:** That is really interesting to hear, the interagency collaboration. It is a really interesting point and an important part of what we have been seeing at IDEA in responses to or holding elections in a Covid environment. Let us now turn our conversation to the training of poll workers, which is often a very big part of election preparations because of the large numbers involved. Ibrahim, are you able to give us an idea of how many polling workers that were recruited for the two governorship elections?

**Ibrahim:** For Edo, you recall Edo state is made up of 18 local governments, and that will translate into 192 decision areas with the polling units of 2,627. I mean each polling units, at least 4 persons are required, one presiding officer and three assistant presiding officers. And if you add that all, it will give you 20,974 poll workers for Edo state alone. Now, similar local governments exist also in Ondo states. And Ondo has instead of, as against Edo, 203 decision areas made up of 3009 polling units. That is at the same time *[several inaudible words]* we had what we call *[several inaudible words]* But nonetheless, the number reduces to 17, so the number of poll units required is 17, *[several inaudible words]* Add this to Edo, you will have a total of 38,877 that is what is required as far as local governorship elections are concerned.

**David:** Goodness me, this is a very large number of polling workers alone. And was the number of polling station workers required to run these polling stations affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in any way?

**Ibrahim:** Yes, actually before Covid, the number was 3 persons per polling unit. The Commission decided to add 1, because there are additional responsibilities attached to both the presiding officer and assistant presiding officers down the ladder. So, on the basis of that, the Commission decided to have one more person per polling unit so that the responsibilities now could be shared equally among the four of them. So, yes, I agree.

**00:14:53**



**David:** That is really interesting to hear, and we will then revisit this issue of these added responsibilities in a Covid pandemic shortly. Prior to the pandemic, how did the Institute conduct poll worker training?

**Ibrahim:** Prior to the pandemic, it is a face-to-face activity, the Commission believe, and the Institute as well believe, that personal contact is very critical when it comes to the learning process and the training of poll workers. For obvious reasons, the attention that is attached on [several inaudible words] the poll workers require that they understand the basics and the rudiments of all the processes. And therefore, the Commission uses face-to-face training. Of course, there are some supplements, for example, in 2019, before Covid, we had CD's, they are block by block activities. [audio cut] poll worker, either as presiding or assistant presiding officer of I, II, III, could have the CD running on his computer, or copy the same content piece form, so that he could watch and view the process as if it is happening that we, plus the face-to-face training, he is understanding, and the process is really broad, and the expectation is that he would deliver as much as expected.

**David:** Ibrahim, that is really interesting, and just to revisit this because our connection was not great for just a part of your response there. So, these CD's contain programs which would allow poll workers to experience the work that they would be carrying out in a polling station. Is that right? It would recreate as much as possible, that environment?

**Ibrahim:** It is an animation of the whole entire electoral process that is expected of each poll worker at the polling unit on Election Day. So, it gives them a video animation of the whole process, not just the theoretical description of it, no. It is an animated description, such that it is a video form, and they can follow off to see all the activities that are required of them at the polling unit.

**David:** Can you briefly explain for us, Ibrahim, how training curricula are maintained and updated?

**Ibrahim:** What we call it is a training manual or curriculum, the manual is subject to update a review whenever there is any new introduction into the processes. Let me explain further. Before Covid, when we had the 2019 general election, the manual was updated before the election. Before the 2020 election, general elections. And immediately after that when Covid came to the fore, the Commission's guide policy on the corner of election under Covid-19 came up with certain activities that are built into the process, and that demands for the revisit of the curriculum and the manual. And on that basis, it was updated almost instantly before the Edo and Ondo commission election.

So, if I might also go further, I could also inform you that now that we are preparing toward an [inaudible] there are certain things that are being introduced by the Commission. For example, the INEC's [inaudible] app, which is an application designed by the Commission to track INEC personnel and material wherever they are, I give them the chance to communicate back to the backend. The tendency for a potential of violence wherever they are, the violence could be of any form that is also demanded that the manual be updated, so the update is like almost instant, whenever there is anything new in the electoral process or anything that needs some slight changes within the guidelines of the conduct of the election as released by the Commission, the manual would definitely be reviewed and updated.



