

Effects of ICT Incorporation Lapses in the Electoral Process of Cameroon

Article by Edward Veranyuy Ndzenyuy
MBA, Texila American University
E-mail: nvedward@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The undisputable benefits of Technology implementation in the electoral systems of advanced democracies like those of Europe and the United States of America, have been applauded and heralded by the international community. But since the year 2012 when Cameroon set out to incorporate Technology in its electoral processes, the fruits are insignificant as the system is plagued by a fleet of electoral Information and Communication Technology (ICT) challenges. This paper investigates the ICT gaps and their consequences on the electoral outcomes in the country.

The findings reveal that a fragile electoral ICT implementation system accounts for the poor sensitization and civic education, inappropriate constituency delimitation, mediocre voter registration, uncertain voter verification and voting, rudimentary vote counting and computation, and unsatisfactory dissemination of elections results in the country.

To address these shortcomings, this article proposes a comprehensive ICT-enhanced electoral system that incorporates training elections officers on the techniques of electoral digital technology, procurement of the crucial ICT devices, and setting them up in the respective field branch offices.

Keywords: ICT, ELECAM, Technology, Election, E-voting, EMB, Cameroon.

Introduction

For many years, elections in several countries have been marred by electoral malpractices, rigging and manipulations of all sorts, which all gained grounds on account of the absence of well-organized electoral management methods and techniques. The hand-written electoral registers, hand-produced voters' cards, manual vote-counting tallying sheets, and manually drafted elections reports rendered the electoral operations cumbersome, doubtful and conflict-prone.

In recent decades, most Election Management Bodies (EMB) around the world have instituted reforms some of which are now considered best practice to improve the management and conduct of elections. Some such include: the use of information and communication technology, professionalization of the organization, adoption of more transparent and inclusive processes, amendments to legal framework and improvement of relationships with external stakeholders (Jega, A.M. - 2012). Specifically, the introduction of ICT in electoral management has resulted in greater efficiency, credibility and acceptability of election outcomes.

ICT is a field of work and study that includes technologies such as the desktop and laptop computers, software, peripherals, and connections to internet primarily for information processing and communications functions. ICT involves the use of computer software and hardware to process information for both private and public use (Statistics Canada, 2008). The use of ICT in election has curbed the incidents of multiple registrations, which had been one of the main political tools for rigging elections by unscrupulous and savage elements. (Nwagwu, 2016).

In Cameroon, a plethora of newspapers and reports have highlighted gross inadequacies in the implementation of ICT infrastructure and techniques in electoral administration by the Elections Management Body (Elections Cameroon or ELECAM). The recurrent public protests against the Results of the October 7th 2018 Presidential Elections and the fierce law-suits against the ruling government, prompted this research to verify if the irregularities in electoral outcomes were not a function of poor implementation of the Information Technology infrastructure and strategies, paying particular attention to the case of Bui Division in the North West Region of Cameroon.

Materials and methods

This study made use of Observation and Secondary data source. The research explored Administrative Reports, Evaluation Reports and Operational Records produced by the Team leaders and Support Staff of the different Elections Management Office Branches of Bui Division in Cameroon. It also utilized comparative data from the Online Database called 'ICTs IN ELECTIONS DATABASE' produced by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). The documents were consolidated and their data analyzed to derive the premises and conclusions.

Literature review

On the basis of their scientific findings, most researchers advocate the incorporation of ICT Techniques in the administration of elections and elections-related activities. According to Wilson and Lawan (2015), advances in Information and Communication Technologies have transformed nearly all, if not all areas of human endeavours. ICT has become an enabler of change, it does not bring change on its own rather; it serves as a facilitator of change in bringing about a stable political system (Olugbenga, 2001). Adamu (2017) asserts that there is no single operation in the electoral process that cannot be computer-aided or even be completely taken over by ICT if the country in question is willing to digitalize.

The adoption of ICT and electronic technology into the electoral process, its usefulness notwithstanding, still suffers some setbacks occasioned by poor or erratic power supply, malfunctioning, unskilled personnel, mass illiteracy, and election fraud using electronic voting (Njoku, Amaefule, Nwandu, & Jibiri - 2018). Nevertheless, many government agencies in the developing countries have taken progressive steps towards the web and ICT use, adding coherence to all local activities on the Internet, widening local access and skills, opening up interactive services for local debates and increasingly, the participation of citizens (Aurigi, 1997).

It is however observed that the potential for e-government in developing countries remain largely unexploited. Human, organizational and technological factors pose great challenges to effective and sustained electronic governance. It is further noted by Allen et al (2001 cited in Wikipedia), that governments in the developing world can effectively exploit and appropriate the benefits of ICT, but e-government success entails the accommodation of certain unique conditions, needs and obstacles. To Chidubem (2018), this sheer confidence in ICT adoption appears robust and seemingly genuine, but it must be noted that the use of ICTs in the conducting of elections in rural communities actually contributes to the disenfranchisement of rural voters and weakens the integrity of the electoral process.

