

# **Critical and Peculiar Challenges of the 2015 Nigeria's General Elections in the Core Niger Delta: A Participant Observer's Perspective**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Like most issues in the development of a country, the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria were enmeshed in sundry phenomenal challenges which need to be addressed. The most devastating challenges experienced in the core Niger Delta during the 2015 elections appear to be peculiar to the zone. Therefore, the aims of this study was to comprehensively evaluate the major critically peculiar challenges that bedevilled the 2015 General Elections in the core Niger Delta region and to proffer possible solutions that will make successive elections in the region very plausible for all stakeholders. Qualitative field research design was adopted for the study. The major data needed for the study were gathered from the experiences of the researcher in the field and from unstructured interviews with major stakeholders during the elections in the region. The study concluded that the 2015 well-founded and well-planned general elections were marred by irregularities that were uncommon in the core Niger Delta. It recommended that Special Forces should be sent to the region during elections to protect voters and election officers. It is also recommended that only morally-tested and highly-principled INEC staff should be sent to the zone because the politicians in the area are very creative in compromising election officials.*

**Keywords:** Election, Delta, Critically, Participant, Niger and Core.

## **Introduction**

Official participatory choosing of leaders in form of formal government organized elections started in Africa in 1848; the first elections to legislative councils in former British colonies such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone and Zambia took place in the 1920s (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2014 and Staffan, 2006). Therefore, elections are not novel to the Nigerian State and her citizens. Nigeria has passed the “founding elections” stage (Staffan, 2006). From the pre-colonial era to date the Nigerian people have been conducting some forms of elections at all levels—in the families, communities and in different types of cultural, economic and political associations.

Consequently, Nigeria can be safely regarded as an “election country” because virtually all largely unknown and as well as known associations such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG), Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN), etc conduct elections to get their executive members. It is a fact that all the students’ unions in tertiary institutions in Nigeria conduct major elections every two years.

Election is not merely a condition for democracy; it is a necessity and necessary process for democracy, development, peace, unity and the achievement of purely economic-related goals such as the MDGs (Omilusi, 2013 and Collier and Lisa 2008). Since independence, elections for legislators and chief executives in Nigeria have always been marred by irregularities because of so many factors that are now well-known. However, successive governments have claimed to either tackle or promise to tackle these challenges with the help of electronic devices, information technology or others (Omilusi, 2013).

The 2015 general elections were supposed to make or unmake Nigeria and this was why millions of United States dollars were expended to achieve near perfect elections (Leke, 2015 and Bakara, 2015). This explains, to a large extent too, why the 2015 general elections elicited a lot of interest from Nigerians all over the world as well as from the international community. Unfortunately, however, the 2015 general elections also fell below acceptable international

standards in the core Niger Delta because of some major challenges which to some extent were not expected by the authorities saddled with the duties to manage the elections. Therefore, this study is a comprehensive evaluation of the crucial and to a large extent peculiar challenges that bedevilled the 2015 elections in the core Niger Delta.

To this end, the study is divided into five major sections. Sections one and two covered the rationale and methodology adopted for the study and the post-independence history of elections in Nigeria. Section three dealt with the analysis of the special and novel features of the 2015 general elections that were supposed to make them free and fair. Section four outlined the major critical and peculiar challenges of the 2015 election in the core Niger Delta. The key causes and the rampant nature of the critical and peculiar challenges across the zone were also covered in this section. The last section of the study covered the comprehensive recommendations made in the light of the critical and special challenges our field work unearthed.

### **Rationale and Methodology**

It is a fact that, in the whole of the core Niger Delta region the just-concluded, well-planned and well-funded general elections were a near farce because of unusual challenges that were largely unexpected. The following three major points buttressed this assertion. One, the former president and so many other eligible voters in the core Niger Delta could not go through one of the major normal accreditation processes, finger print verification, with the Card Readers provided in the voting points because of perhaps the type of the occupation (fishing) common in the area. Two, in some parts of the core Niger Delta, elections to State Houses of Assemblies are inconclusive up till now because of the critical and peculiar challenges that needed to be tackled urgently (these challenges will be enumerated below). Three, the unprecedented low turnout of voters in Bayelsa State as a whole and other local and remote crude oil producing communities in the core Niger Delta that was mainly occasioned by fraud connected to the distribution of the voters' cards.