**David:** Wonderful.

**Ibrahim:** The update is not done by the Institute alone. All we do is call all the respective departments of the Commission, and we will sit down with them as a committee, then we will go into the manual one after the other, taking notes of areas where there is need for us to update and upgrade, then we will do that. We also now, at the same time, go through whatever has been replaced by the condition that as in the form of the election guidelines, or in the form of the policy, like I mentioned, on Covid-19. And we will go through the policy and look at how those things that required to be in the manual as updates, and we do that with almost all the departments in particular Operations, legal, ICT. VR and P&M is a very critical department that must be on board before we could update and upgrade the model, and their response is almost as prompt as possible.

**David:** So, you have described how this is a very fluid and responsive process able to respond to changes in the way that the elections are administered, but also that it is a very collaborative process bringing all layers into it? OK, that is really good to hear. So, the Commission's Covid-19 election policy and guidelines from the Nigeria Center for Disease Control published in May and July 2020, and you have already touched on that for us, was amongst the earliest African policy and guidance. And these documents required changes in the way in which polling stations were run, and poll worker training was carried out, meaning presumably that changes were required to both the training curricula and the delivery. Can you give us just a couple of examples of these changes?

**Ibrahim:** Yeah, of course. Let's take the training first, the training venue. We insist on having a venue that is spacious enough to take and cut out for the implementation of the 2-meter spacing that is required in Covid-19. So, when we deploy to the field for the training, the in-person training, the Commission insists on maintaining social distance of four feet, and therefore the class, the main class venues for the training, were held on that basis. Of course, there are the instance where one would see some non-compliance, but nonetheless, much of the large percentage of what we have done during Edo and Ondo [several inaudible words] a reasonable number of compliances with the social distance requirement of Covid-19.

And then at the same time, one is not allowed into the training venue except if his temperature has been taken by the thermometer gun. So, the temperature change is also applied when entering the training venue. And then at the same time, the face masks, I recall when we went out, we insist on all trainees and trainers have their face mask with them, and that was enforced to an extent, and we would say that from the Commission side. Of course, there is a large number of percentages of compliance. Now, if we go down to the polling unit in the election period, the first changes that happen are the structure of the polling units. Before, we usually have one single queue for prospective voters to cast their vote. But now, what we did during Covid, is we created two queues, one in the outer part of the polling unit, and one from the inner part of the polling unit, and social distance is also strictly complied with. Of course, there are reports and instances of non-compliance, indeed. And I know when somebody looked at the news would come across some of them. But the Commission insists on having two queues for polling units, and the APO III, which is a simple [several inaudible words] charged with the responsibility of making sure that both the inner and outer queue maintain social distance. And he introduces into the inner queue when





the next person on the inner queue has moved out, has cast his vote, and left, and then he would introduce the next person. That is how we managed the polling unit. And like I have said before, there are cases of non-compliance of course, but to an extent, all the staff of the Commission, both permanent and ad hoc have tried, they basically could in enforcing the combining protocols as established by the presidential task force and the NCDC, plus the guidelines of conducting election under Covid.

**David:** Even that, thank you. It said that you paint a picture in which there are some important changes, both to the way in which training was delivered, so, ensuring that appropriate training facilities are found. I might assume that in previous years the same facilities might have been used again and again, and now those might have to be changed, but also big change is to the way in which the polling stations were operating. So, you now have a much more complex two-tier queuing system that you are describing there, and all this has to be achieved in a very short space of time. What are some of the, perhaps give us two or three examples if you can, of the challenges that the Institute faced in implementing these changes?

**00:26:55**

**Ibrahim:** No, the first thing is, you know Covid-19 came with the lockdown, and then a lot of people were locked into their houses and when the partial unlocking began, then people were asked to come out for the training. And of course, you could see the rate at which people are looking for anything they could do to sustain that. Leaving now that creates a population that are coming to the training place controlling such a [audio cut] is not an easy thing, so that is one of the challenges, of course, that the Commission has encountered. And then I think the most important now is the fact that the coronavirus is a novel virus, that there are not any clear examples elsewhere that one could put his hand and [inaudible] that really pose a serious challenge to the Commission. However, like I have said, the Institute, with the mandate given to it by the Commission, has done its best. You see that all possible things that need to be done, to ensure that the training is delivered, were done, and we have done it and, of course, there are challenges here and there.