Ideal standards of ICT in electoral management

International IDEA (2019) stipulates that ICTs can quickly galvanize several procedures in the electoral cycle, such as voter registration, casting the vote, processing of results and many other processes. The application of ICTs based on well-identified needs and the adoption of a proper implementation strategy, results in gigantic benefits.

Having partnered with governments in their electoral processes, granting capacity building programs to staff of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and facilitated ICT implementation schemes across many countries in the globe, International IDEA has elaborated some best practices or principles for the implementation of ICT for electoral management. Coined as 'Ideal Standards of ICT in Electoral Management' in this article, these principles are:

- The EMBs need to develop a Voter registration system using biometric technology.
- Biometric data needs to be used in voter identification at polling stations.
- Electronic voting (E-voting) needs to be instituted to facilitate balloting.
- Official results need to be processed by an Electronic Tabulation System.
- The EMB needs to provide individual online voter registration/polling assignment checks.
- The country should publish the statistical overview of voter lists online.
- Election results, seat allocation, parties and candidates should be published online.

To concretely evaluate trends in various countries, International IDEA has created a dynamic online database that unveils facts on the application of ICT in the five aspects of Electoral Management, namely: Voter registration and identification, Electronic voting, Processing of Election results, Usage of open source software in election administration, Online data publication by Election Management Bodies, for countries around the world including Cameroon.

Table 1. Application of ICT in the five aspects of electoral management in cameroon

1	Voter registration and identification	in Cameroon
	Type of technology used for collecting registration data	Digital voter registration kits/computers, off-line
	Is biometric data captured and used during registration?	Yes, both fingerprint scans and photos
	Is the biometric data used in voter identification at polling stations?	Yes
	Is technology used for identifying voters at polling stations (electronic poll books)?	No
2	Electronic voting (E-voting)	
	Is e-voting currently used in any elections with EMB participation?	No, e-voting is not used currently
	If e-voting is NOT currently being used, what is the current status of e-voting in general?	E-voting has never been used
3	Processing of results	
	Are official election results processed by an electronic tabulation system?	No
	In the last national election, how many days did it take for the EMB to establish final results?	17 days. (Too long. A negative)
	In the last national election, how many days did it take for the EMB to announce certified results?	17 days. (Too long. A negative)
4	Usage of open source software in election administration	
	Does the country use open source software in electoral processes?	Using open source systems have never been considered
	Key reasons for or against using open source systems?	Not specified
	Type of open source systems have been considered or used	Not applicable
5	Online data publication by EMB (Elections Cameroon)	
	Does the country provide individual online voter registration/polling assignment checks?	Yes
	Does the country publish the statistical overview of voter lists online?	No
	Does the country publish full voter registers at the polling station level online?	No
	Does the country publish full voter registers at the national level online?	No
	Does the country publish the lists of parties and/or candidates registered for elections online?	No
	Does the country publish the election results online?	No
	Does the country publish seat allocation data online?	Yes, not machine readable
	Does the country publish candidate/party financing reports online?	No

Source: International IDEA Online Database

In quantitative terms, Table 1 above presents twenty (20) characteristics/questions of Cameroon's electoral system according to International IDEA. Eighteen (18) of the questions are answered in 'Yes'

or 'No' format. We have '13 No' and '5 Yes'. Analytically, Cameroon's ICT electoral system is far below acceptable standard as it scores only 5 on 18 (5/18) which is 27.7 %.

ICT infrastructure in ELECAM, bui division

Table 2. Staff, kits, computers and transport facilities in ELECAM BUI

Branch Office	Number of Staff	Number of Biometric Kits	N ^o of Office Computers	Internet Connections	Calculation of Election Results/Operations
Divisional Office	5	0	4	Yes / Wifi	Computer/Excel
Elak Council	5	3	1	None	Calculators
Jakiri Council	5	2	1	None	Calculators
Kumbo Council	7	2	1	None	Calculators
Mbiame Council	5	2	1	None	Calculators
Nkor Council	4	3	1	None	Calculators
Nkum Council	5	2	1	None	Calculators
Total	36	14	10	/	/

Source: Archive of ELECAM Bui Divisional Branch Office

In Table 2 above, the total number of staff is 36, 14 Biometric Kits, and 10 office computers. On an average note, this implies that at least 2 staff are entitled to a Biometric Kit. This depicts a situation where human skills are idling due to lack of working tools. Besides, Councils do not have Internet Connections and staff use just calculators for election results and other electoral operations. Such rudimentary conditions would likely only slow down productivity and produce mediocre output.