The above and many others, which will be revealed and evaluated systematically in section four, were the by-products of the uncharacteristic and critical challenges of the 2015 general elections in the core Niger Delta. Consequently, the major rationale of this study is to comprehensively

deal with the peculiar and special challenges that bedevilled the 2015 general elections in the whole of the core Niger Delta so that subsequent elections in the area will not suffer the same fate.

The data for this study were gathered principally during the elections through participant observation and unstructured interviews. Politicians, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials, INEC ad-hoc staff, community leaders, security personnel and voters were interviewed before, during and after the main election days.

### **Elections in Nigeria: From Independence to 2011**

In reaction to the political changes of the early 1990s, according to Staffan (2006) many Africanists became “transitologists”. This is because they do not want the transitions from military to civil rules on the continent to become “virtual democracies”; “big man,” neopatrimonial; clientelist; informalized, and disordered politics that had in the past dominated the style of most African government and politics. Successful and largely acceptable general elections are now synonymous with democratic and economic development (Collier and Lisa 2008). The struggle for economic development and to be accepted as a civilized nation by the Global North have been compelling Nigeria, to a large degree, to be conducting periodic elections. However, these elections have so far not met “international standards”.

As a result of poorly conducted elections with little or no regard for the sentiments of the voters, Nigeria is fast derailing into one of the pseudo-democracies that pervades materially underdeveloped or developing countries (Oni; Chidozie and Agbude,2013 and Omilusi, 2013). The verdict that since the attainment of flag independence in 1960, Nigeria has not fully conducted largely free and fair elections was succinctly echoed by Omilusi (2013). He summarized the elections debacle of the country from 1964 to 2011 thus:

Nigeria became a republic in 1963 and subsequently had its post-independence election in December 1964...., the election was marred by violence, rigging and corruption and later led to a military take over....The 1979 elections were fairly smoother than the those of 1964....The 1983 elections which were conducted by the civilian government headed by Shagari ...were both badly organized and managed. The June 12, 1993 presidential election...witnessed some irregularities and violence. Polls in 1999 and 2003 were characterized by widespread violence, intimidation, bribery, vote rigging and corruption.

The 2007 state and federal elections have fallen short of basic international and regional standards. The April 2011 elections...like previous elections, the pools were riddled with malpractices, logistical deficiencies and procedural inconsistencies (Omilusi, 2013:47-74).

The fact that Nigeria has not been conducting largely free, fair and violent-free elections is one of the triggers of the quest by the immediate past Nigerian government and the Nigerian people and their development partners to make the huge investments that were needed to make the 2015 general election a success (Olayiwola, 2014; Idike, 2014; Paul, Muhammad and Eri, 2014 and Ojo, Adewunmi and Oluwale, 2013).

As stated earlier, the 2015 general elections were regarded in most quarters as the processes that would either project positively the image of Nigeria or to trigger the country's implosion (Lake, 2015 and Bakare, 2015). To the International Crisis Group (2014):

Nigeria's presidential, parliamentary and state (sic) gubernatorial and assembly elections, scheduled for February 2015, will be more contentious than usual. Tensions within and between the two major political parties, competing claims to the presidency between northern and Niger Delta politicians and along religious lines, the grim radical Islamist Boko Haram insurgency and increasing communal violence in several northern states, along with inadequate preparations by the electoral commission and apparent bias by security agencies, suggest the country is heading toward a very volatile and vicious electoral contest. If this violent trend continues, and particularly if the vote is close, marred or followed by widespread violence, it would deepen Nigeria's already grave security and governance crises (International Crisis Group, 2014:3)

That former President Goodluck Jonathan actually tamed the violence that could have characterized the largely poorly conducted elections in the core Niger Delta, especially, is an acceptable fact now in the history of the development of democracy in Nigeria (Abati, 2015). Before the challenges of the 2015 general elections in the core Niger Delta under focus are stated and analyzed, it is germane to review the new and special features of the 2015 general elections that were designed to make them a huge success. The special features of the just-concluded elections unfortunately also contributed to the peculiar challenges that enveloped the electoral processes in the core Niger Delta.

