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An Interview with Engr. Dr. Hilkiyah Igoni (MNSE) on Electoral Processes in Nigeria

E-Newsletter: Our aim of conducting these interviews is to sensitise the Public with not only events in the engineering fields, but also in other areas that will keep us informed. Before we start, we will like you to tell us about your profile, your contribution to the engineering profession and your services to the Rivers State Independent Electoral Commission.



Engr. Dr. Igoni, MNSE.

Engr. Dr. Igoni: I want to express my appreciation to NSEPH E-newsletter team for giving me this privilege to be one of your guests. I am Engr. Dr Hilkiyah Igoni. I had my primary and secondary education in Bonny after which I proceeded to Rivers State University of Science and Technology where I studied Agricultural Engineering and I graduated in 1989 with Second Class-Upper Division. I had my Master's Degree program in 1991 in Power and Machinery Engineering at the University of Ibadan. I joined the RSUST as an Assistant Lecturer in May 1992. I did not only work with Afribank Nigeria Plc. as an executive assistant, but also with TSKJ on Bonny Island on NLNG project. At the end of my contract in 1999 I gained admission with the Rivers State University of Science & Technology for a PhD program in Environmental Management. This I concluded in 2002 and started lecturing with the university, until November 27th 2007 when in the pleasure of the Rivers State government I was appointed Electoral Commissioner to work in the Rivers State Independent Electoral Commission.

E-Newsletter: That's quite interesting, thank you. What challenges do you face as an Electoral Commissioner know that you have an engineering background and perhaps your prospects in this new assignment?

Engr. Dr. Igoni: There are numerous challenges coming from a teaching background as if coming from a sea environment to a muddy water environment as it were. The way we do politics here people see it as a do or die thing. First of all I was confronted with the challenge of convincing people, who know you that you have not come to do the bidding of government because once you are appointed by the government in a commission like this, the assignment you have to do have been pre-determined by the appointing person. In other words since the governor has appointed you, you will have to do the bidding of the governor and it is expected that the bidding of the government is for you to rig the election for him. So that is the pitying challenges on this job. Interestingly and incidentally, people had already known me and the character I have been made up of. People know that I stand for the truth and do what is right all the time. So I was able to convince people in that regard and also to the fact that the governor himself came in through the instrumentality of the rule of law. So he was determined to do what is right. He said to us that he was appointing us in our individual capacity as men of integrity. My ASUU background has helped me in this noble assignment. I have at the back of my mind that at the end of appointment what is most likely is that one will go back to the university, so on a general note that was part of the challenges. When the elections actually came on board, it was interestingly one of your members (publicity committee) assisted us during the election and he too could testify to the challenges we had. Politicians came wanting us to actually do their bidding. I must say that by God's special grace, he has built me with these two qualities. But I want to say without fear of contradiction that the Governor who appointed us did not in any way interfere with what we are doing except some of his subjects who see it as a do or die affair. Most of them believe that they have a responsibility to deliver their constituencies, those are the people that are mounting such pressure but God has enabled us to withstand and overcome their pressure without doing what is wrong.

E-Newsletter: We thank God for that special grace given to you. What effects or effect are/is the security situation in the country on electoral process in Rivers State?

Engr. Dr. Igoni: I must say that the effects are incremental, if you follow the electoral process in this state you will see that first of all there are places we couldn't go to conduct election, it was as bad as that. You have an assignment to do and you couldn't even go to the place to carry out that assignment by reason of the turbulence in that area. The case in hand I can remember immediately is that of Rumuekpe which happened to be under my constituency and in the first and second instances we couldn't go to Rumuekpe, it was so terrifying when even the security aid you have will tell you that they will not go with you. If you as the commissioner in charge is insisting on going and the police men assigned to you tell you that you are on your own. So we had that kind of problem that we couldn't go and of course again you have also seen that we have occasion to cancel a lot of results. We need to do that for several reasons, we are talking particularly as it concerns security. There were a lot of hoodlums that distorted the electoral process. They would not allow voting to go on peacefully, you may like to call them political tugs, militants. In a nutshell the security situation really affected the election, but I thank God that we were able to get through.