And the recruitment, of course, of people, is another area of challenge, because even though in one area you will have a large number coming for the recruitment, because the NYSC MOU that exists between INEC and the National Youth Service Corps. The National Youth Service Corps, if I may explain it, somebody responsible for managing those who have finished university degree and they are to carry out a one-year service to the nation, and it is from that pool that the Commission would really recruit for its ad hoc staff. So, by the fact of the experience of Covid-19, then the challenge of how to even get the crew members to attend the training is another thing. I recall when I was in Edo, there was that instance, we had only one single haul of NYSC, who are the major presiding officers of the Commission. But so, we had to play with others to then augment the differences. Those are the major challenges encountered, of course.

**David:** And it was trying yeah, so the challenge of having these polling workers attend these mandatory training sessions was their reluctance, due to the public health concerns, was it?



**Ibrahim:** I think the reluctance came not really from them in particular because the institute, NYSC, that is managing them, has to agree to release them to us, but then that was overcome later on. Of course, when the Commission engaged the NYSC, and of course, [inaudible] and they just put in place to serve as a protective measure for tendences for one to contract Covid-19, to give them the hope and then they turn out, appeared good, and we were able to conduct the election.

**David:** Wonderful, thank you, and it actually takes us very nicely on to talk a little bit about voter and civic education. So, voters themselves are of course the largest and arguably the most important electoral stakeholder. And as we have discussed in earlier episodes, motivating voters to go and to cast their ballots and to do so correctly and safely through voter and civic education is of critical importance, and this is particularly so in the context of a pandemic. What methods and medium does the Institute employ to reach Nigerian voters?

**Ibrahim:** Voter education is not within the mandate of the Institute; however, the Commission, INEC, has a particular department called voter education and publicity. Now, in the first instance after the outbreak of Covid-19, the Commission called a Zoom meeting with the media houses, both print and electronic, and engage them as part of a quarterly meeting with critical stakeholders, which media is one. During that meeting, a lot of issues were discussed, a lot of the policy was interrogated by together with them, and then from there on the guidelines and the appropriate ways of reaching out to the voters were mapped out. And each media house is left with the result of going back to create ways, of course, the Commission now did its own, a lot of engagement was held with the media houses, like I said, I mentioned both print and electronic.

The Commission also issued out a lot of jingles of voter education, if you read my article, my write off on Nigerian case, you would come across areas where, several jingles were confirmed. In fact, the media outreach was such that INEC Citizen Contact Center was so functional and in [several inaudible words] that is on Edo and Ondo, the ads own frequency increase when the elections get closer. So, the INEC Twitter handle, by then a Twitter was functional, Facebook was also used, Instagram and YouTube accounts were only used for the purpose of getting to Nigerian voters and letting them know that they need to exercise their [inaudible] with or [several inaudible words] should it be a blockage for them to exercise their responsibility, particularly the almost over 3 million voters that are to cast their vote in Edo and Ondo, if you add them together.

**David:** Ibrahim, thank you so much for joining us today. It was a really, really insightful conversation and you have already alluded to it earlier, but I would like to highlight, again, for those who are interested in learning more about the administration of the Edo and Ondo governorship elections. Ibrahim has written a fantastic case for us, which can be accessed via the background reading section of this podcast episode and a case study on the elections institute written by the former chairperson of the Independent National Election Commission, Morris Ywu, can also be found there for any suggestions or recommendations. Feel free to email us at [elections\(at\)idea.int](mailto:elections@idea.int). My name is David Towriss. Thank you very much for listening.





***International IDEA message:*** Thank you for listening to the Democracy IDEAs Podcast. Keep following International IDEA on social media. We need all of you to participate in constructing better societies. Goodbye.

*This transcript has been lightly edited to enhance readability and clarity without changing the sense of the points made by the discussants.*