## **2015 Election: An Analysis of the Special Features**

As a result of the legitimate quest to make the 2015 general elections a huge success, the election management agency, INEC, with the collaboration of major development partners and experts designed almost fraud-proof mechanisms. The election anti-fraud strategies and devices introduced during the 2015 elections were to all intents and purposes very novel to elections in the country. These special features were also mounted or used all over the core Niger Delta. They indeed, however, contributed to some of the critical challenges observed in the zone. The special features of the 2015 general elections are:

- 1) **Permanent Voters' Card (PVC):** This is a special permanent plastic voters' card with micro chips provided for eligible and correctly registered voters all over the country. The PVC replaced the paper voters' cards (temporary voters' card) that can easily be produced by anybody. The PVC has unique features that made it difficult for politicians to produce for election rigging purposes. The PVC was an essential tool for the accreditation of voters in the last elections.
- 2) **Card Reader:** In the 2015 general elections, each voting points was provided with a Card reader. The Card Reader was used to verify the biometrics of the voter, thereby check-mating all forms of impersonation by voters. The Card Reader was an integral part of collation at the Registration Area Level (INEC Training Manual, 2015:35). Unfortunately, in the core Niger Delta, the card readers malfunctioned in some voting units while in most other voting units they were not used because the ad-hoc staff were compromised. The Card Readers were used to verify the voters' PVCs during the accreditation process.
- 3) **Incidence forms:** The main purpose of the Incidence Form was to report major challenges encounter in the accreditation of voters which could not be taken care of by the ad-hoc staff in the polling units. However, in the core Niger Delta, Incidence Forms were used to only compile names of voters that the Card Readers could not authenticate their PVCs during accreditations. This was a source of huge fraud too.
- 4) **Special Accreditation period:** Unlike in the past, voters were not allowed to vote immediately after they are accredited. There were scheduled times for accreditation and

for voting. Officially, according to the INEC Manual (2015) “accreditation shall commence at 8.00 am and close at 1:00 pm; however, all voters who are already on the queue by 1:00 pm shall be accredited”. This actually caused confusion, because some voters did not come back to cast their votes, some even thought accreditation was the real voting! This was as a result of lack of voters’ education or language barrier. In the core Niger Delta, most of the voters are still unlettered. Communication dysfunction between the ad-hoc staff and the local people is the major cause of this challenge.

- 5) **Special voting time:** voting during the last elections started from 1:30 pm. This was quite new to most of the voters in the core Niger Delta. They were used to cast their votes immediately each of them went through the accreditation process.
- 6) **Permission to the use of electronic recording devices by voters to record the processes of the elections:** Before now voters were directly or indirectly not allowed to use electronic devices such as cameras, videos, etc to record the processes of the elections in their voting points and collation areas. However, the managers of the 2015 elections expressly permitted voters to record the processes. This opportunity contributed to the reduction of electoral malpractice in some parts of the country. In some parts of the country such as the core Niger Delta this novel opportunity led to the destruction of lives and properties of some voters by ex-militants and cultists.
- 7) **The exclusion of the Armed Forces Personnel from securing and monitoring the processes within the immediate voting points:** The use of the personnel of the Nigerian armed forces to protect voters, ad-hoc staff and elections’ sensitive and non-sensitive materials was a norm before the 2015 general elections. However, the personnel of the country’s armed forces were not allowed to be part of the protection of voters and election materials directly in the recent elections in voting points. This perhaps explains why the personnel of the Nigerian Army were almost absent in all voting points in the core Niger Delta region. This spelt doom for the process in most part of the core Niger Delta where illegal para-military elements and formations are still prominent because of the recent crude oil-induced violent conflict.

- 8) Voters were allowed to monitor the processes near the voting points after voting:** The mantra of “vote protection” by voters was canvassed and permitted constitutionally by INEC in the just concluded elections. Voters were allowed to monitor the sorting, counting and winners’ declarations processes in the voting points. This was a novel idea that in some part of the country helped to reduced fraud. However, in other parts of the country such as the Niger Delta, this widow actually endangers the lives of innocent voters.

The special features of the 2015 elections, which also featured prominently in the core Niger Delta and in most parts of the country that were designed to make the 2015 general elections very successful have been highlighted above. However, as it has been stated, most of these novel and laudable features contributed to the critical challenges that bedeviled the elections in the core Niger Delta. Below are the analyses of the major challenges that made the 2015 general elections unacceptable to most participants, international observers and the ordinary voters in the region.