E-Newsletter: As an engineer, a banker and a teacher what are your areas of interest in this your new assignment?

Engr. Dr. Igoni: This is very interesting; first of all I have associated engineering profession with high level discipline and decency. As an engineer, primarily you are expected to be decent, disciplined in exercising your engineering assignment otherwise you will have a lot of problems, in fact you will kill people. One of my lecturers used to tell of a story of one marine engineer who forgot to multiply a design equation by two and it caused him his life. I must say that I have brought that discipline on this job and of course engineering mind is a technical mind, and this is a job that you really cannot effectively execute without bringing in your technical mind in addition to moral standard. I must say that my training as an engineer has really impacted on this job. Even my colleagues have a lot of confidence in me. I don't only work here as an electoral commissioner, but also the commissioner in charge of works, estates and field services and that have to be completely engineering infrastructure. So we are in charge of maintenance of the facilities that you see both at the head quarters and the Local Government Areas, so one would not have been able to do that without the application of Engineering Knowledge.

E-Newsletter: What is your view on after-election, tribunals and appeal court judgement on the electoral process?

Engr. Dr. Igoni: I think it's healthy for democracy and for the rule of law. My only source of worry is that our courts here in recent times are doing very well but at every level of our activities, we need a lot of discipline. Nigerians appear to be poor at heart, we have high level moral bankruptcy, by that it will appear that the courts are not helping but ordinarily the court processes, the election tribunals and all that are suppose to make democracy healthier given the various tiers government that we have. If I have to talk specifically as it concerns us here, as a commission, we have had to protest a lot of judgement given by the tribunals both the lower tribunals and the appeal court. As I talk to you now we have a case, where we think the tribunal did not do well. Just to give you an instance, as a commission we did not consider tax clearance certificates as a prerequisite in qualifying a candidate. Initially we had wanted to abide by our bye-law but when our attention was drawn to a recited case in the appeal court to reflect that, that certificate should not be a condition for qualifying or disqualifying we dropped that requirement but to our surprise the appeal court judgement disqualified a candidate who had won election by reasons of his not paying taxes as at and when due. So we called our lawyer and told them "Look we have to fight

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against this case”, we are very mindful of the impression the public has about electoral commission because everybody thinks that you are doing everything to support the winning party and even in places where other parties have won to show how fair and free, we allowed the election to go. Some other parties won some councillors seat in some LGAs. By reason of the discretion of the ruling party, to the extent that they were not able to manipulate the commission to achieve what they wanted. They went to court and of course you at that point we were no longer in control so they got away with it but we said “no we do not accept this” so we wrote back to the court, that matter is still in court. We have a lot of cases that are pending in court and if you are talking with our chairman, he will tell you that he is not happy with the way the courts are handling the matter. Some how the politicians also use the instrumentality of the judiciary to scuttle what we are doing here. To be honest with you I cannot remember the number of orders we have received. At times we want to conduct an election the next day and a court order would be served on the day of election.



Engr. Dr. Igoni (left) & Engr. Dr. Ujile

E-Newsletter: How can this prepare the citizen for subsequent elections, the unhealthy environment, the perception the public will have on the judiciary in terms of cancellation of election, disqualification of candidate?

Engr. Igoni: With reference to our state and our commission, I must quickly say that the citizens have a lot of confidence in us. When we came the situation was very bad. Everybody believed that we were not going to do what was right. In fact some of us in our board meetings have agreed with the view of such persons. So we will do whatever we can to erase that impression and we went ahead on several stakeholders meetings. In the cause of these stakeholders' meeting we got a lot of revelation, we got to know a lot of things that politicians use to do to be able to have a strong hold on the commission so that the commission will do their bidding. Now armed with these facts we built our code of conduct, developed our guide lines for the election and this became clear that the commission was set for the election. We tried to convince them, held meetings, invited political parties but they didn't believe, to the point that even in the field

we were begging them to come and vote, they said “no, they know that the result has been written”, that's the impression people had. However, after election when we began to announce our result and the voters now started seeing that the results are true representation of what happened in the field. The AC chairmanship candidate came to my office to apologize; he said he did not know that we meant business. As I talk with you, we are very optimistic that if we have occasion to conduct election again by reason of what has happened they will comport themselves to come out and exercise their civic right. We believe that in the next election by God's grace if we have the opportunity to conduct the next election (that is if we are not scraped, of course you know that there are speculations to scrap the State Electoral Commission) there will be tremendous improvement in the entire processes.

