

**Statement on the 2007 Elections in the South East Zone of Nigeria
By the South East Election Mandate Protection Working Group**

The South East Election Mandate Protection Group (SEEMPWG) was formed by participants in a training workshop drawn from the five states of the South East, after thorough deliberations on the state of elections in Nigeria. The objectives of the volunteer group include the monitoring of electoral activities and the 2007 general elections particularly the Presidential/National Assembly Elections and the Gubernatorial and State Assembly elections.

On the 14th, 21st and 28th April 2007 the group monitored elections in the five SE states. The feedback from the field on the elections which has been heralded by President Olusegun Obasanjo, and INEC, as the first in the country's history to have successfully transferred power from one civilian head of state to another has been the same. One of the Volunteers, an elderly man from Nnewi captured the mood of people by singing a popular song that goes thus: "Since I was born, now I am very old, I have never seen an election as rigged as this one." The 2007 elections were meant to mark a milestone in Nigeria's history, after elections in 1999 and 2003 that were plagued with vote-rigging, violence and human rights abuses. But they failed to meet the already-low expectations of Nigerians, as anger and frustration at the vote-rigging resulted in several incidents of violence. The elections were marred by poor organization, lack of transparency and impartiality on the part of INEC, widespread procedural irregularities and fraud.

Months and weeks before the general elections, there were series of civic education meetings, training workshops and seminars to prepare the electorate for the elections. It took a lot of convincing and hard work to remove apathy from the people and get them in the mood to vote. People had already resigned to their fate and adopted the attitude of "siddon look" since a group of their countrymen had decided to impose themselves on the citizenry through the massive rigging of the 2003 elections. This time around, they had been assured that it would not be business as usual and they had been taught how to protect their mandate. Lo and behold, the people were not only disenfranchised, but they could not react in the face of AK 47 rifles used by those who caused them the pain; confirming the saying that they were beaten and prevented from crying.

On the 14th of April 2007, people in the five states trooped to the Polling stations to perform their civic responsibility as early as 7.00am. This zeal was dampened when as late as 3pm in the South East states as well as other states in the country, election materials had not arrived at the stations; and when they arrived there were no result sheets. Thank God for the series of civic education programmes for they knew right away that their fears were coming to pass – the elections were programmed to fail from the onset. They knew that they would be shortchanged and their votes would be another waste of time; so they refused to vote unless the result sheets were brought. The crooks tried to prevail on them to vote and the results would be recorded on plain sheets and signed but the people did not want to be fooled a second time as it had happened in the past elections and the courts did not admit such documents as exhibit in the election

petitions before them. The courts held the position that under the law, the results were to be recorded in a particular form.

In Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi and Abia states voting was undermined by open displays of rigging, intimidation and violence by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and its armed thugs. In many places there was no voting at all, in all the elections. In many rural areas EMPWG visited, polling stations did not open because electoral staff removed ballot boxes and voting papers to government offices or the homes of ruling party officials, in order to thumb print ballot papers, stuff ballot boxes and fabricate results in secret. There was no secrecy in voting. People were expected to vote in the presence of electoral officers who were mostly known PDP card holders in the communities, as there were no voting cubicles. Infact in the Community Primary School Ohaukwu LGA of Ebonyi state, a man stood at the gate of the polling booth with a bag. Any voter that came was asked whom he or she was going to vote for. If the voter said it was for a party other than PDP, the voter was instantly turned back on the ground that the booth was for PDP. If the voter agreed to vote for the PDP, he or she would be let in and invited to a handshake by the man. The handshake turned out to be a clean N1,000 note. Our volunteer observer that refused to accept the money was beaten into coma and carried away in the trunk of a car. He was dumped on the road side thinking he was dead.

Elections did not take place in most of the polling centres all over Anambra state. The Federal Government and INEC were bent on imposing Andy Uba on the people of Anambra State as their governor, and this resulted in large scale and widespread malpractices and fraud by PDP. In all the polling booths, electoral materials came very late (as late as 4pm in some centres) and did not come with result sheets. Apparently, the result sheets had been written up ahead of time. Voting was declared closed before everybody voted leading to several voters being disenfranchised. Pictures of the Action Congress (Chris Ngige) and APGA (Dame Virgy Etiaba) gubernatorial candidates were not on the ballot paper. There were large scale snatching, stuffing and burning of ballot boxes accompanied by sporadic and indiscriminate shooting. Ballot papers littered the place and voters were scared away from the polling booth. At least three INEC offices were set ablaze by frustrated voters and an irate mob determined to curb PDP's arrogance and excesses. These are Onitsha North, Awka North, Orumba South. Even before elections, the desperation in PDP and the President was clear as he had said that this election would be a do or die affair for PDP. It was clearly a conspiracy of the government, INEC and the security forces to install the PDP candidate for governorship and they left no stone unturned in carrying out the assignment.