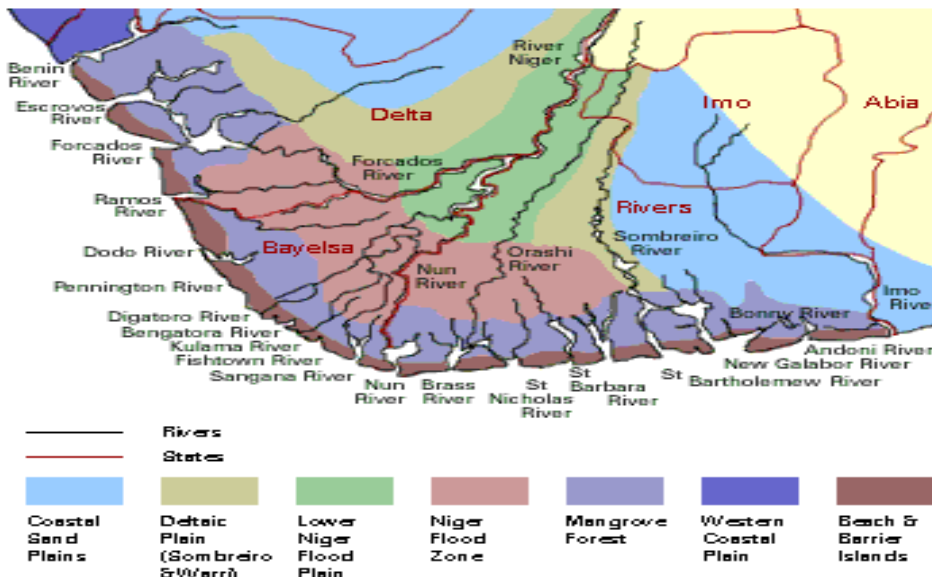
#### **Unique Challenges: the Core Niger Delta and the 2015 Election**

The 2015 general elections were not a real success in the core Niger Delta. This was because of the peculiar critical challenges that bedevilled all the elections that were conducted. These critical and peculiar challenges in the region were complex and they were instrumental in the destructions of lives and properties in the region under focus. Some of these challenges were not clearly foreseen by top INEC officials.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is located mostly in the southern part of the country; it is the section from which tributaries of the River Niger drain into the Atlantic Ocean. It occupies a total land area of 112 square kilometres, 7 percent of Nigeria’s land mass (Social Development Integrated Centre, 2009; Nseabasi, 2010 and Etekpe, 2009). At present, the Niger Delta region has a population of about 45 million people (24 % of Nigeria’s total population); the region is one of the largest wetlands in the world, covering 70,000sqm (Balouga, 2006, National Bureau of Statistics, 2010 and Nseabasi, 2010).



## Map of the Niger Delta



**Fig 3:1 Map of the Niger Delta, source: Urhobo Historical Society (2012:1)**

A delta is a triangular alluvial deposit at the mouth of a river caused by the tidal current (Etekpe, 2009) there are several deltas in the world; but the following Table only lists the ten most viable deltas in the world:

**Table 1:1: Ten most Viable Deltas in the World**

S/N	Name of Delta	Location	Size
1.	Mekong Delta	China – Asia	49,520 Kilometres
2.	Mississippi Delta	United State of America–North America	3,705 Kilometres
3.	Niger Delta	Nigeria – Africa	70,000 sq Kilometres
4.	Yangtze Delta	China – Asia	
5.	Pearl Delta	China – Asia	
6.	Nile Delta	Egypt – Africa	3,349 sq Kilometres
7.	Okavango Delta	Angola –Africa	16,000 sq Kilometres
8.	Orinoco Delta	Venezuela–South America	2,140 sq Kilometres
9.	Mahoakam Delta	Indonesia – Asia	
10.	Mackenzie Delta	Canada –North America	1,738 sq Kilometres

**Source: Etekpe: 2009**

The Niger Delta is one of the most blessed deltas in the world as a result of the huge deposit of natural resources in the area (Omofonmwan and Lucky, 2009). The region is estimated to have approximately more than 32 billion barrels of oil reserve and about 104.7 million cubic feet of gas deposit (Omofonmwan and Lucky, 2009).

