13/01/2020

COALITION FOR RESTORATION (CFR)

NEW EC REGISTER UNNECESSARY AND UNJUSTIFIED; ELECTORAL COMMISSION'S TECHNICAL ARGUMENTS NOT CONVINCING

The Coalition For Restoration (CFR) has taken note of the Electoral Commission's worryingly entrenched stance on the compilation of a new voter register for the 2020 elections. The Electoral Commission having admitted that the current register is indeed credible, has resorted to the use of technical/technological terminologies to justify the need for a new register.

These claims under the guise of technology are at best porous and do not in any way support the position taken by the EC to compile a new register at all cost.

The CFR would like to, by this release, demystify the claims of the EC and support the many voices of reason that have spoken against the compilation of a new register.

It is worthy to note the following:

1. Deviation from National IT Plan

1.1 NITA's Legal Mandate

The National Information Technology Agency (NITA) is a public service institution established by Act 771 in 2008 as the ICT policy implementing arm of the Ministry of Communications. NITA is the agency responsible for implementing Ghana’s IT policies. Its mandate includes identifying, promoting and developing innovative technologies, standards, guidelines and practices among government agencies and local governments, as well as ensuring the sustainable growth of ICT via research & development planning and technology acquisition strategies to facilitate Ghana’s prospect of becoming a technology-driven, knowledge-and values-based economy as espoused in the e-Ghana project which ideally seeks to assist the Government generate growth and employment, by leveraging ICT and public-private partnerships.

The establishment of the NITA is essential for e-Government to take off in Ghana. E-Government, being an essential component of the e-Ghana project will contribute to improved efficiency, transparency and accountability in selected Government functions

1.2 Project’s Consistency with Ghana’s Long Term IT Plan

NITA under the Ministry of Communications on October 22, 2013 committed to a contract where World Bank Provides US$97 Million for Ghana's E-transForm Project

This was meant to support Ghana’s on-going actions to improve the efficiency and coverage of government service delivery using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Please see the following links for official information:

a. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/466441499870723132/pdf/etransform-Financial-Statements-Management-Letter-Dec-2016.pdf

b. https://www.modernghana.com/news/574363/world-bank-provides-us97-million-for-ghanas-e.html

One of the four key components of that project was to achieve the following outputs:

Component 2 -Support for Upgrading National Identification System and Online Verification Services;

The project will assist the government to link key agencies, including the Births and Deaths Registries, the Department of Social Welfare, Electoral Commission, Statistics Department, Social Security and National Insurance, Immigration, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA), etc., using the national identification number as a common identifier.

In all their discussions the EC has not mentioned this and it is obvious they have not taken this project into consideration and it is a big flaw and a huge setback in our national IT plan. What this means is that their new database schema will not facilitate interfacing with the national identification database. Another potential cost to develop a new EC database in future.

2. Technical Audit report shrouded in Secrecy

We demand that the technical audit report on the existing infrastructure be made available to IPAC. We also need documentation on the following equipment and tools. We need to know the serial numbers and the Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEM) to do our independent checks:

Biometric system and its component subsystems

Biometric Voter Registration (BVR) kits and accessories

• Fingerprint Scanner

• Templates

• Laptops

• Instant PVC Card Issuance Printer or Receipt Printer

Biometric Data Verification devices

Central System: Datacenter

• Servers- Manufacturer, Serial Number, Warranty Information

• Routers- Makes and type of routers, model numbers and warranty information

• Switches- same information as for routers

• Power Distribution systems- full technical information

• Cooling System- same as above

3.. Data center infrastructure challenges

The data center was commissioned in 2012 and used to capture voters' registration data in same year. The datacenter has been used three times for voting- 2012, 2016 and district assembly elections and a referendum. Such level of usage cannot impact the data center to reach End of Life and End of Support stages. However, the current leadership which has been in charge for about two(2) years, could have taken prudent measures to restore the situation to normality instead of insisting on a completely new data center.