Discussion and findings

A critical observation of the facts above reveal that colossal work needs to be done in Cameroon as concerns implementing ICT in its electoral process. An examination of the usage of ICT in electoral management in the country can be done in the six major phases of the Electoral Process: (1) Sensitization and Civic Education; (2) Constituency Delimitation; (3) Voter Registration and Data Capture; (4) Voter Verification and Voting; (5) Vote Counting and Computation; and (6) Result Dissemination.

Sensitization and Civic Education are fundamental components of the electoral process. Citizens need to be schooled on why and how they should participate in elections. The use of the Internet, Websites and popular social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube and special mobile applications to disseminate voter education messages in real-time and cost-effectively would invariably yield fruits to the electoral process. Unfortunately, none of these communication avenues are utilized by the election's officers of Bui Division, as observed in the aforementioned documentation.

Constituency Delimitation is the equitable and balanced segmentation of communities into units for electoral representation in the body politics (Umar Pate, 2008). Constituency boundaries deliberately carved in favor of one political candidate or group, thereby disadvantaging others would definitely produce unrealistic and unfair electoral representation and outcomes. This risk can be averted by applying ICT solutions like digital mapping, digital charts, Global Positioning System (GPS) and GIS Satellite Footprints. A perusal of the operational records in the various Electoral Offices reveals that boundary delimitation is based on estimates and not on digital or GPS device.

Voter Registration and Data Capture are indispensable prerequisites for free and fair elections. Voter registers hold the accurate identities of potential voters and this is achieved by digitally capturing the biometric data of willing persons who are twenty (20) years and above, in Cameroon. By our research documentation, the Election Management Offices of Bui Division possess and utilize Biometric Kits for this purpose. However, only fourteen (14) biometric kits are allocated to the thirty-one (31) staff in the six Branch offices. This implies that two staff are entitled to a biometric kit, meaning that a kit operator has to standby and wait for his/her collaborator to finish before they can work. Ideally, thirty-one (31) biometric kits would have been allocated to the thirty-one (31) staff so that they serve Bui Division's population of about 322,000 inhabitants.

The validity of **Voter Verification and Voting** on Election Day is determined by the quality of ICT solutions. Double or multiple voting incidences and other rigging tricks can be eradicated or minimized

by a Voter Verification and Voting System that is digitally enabled. This involves the use of electronic recoding machine, optical scanning system, use of smart cards and card readers at the polling stations. Categorically, the Elections Administration Offices of Bui Division do not have any of these devices and most staff have never even heard about such. In fact, voter verification and voting are manually conducted.

The Vote Counting and Computation operations of an elections is remarkably facilitated by the Results Management System. The manual tasks of vote counting, tallying, calculations with calculators and hand-recording of results is always sluggish, prone to errors and even manipulations. But a Results Management System would incorporate software with analytical potentials of consolidating voting data and processing them in easily readable formats. The speed, accuracy and flexibility of such technology enhances electoral credibility and integrity. Regrettably, the Elections officials in this Division are not in possession of this facility; consequently, they utilize the manual methods for vote counting and recording.

Having organized the Elections and obtained the Results, it is important to publish or disseminate them for the consumption of the general public – especially the electorate, the candidates and the stakeholders at various levels. This **Results Dissemination** phase would give an official statement of the general outcome of the elections, thus avoiding tendencies of destructive rumors which can generate unnecessary post-election conflicts. Results Dissemination can appropriately be done on the local webpage of Electoral Management office of Bui Division. Strangely, in this jurisdiction, no such webpage exists and none of the Branch offices has any Internet Connections.

Conclusion

This article reveals the observation of acute inadequacies of ICT implementation in Electoral Management particularly in Bui Division and Cameroon on general terms. There is a gross lack of modern electoral materials that eventually culminates in the near absence of ICT application in electoral operations in the Division. Poor sensitization and civic education, inappropriate constituency delimitation, mediocre voter registration, uncertain voter verification and voting, rudimentary vote counting and computation, and unsatisfactory dissemination of elections results, characterize the country's electoral system. Thus, the irregularities in electoral outcomes were a function of poor implementation of ICT infrastructure and strategies. These challenges necessitate concrete action that would transform and modernize the entire political set up, in order to ensure genuine representation of the people's choices as a fundamental standard of true democracy.

Recommendations

To salvage the deplorable ICT implementation as it is now, some recommendations are advanced: We propose that Cameroon's EMB would design a realistic ICT Implementation Strategic Plan and Operational blueprints that galvanize effective action in its administration of electoral affairs. This involves intensively training elections officers on the techniques of electoral digital technology, procuring the necessary ICT devices, and setting them up in the respective field branch offices.

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