There are some major disagreements of which states/communities truly made up the Niger Delta in Nigeria. To Etekpe (2007), Alagoa (2005), and Saro-Wiwa (1995); Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states are the states that made up the Niger Delta (historical or core Niger Delta). This observation is in agreement with the areas that were slated for the now defunct, Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) to cover and develop in 1961. The special areas created for the NDDDB to develop economically and otherwise were: Yenagoa, Degema, Delta Provinces and Port-Harcourt, Ogoni, and Western Ijaw Divisions. At present because of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) law and other issues that are largely economic, the Niger Delta is now made up of nine states: Abia, Edo, Ondo, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta (NDDC Law, 2000 cited by Etekpe, 2007). This informed the categorization of the region into the political and historical/core Niger Delta (Azaiki, 2006).

The Willink Commission Report (1958), Popoola Report (1999), Ogomudia Report (2001) and the Ledum Mittee Technical Committee Report (2008) have highlighted the problems associated with the region. The core Niger Delta in this study refers to the historical Niger Delta. These areas are largely swampy and most of the communities in this area are along the shore-line of the Atlantic Ocean. Besides the difficult topography of the region, especially the complicated geography of the core Niger Delta which made the management of the 2015 general election difficult for INEC; there were other peculiar challenges that were largely not associated with the natural state of the region.

Table 1:2 outlines the critical challenges that bedevilled the 2015 general elections in the core Niger Delta. These challenges should be tackled immediately so that they will not mar subsequent elections in the region.

**Table: 1.2 Critical and peculiar challenges of the 2015 General Elections in the Core Niger Delta and Possible Causes.**

N/S	Challenges	Causes of the challenges	Interview comments and experiences from the field	Frequency of occurrences and Remarks
1	More than half of the registered voters do not have their voters' cards (PVCs). INEC issued the voters cards but the people did not get them.	A good number of the voters' cards issued by INEC to registered voters are with top politicians and community leaders.	Most voters came to the polling units to complain of not collecting their cards. Some confessed, "they went to see the leaders for their cards...."	This is common in all the local areas in the core Niger Delta. However, it was more prevalent in Yenagoa and other Bayelsa state local communities.
2	The local people lack the basic knowledge of the voting processes and the Ad-hoc staff were not able to communicate with the voters because of language barrier.	A good numbers of the ad-hoc staff did not understand the local languages of the local people. Poor voters' education was a major cause too.	"I don't want to vote because na grammar people they control everything, I don't speak the INEC people languages..."	This was prevalent in all the communities and towns in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states (core Niger Delta).
3	About 90% of the ad-hoc staff were not trained. They did not attend the training sessions but they were mobilized because they had "connections." Some of them are "serial" INEC ad-hoc staff. Most were non-federal/states' civil servants. A good number of the "serial" ad-hoc staff are unemployed.	Most of the INEC staff in the core Niger Delta are dishonest and they allowed themselves to be influenced by politicians, etc	Most of the forms that were handled by the "serial" ad-hoc staff were mutilated; there was rampant remedial refilling and correcting of records after voting in the INEC offices.	This was rampant. It was a region-wide phenomenon.
4	All the Ad-hoc staff besides the NYSC personnel were posted to their places of work on election days.	Late and corrupt manipulation of ad-hoc staff lists.	During the presidential, etc elections we were sent to our places of work by 12: 58 pm on the day of the election. Some of the ward and LGAs collation officers got to their stations on Sunday morning.	This was very common in Bayelsa state. Most of the ad-hoc staff that were posted to riverine communities in Delta and Rivers were posted very late too.
5	Ad-hoc staff were not given their transport, accommodations and feeding allowances, etc before they were sent to the field to work. This gave most of the ad-hoc staff additional motivation to collect "favours/appreciations" from politicians and others in the local communities.	Continuous dishonest manipulation of ad-hoc staff lists.	I was not paid my transport, etc allowances until after the elections. Up till now my training allowance have not been paid.	This was mostly a Bayelsa State problem. However, reports from Delta and Rivers states indicated that some ad-hoc staff were not mobilized too financially.
6	Ad-hoc staff were encouraged	Lack of security in	When most of the	This happened in the