In Imo state, the elections were not credible as they were characterized by monumental irregularities perpetrated by politicians in collaboration with INEC officials and security agents. For starters, electoral materials did not arrive at the polling booths until about 5:15pm in many polling stations. Reports also had it that people came out in their large numbers to vote but left out of frustration. This situation was the same in okigwe, owerri and orlu senatorial zones. Ballot box stuffing, thumb printing at undesignated venues, supply of inadequate materials, lack of secrecy, unverifiable electoral documents, and

involvement of security agents in manipulating the process were rampant. INEC officials and PDP had a field day thumb printing ballot papers in favour of PDP. In a few places where voting took place, the votes were not recorded after the counting because there were no result sheets available.

Gubernatorial elections were cancelled at the last minute on grounds of violence and malpractices in 4 LGAs. They were rescheduled for the 28th of April. On that day, voter turn out was pathetically low and there were widespread irregularities including late arrival of materials. The 2007 elections have once again, eroded the citizens' confidence in the electoral process and failed the Nigerian people. One monitor in Imo had this to say "I am short of words to describe what actually happened on Saturday. The elites and the elderly are sacrificing the younger generation on the altar of greed. They have kept us as low as goats, dogs and idiots so that they can continue to manipulate us for selfish interests. My heart is bleeding, as I write this report; I am ashamed of being a Nigerian....we are doomed as a nation if this whole process is not cancelled and a fresh election that will be conducted by the United Nations is not put in place...."

In Ebonyi state, accreditation of observers was hard to obtain. Out of over 280 observers of TMG and SEMPWG, only 20 got approval in preference of independent observers; and there were clear instructions not to allow un-accredited observers into the polling centres. Elections in Ebonyi state were characterized by late arrival of electoral materials, violence, bribery and corruption, refusal to count votes in the polling booths using the late closure of polls and unavailability of result sheets as excuse. There were sporadic and indiscriminate shooting along Afikpo Road to scare voters away from the polling centres. Some parties' candidates' photographs were omitted on the ballot paper and they were protesting. Incumbent LG chairmen used their powers remove voting materials for the private use of their party (PDP). This resulted in clashes with opposition parties and burning down of the house of the LG chairman, a nearby petrol station and several vehicles. Many people were wounded. As a result of this, there was no election in Ohaozara as movement of people was restricted in the LG.

The mandate protection training of youths yielded results in Afikpo North. They successfully countered the incumbent LG chairman and a PDP member who organized thugs to ensure that votes were not counted at the polling units and to cart away the ballot boxes. He had at a point, instructed PDP agents to take over thumb printing of the ballot papers after giving the security agents N2, 000 each. They used thugs and security men to compel the presiding officers to tick all the names in the register as having voted. Our monitors were often shown the way out at gun point, for refusing to accept the money and to do their bidding. Two of such observers were abducted by the thugs at Ikwuano area and later released. When they finally took away the ballot boxes, little did they know that the community youths trained under election mandate protection laid ambush for them, and gave them a beating of their lives. The ballot boxes were retrieved from them. However, at the Ngodo community hall and adjoining polling units, thugs succeeded in carrying away the ballot boxes to an unknown destination and that halted voting.

Under the orders of incumbent chairmen, ballot boxes were taken away without counting the votes, with impunity. Not even the protest of the other party agents could stop them as the electoral officials openly supported them. Some of the Chairmen openly canvassed for votes for PDP in the Polling centres. In a few places, where votes were counted, already stamped ballot papers were openly added and on the complaint of an observer, the security agent responded **“Oga our power no reach for that one”**. A Presiding officer who openly handed some booklets of ballot papers and ink pad to PDP agents to go and thumb print in an uncompleted building adjacent to the centre boasted that **“if you like, take me to Abuja, nothing will happen”**.