E-Newsletter: Before we draw the curtain, what advice do you have concerning the security situation of the electoral process for the state and citizens of this nation?

Engr. Dr. Igoni: The security situation in the state presently has improved when compared to last year. The major problem that we have now is that of kidnapping. These boys are looking for how to compelling government to get money out of the state. The people we have now are just criminals, if you follow the trend you will see that arm robbery has dropped because all the arm robbers from different part of the country have seen here as a save heaven. I think everybody has to be security conscious that is what I can say now. Be mindful of the vehicle that are following you because the boys are desperate because the state government has tightened up a lot of avenues from which these boys get money, therefore everybody has to be careful. On the part of the state, it is the responsibility of the state to take care of its citizens. Our governor is the chief security officer of the state even though we know that he has his drawback, know that he is not the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, so he has to align properly with the president of the country to support him because this state needs support and the federal government has to show interest in what is happening here. I am not particularly impressed with the attitude of the federal government towards what is happening in this part of the country. I am from Bonny and I know the kind of molestation that people from my area are experiencing. The only thing the federal government does is to protect their installations. It appears that the federal government is only interested in the oil here because that's the source of revenue to the nation. Government has to take interest not only in the resource but also in the people. Thank you.

E-Newsletter: Thank you very much for the audience you have given us.

FACULTY OF ENGINEERING, RSUST GETS NEW DEAN

The Faculty of Engineering of the Rivers State University of Science & Technology, Port Harcourt has got a new dean. He is Engr. Prof. E N Wami. Photograph shows the former dean, Engr. Prof. H I Hart who is now the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University at the handing over ceremony during the faculty board meeting at the conference room. E-Newsletter wishes them God's blessing and guidance in their new assignments.



Engr. Prof. H. I. Hart (left) handing over to Engr. Prof. E. N. Wami (right)

**JOURNAL OF THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY OF CHEMICAL ENGINEERS (JNSChE) CALL FOR PAPERS**

The editorial board of the above journal is collating articles for Vol. 23 (2008) edition and perhaps for Vol.24 (2009) if enough articles are received. The editorial board is therefore soliciting for quality papers in Chemical engineering and other related fields for these two editions of the journal. Associate editors of the journal should sensitize colleagues and source for articles from the zones they cover as to obtain good spread of paper in each edition. All correspondences should be directed to: Editor-in-Chief, Prof. E. N Wami, Dept. of Chemical/Petrochemical Engineering, Rivers State University of Science & Technology, Port Harcourt. profwami@yahoo.com, nsche@beta.linkserv.com

NSE PROSPECTIVE MEMBERS

The NSE PH branch conducted a 1 day seminar for prospective new members on Thursday 19th March 2009. Also a 3-day compulsory refresher workshop was held on Wednesday 25th March to Friday 27th March 2009 at the NSE PH secretariat. The oral interview for the prospective members will come up on the 14th and 15th April 2009 while the written exam will come up on the 18th of April 2009. The last date for the submission of their report is 7th April 2009.



Engr. Prof. Hart (standing) addressing the prospective members



A cross section of the prospective members



Engr. Chief Oruye addressing the prospective members

NOTICE! NOTICE!! NOTICE!!!

All members of NSE PH should pay their annual branch dues of N4000 and compulsory levy of N5000 towards the Engineer Resource Center to UBA ACC. NO: 0802080000194 (Port Harcourt main Branch). Also pay National Annual Subscription of N5,500.00 directly to AFRIBANK ACC No. 1420202215613 & forward all tellers to the secretariat for reconciliation. All payments should be made at the Bank