	openly by some INEC staff to seek protection from ex-militants, etc and to collect bribes from top politicians, etc.	the polling units and non-payment of ad-hoc staff allowances before the elections.	ad-hoc staff called the INEC offices complaining about lack of security in the field, the reply was “seek help from the big men, go and see the youth leaders, make sure you aren’t too strict, etc....”	entire core Niger Delta states.
7	Some communities presented “communal consensus candidates” to ad-hoc staff and all other voters were prevented from coming out of their houses to vote by “communities’ leaders”.	Lack of voters’ education. Lack of security, rampant extreme poverty in the areas, greed and the easy way ad-hoc staff were manipulated by politicians.	In some local communities ad-hoc staff were asked to just fill-in the gaps in their forms for “consensus candidates”.	This was mostly common in the crude oil producing communities in the three states under focus.
8	Card readers’ inability to read the local people’s finger prints.	This may be cause by the occupation—fishing, of most of the local people.	Most of the polling units’ staff reported this. The former president’s finger print could not be read too.	This was prevalent in most of the fishing communities.
9	Lack of means of transportation for willing voters.	The ban placed on the movement of boats on election days was the major cause of this challenge. Most people in the region are always on the move (itinerants) they do not have fixed places of abode because of their occupation.	“We can’t suffer ourselves to go and vote. No means of transport to move to vote” these are the regular answers when eligible voters who did not vote were interviewed.	Very common in the local areas because of the geography of the area.
10	Lack of official security in the polling units and collation centres and the rampant use of cultists and ex-militants as the main security personnel.	Most of the police men and others who were sent to the local communities were not seen. Fear of the official security men to go to the creeks.	I, like most other ad-hoc staff were protected directly or indirectly by cultists and ex-militants.	This was a region-wide issue. It was even common in some cities such as Warri, Port-Harcourt and Yenagoa.
11	Absence of local and international elections’ observers in the local communities.	Insecurity	As it was reported by most of my respondents, I also did not see any election observers in my LGA.	It appears few of the election observers covered only some elite and well protected communities in the major cities.

**Source: author, 2015.**

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Elections are now permanent characteristics of the increasingly globalizing world. In fact, nations are judged now as civilized, even developed, according to the free and fair elections they conduct (Thad and Michael, 2008). No doubt, the 2015 general elections in Nigeria have given the country some credibility internationally and otherwise. However, the fact still remains that the 2015 elections were not as good as they were planned and funded in some parts of the country. That these elections fall below internationally acceptable standards to some extent have been highlighted in this work based on the challenges that were observed in the core Niger Delta.

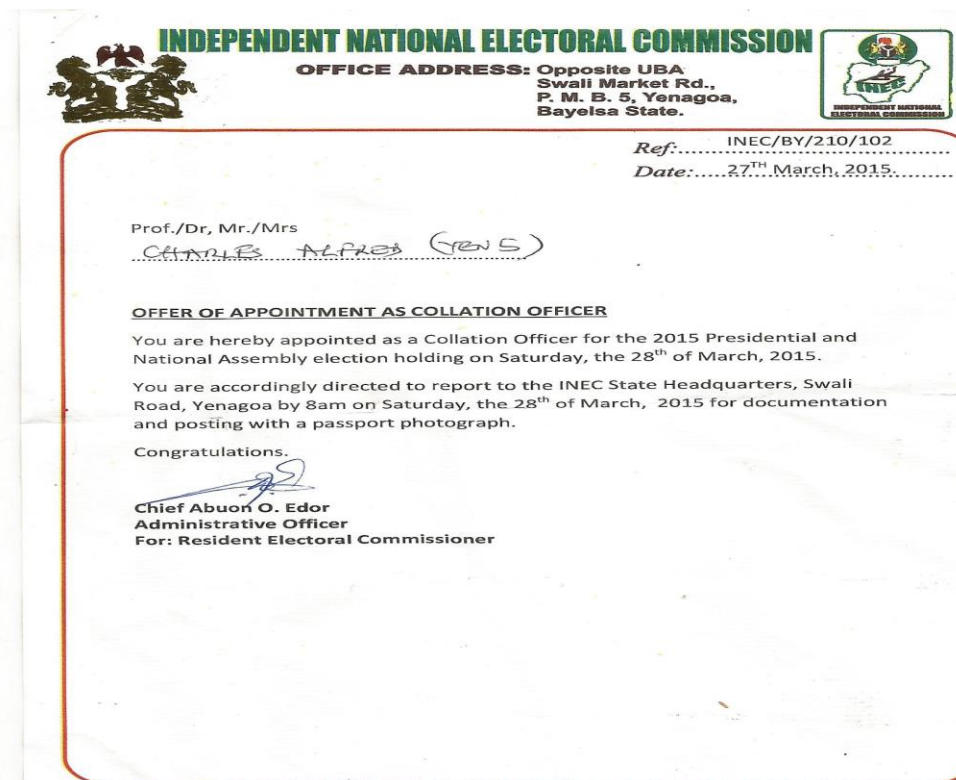
The peculiar challenges that reduced the freeness and fairness of the 2015 elections were not cast on stones like the Ten Commandments. They can be tackled so that subsequent elections in the core Niger Delta will meet internationally acceptable standards. The following are major ways that the challenges observed in the core Niger Delta can be tackled. These ways are:

- 1) Voters' card, that is the PVCs, should be given in the region at the point of registration immediately to the applicants. Mostly importantly, eligible voters' PVCs in the hands of the politicians and communities' heads should be retrieved and given back to the real owners. If this can be done, INEC should give new PVCs out to the registered voters before the next elections.
- 2) The armed force, or other well-resourced special forces (such as the DSS personnel) should be used to protect voters and election materials in election days;
- 3) Only well-educated and well-trained federal civil servants who work outside the zone should be used as major ad-hoc staff in the area;
- 4) Only morally-tested and highly-principled INEC staff should be sent to the zone because the politicians, etc in the area are very creative in persuading election officials to compromise on their duties. The politicians in the core Niger Delta and their major supporters are also very rich, they can bribe election officials with huge sums of money (mostly in foreign currencies) with ease;
- 5) The general security situation in the local communities should be improved. So that voters will vote according to their choices. A good security arrangement will also stop community leaders and politicians to impose "consensus candidates" on the people;

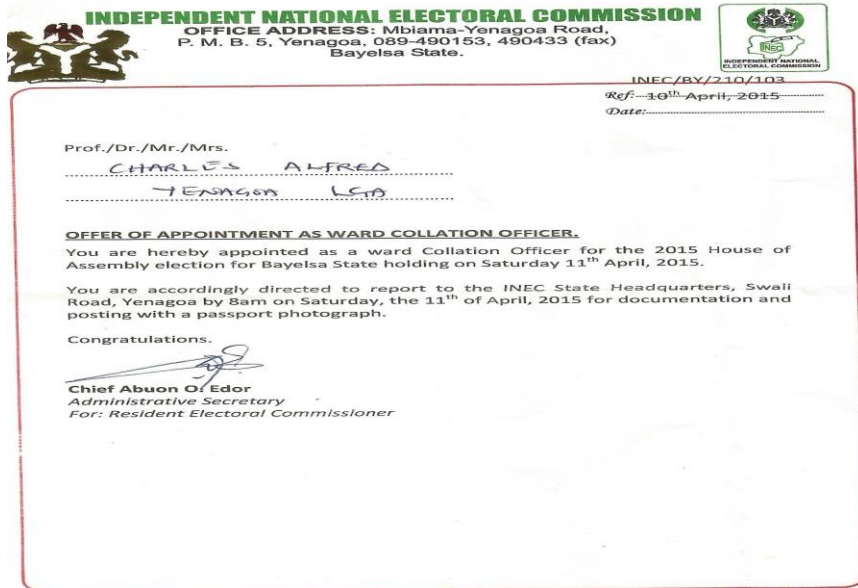
- 6) Every polling unit should have the local languages' translators that can help the local voters to communicate with the polling agents and other election officials. INEC should note that, the core Niger Delta zone is a multi-lingual and multi-dialect area, the Izon language is not the *lingua franca* in the area; and
- 7) Voters should be educated properly with pictures in their local languages. Voters' education should be embedded into the curriculum of the informal and formal school systems in the area.

### Appendixes

#### Appendix 1: Appointment letter for Presidential and National Assembly Elections



#### Appendix 2: An Appointment Letter for Bayelsa State Assembly Election



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