Data center cooling systems can always be replaced. The cooling design can be revisited. It may be in between racks, behind racks or in entire room. Whatever the design approach is, it can always be changed or equipment changed for better cooling. You do not change an entire data center because of poorly performing cooling systems.

Power distribution and back up can always be changed at a minimal cost compared to building a new datacenter. One key question to ask the EC is whether we have a backup power system? If we have a backup power system, how then has power failure affected our data center operations on numerous occasions as being alleged by the EC? If we do not have a power back- up system what stopped management of the EC from investing in a power back - up system, instead of insisting on a new data center?

How often is the database refreshed with new data apart from the main registration in 2012, limited registration and voting days? These are several months and years apart so how does four days back up time affect the performance of EC with respect to elections?

The EC also makes the claim that the current BVDs have a high incidence of manual verification as justification for a new voter register. However, this is to do with failures in quality control. With adequate quality control mechanism EC should be able to identify these issues in advance of voting day. This is a clear indication of lack of diligence and proactiveness on the part of the leadership of EC and not merely issues with the data center or its systems and subsystems. Management and leadership need to be more proactive and diligent to be effective

4. Vendor related issues

Enough emphasis has been placed on vendor lock-in across all the EC’s submissions but one key important factor needs to be be noted: Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are very relevant in such situations. Apart from the fact that sovereign data is locked up with a foreign vendor,there hasn't been any major issues with respect to STL, especially in relation to the vendor lock-in scenario. It to be further noted that what really matters is performance, and in a global digital village, industry players are allowed to play all kinds of roles. And was it not a really good strategic initiative for EC to concentrate on their core competence and outsource certain key functions to external players when they deem fit? The EC is yet to prove why the data resident with the vendor poses a security threat.

There is also the issue of Data stuck in registration kits and these problems surfaced during the recent exhibition exercise where people were not seeing their names because of a lot of stuck data. We understand 150,000 alleged missing names have been retrieved and restored so far. This is another quality verification related issue. The inept leadership of the EC failed to provide for enough diligent verification to ensure that all data captured are stored in the database. One may ask the obvious question as to why the EC would wait for a complaint before taking steps to do verification and rectify what it ought to have known from its own established systems. Every competent database administrator should be able to identify this issue in advance.

The Vendor refusing to train EC IT staff, as another embarrassing complaint raised by the EC is probably the worst excuse to ever give in relation to the issue of a new voter register. In fact, the entire IT staff need to be questioned for not bringing this to the notice of the appropriate quarters to deal with. Why would a vendor refuse capacity building and training of staff expected to use equipment provided by them? Something is definitely not right and there are most questions than answers for this particular claim, needles to ask whether the service contract between the vendor and EC did not provide remedies for such breaches.

Concerning the data center, we further submit that generally, the lifespan of data centers are between 10 and 15 years. Some businesses even maintain and refurbish their data center equipment to extend the lifespan beyond the 15 years. This therefore makes it questionable for a datacenter which was commissioned in 2012 to have some equipment running out of warranty and others beyond repairs in 2014, and then the entire datacenter being decommissioned after seven years. This is unprecedented and the reason why the EC needs to make available the so called comparative technical analysis to prove this awkward situation.

Conclusion

A new Electoral Commission IT infrastructure cannot be implemented in isolation of other state institutions especially the Revenue Department and National Identification Authority since these databases need to synchronize with each other. In addition, a new IT infrastructure for Ghana’s Electoral Commission is an important project which needs all hands on deck from technical experts across political parties and some key institutions.

Ghana’s entire IT landscape has completely been avoided by an institution as important as the EC. Where is our $47million National Data center, the 700 km eastern corridor fiber optics backbone to connect our various districts and assemblies instead of a VSAT and microwave radios provided by Telcos? Why not a hybrid approach to ensure that existing facilities are leveraged across the regions and districts?

In a nutshell, the intended procurement by the EC of new database and IT infrastructure is reinventing several wheels, introducing some redundancies and therefore not a justifiable use of the public purse. It needs to be suspended and taken back to the drawing board for a broader stakeholder engagement.

(SIGNED)

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