On the 21st of April 2007, voting started very late in the whole of Ebonyi State, as late as 4.15pm in some places such as Ishielu Local Government Area, especially at Nkalagu and Ezzilo and 5pm at Hausa Quarters along Ogoja Road. Voter turnout was poor when compared to the turnout of the 14/4/07. A cross sampling of voters opinion had it that people were discouraged when the results of the governorship and State House of Assembly were released the previous week. They did not reflect the aspirations of the people.

In Enugu state, the story was not different. There was massive pre-election thumb printing of ballot papers. This was noted in Ezeagu where private houses of PDP members were used for thumb printing ballot papers. It was also reported that people were picked up from the markets and paid N1,000 each to thumb print ballot papers, the day before elections. Generally, voting started after 3pm in most polling centres because of the late arrival of ballot papers, and ended just three hours later. Hundreds of angry voters were turned away and told that ballot papers had run out. Electoral officers complained to observers that they had not been given enough. Later, at the collation centre, polling stations that had received less than 400 ballot papers recorded over 800 votes cast. And at the state electoral office the following day, turnout was officially declared at over 90 per cent, with the ruling PDP taking nearly all votes in every area.

In Abia state, late arrival of materials, insecurity, thuggery, insufficient or non-availability of electoral materials especially result sheets, hijacking of electoral materials, inadequacy of INEC staff, and financial intimidation were prevalent. In nearly all the places INEC officials and materials did not arrive at the polling stations until about 1.00pm or not at all. This led to some form of voter apathy as those who came earlier turned back and took the news home. Security was inadequate. The few police people available at the polling stations were not armed and that made the assignment of thugs easy for them. Indeed at Ibere Ward 1 thugs allegedly came in a car with government number plate (25ABSG5) and in the full view of the armed policemen hijacked the ballot box and materials. Thugs had a field day in many of the areas, especially towards the counting period. In Uturu area (Ward II) PPA thugs scared people away with live snake and made away with electoral materials. Our monitors reported that elections did not take place in Isiala Ngwa North area as thugs suspected to be of Niger Delta Volunteer Force arrived the night before and took over proceedings, shooting indiscriminately and throwing grenades. The voters' registers were mixed up and did not reflect the names of the people who showed up to vote.

At the end of polls, official results showed a stunning success for the PDP. The party's presidential candidate, Umaru Yar'Adua, received 70 per cent of the vote, according to the electoral commission, and its gubernatorial candidates won at least 29 of Nigeria's 36 states. PDP also won almost all the legislative seats in the country at all levels. But condemnation of the polls has been unanimous. If these elections stand, Nigeria will have a president, governors and legislators in the next four years with the most questionable legitimacy in the country's history. What we have seen is that the corrupt capitalist ruling class will continue to recycle itself in power, irrespective of mass opposition.

The last hope of the citizens appears to be the judiciary. In the run-up to the polls, the judiciary showed itself to be independent, ordering the electoral commission to reinstate opposition candidates on the ballot, including the vice-president, whom the government had expended enormous efforts to exclude. The wide array of court cases now under way will make life difficult for the PDP, and may hold some embarrassing surprises.

Nigerians have called for rejection and cancellation of the elections. Others called for immediate reconstitution of the electoral body, a re-run of all elections, and convocation of a Sovereign National Conference. Civil society organisations and social movements were called upon to come together and call the people to the street to take their destiny in their own hands. A week of political protests around the country to include mass processions, leafleting, rallies and mass meetings as soon as possible have also been proposed.

However, our position in the SEMPWG, is that any strategy that will offer Obasanjo a third term on a platter of gold is not acceptable to us. Cancellation of elections is bound to leave a vacuum and hence set the country back several years. Reconstituting INEC will not make any difference either as the executive retains the power to constitute INEC. It will replace Iwu and the rest of them with another set of its cronies. Rather than this, we propose a constitutional amendment that would make INEC truly independent by removing the power to appoint principal officers of INEC from the executive. Election tribunals have been set up to entertain election petitions. Aggrieved politicians should explore the legal mechanism to seek redress for any wrong done them. INEC has an opportunity to launder its already battered image by cooperating with politicians who are filing petitions by releasing to them, documents they need to prosecute their cases. It is also important, in order to restore confidence in the electoral process, that all persons found to have been involved in electoral malpractices should as a matter of urgency be identified, arrested and prosecuted. Those wrongly detained should be released immediately.