

The ICAN

Electoral Impasse:

Of Origins, Issues and The Court-Ordered Special Meeting

Friday, 19 May 2023 | OpEd by Concerned Professionals

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Special General Meeting (SGM) fixed for:

Date: Wednesday May 24, 2023

Venue: ICAN Center, Plot 12, Kofo Kasunmu Street, Lakeview Estate, Amuwo-Odofin, Lagos.

Time: 11 am (WAT)

1. Preamble

The professional obligations and ethical requirements imposed on members of the accounting profession are based on the five fundamental principles of integrity, objectivity, professional competence and due care, confidentiality and professional behaviour. These are codified in most institutes. A professional accountant therefore, as a member of the Institute, is expected to conduct himself along these lines and should not allow bias, conflict of interest or undue influence of others to override professional judgments in the service of the professional body/Institute.

ICAN has had a challenge in this regard, and whether it admits it or not, the non-resolution of same is impacting its influence in a society saddled with corruption and proliferation of professional services (or specialisation as some choose to see it); one that should usher in a new lease of life through innovation, adoption of technology and acculturation of higher standards of governance that

would yield market-ready professionals able to play their role in delivering value to our emerging economy.

*The challenge faced by ICAN is such that a new governance architecture is required and one the association must resolve at the **Special General Meeting (SGM)** scheduled for May 24, 2023, at the ICAN Centre, Amuwo-Odofin, Lagos State. This contribution seeks to provide context to this journey towards chaos, the moves and counter moves to affect status quo, and the option for redemption now before the professional body.*

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) was created by the Act of Parliament No. 15 of 1965 as the premier professional institution in Nigeria. Its governance model (and succession planning, committees and branches) was subsequently adopted by other professional institutions and has served all well, with many iterations made by these respectable bodies to make the ICAN governance model fit-for-purpose.

ICAN has had a long string of successful elections and transitions over the years, as the ICAN Electoral Processes had served the Institute very well until the issue of electoral fraud was established by Forensic experts in 2014. Before this incident, ballot papers were manually issued, and the signatures of members were physically validated from their membership records. Members were rightly disqualified for irregular signatures and for not being in good financial

2. Recalling A History of Quality and Service-Driven Council Membership

ICAN members were elected to the Council to serve not because of any ambition to be President. Only fit, proper BoPP-screened and approved Council members, irrespective of seniority could be considered as Vice-President and President.

In 1980, the offices of 1st Deputy Vice-President (1 DVP) and 2nd Deputy Vice President (2 DVP) were created to enhance the learning process for the ICAN Presidency. This method has been adopted by other professional bodies in the country. Through this process, the institute was able to produce many brilliant and passionate past Council members including Prince Adesupo Adetona, Prof A. R.

3. The 2009 Elections – Sowing the Seed of Discord, Exposing Governance Frailties

The origin of the impasse on ICAN Electoral Reforms has its origins in the 2009 Election to Council. This election, according to esteemed members of the profession, sowed the seeds for the current crisis in 'The Council' as it set two members, the Late Mr. Abiodun Ajomale and Mr. Chidi Ajaegbu, who had been in Council continuously against each other. According to reports, Late Ajomale had consistently won elections on three (3) occasions, whereas Ajaegbu was in Council as a government nominee for nine (9) years.

By Council rules, only an elected Council member can be elevated to the Presidency of ICAN. Since it was the last and determining election to enter the ICAN Presidency, entities interested in the candidature of government nominee mobilised members through a quid pro quo that led to an upsurge in payments received for the subscriptions of many financially delinquent members. This was the first time the Institute got blindsided by political-type manoeuvres; and it worked as Ajaegbu won while Late Mr. Ajomale lost the election. The genie had left the bottle, and the institute reeled from it.

During the ensuing year, the seating arrangements in Council, which were numbered to rank members during the tenure of Maj. Gen. Rtd. Owuama; were adjusted by 'The Council' who decided that anyone who lost an election,

standing. The Rules and Regulations guiding elections to Council were clear and not arbitrarily changed. Confidence in the outcomes was very high, given that Past Presidents superintended over the process to deliver transparent outcomes. No campaigns, alignment, groupings, or geographical representation were tolerated, in line with professional best-practices requirement. Elections were premised on merit, credibility, clout, passion for service, and previous contributions to the Institute. Services were rendered by Council members pro-bono.

Anao, Late Mrs. M. O. Onasanya, Mr. Fola Adeola, Mr. Oyinade Iyaniwura, Late Zubair Abdullah, and others, to mention a few; who voluntarily walked away either because of other national and professional assignments or stepped down for their compatriots in Council to progress, even after serving on Council for over ten (10) years. Recently, a long-standing member, who despite winning elections consistently for fifteen (15) years, was adjudged not to be presidential material and was persuaded to step down from Council in the interest of the Institute! Such was the craving for quality.

Today, the story is a sordid tale of a southward turn that had its roots in the 2009 ICAN Elections.

would also lose his/her seniority in Council. Thus, when Late Mr. Ajomale subsequently managed to win and returned to Council two years later, he was assigned the last number as the newest and most junior Council member. To those looking in from the outside, this was a trite issue but then, lines were being drawn in the sand and governance was receding gradually.

With these developments, contestations into Council became war of attrition which led to an emergence of caucuses and groupings which led to more fragmentation of purpose and principles. Visions need to be guarded and, in this case, the guardrails were falling off bit by bit. Soon enough, the ethos of street politicking found a home as elections became a matter of win at all cost. The list of 'victims' grew to include experienced members such as Mrs. Seyi Williams, Mr. F.I. Ogunjuboun, Mr. Sunday Bammeke, Mr. Solomon Adeleke, Mr Sola Oyetayo, Mrs. Peju Babatunde, Mr. Tayo Phillips, Mr. Wale Raji, Mr. Odejayi, Alhaji Ekungba, Mrs Soyemi-Beecroft and others, who had contested elections but lost to members of the caucus whose principals included Chidi Ajaegbu, Ismaila Zakari and Onome Joy Adewuyi.

At this stage, the fault lines widened and discussions at ICAN went along the lines of ethnic, faith and political affiliations. The system tried to heal itself but the damage was deep, and trust, fidelity of purpose and service took a back seat.

Either by sheer change in group dynamics or the effective role of the caucus, a member was more likely to lose an election irrespective of your popularity and visible contributions to the development of ICAN. The pervasiveness of this 'takeover; was such that members of the caucus who dared to defy or dissent from the leadership would lose elections. Such examples included experienced members such as HRM Chidume-Okoro, Ngozi Okonkwo, Hon. Nasiru Mohammed, Alhaja Titi Akinbayo and Chief Oye Akinsulire. Of recent, Hilda Ozoh, Jamiu Olakisan,

Deji Awobotu and Alh. Haruna Yahaya, formerly active members of the caucus have been marked for expulsion. In the case of Haruna Yahaya, he has been humiliated to repeat a 'class' he did not fail (by running the office of 2nd DVP for two years instead of one year) for daring to challenge status quo. Such has been the sorry state of affairs in ICAN that the unthinkable has now become the new normal with campaigns around geographical representations, not competence with the demands for the balancing of the number of past Presidents vide the questioning of why the Southwest should have more past presidents than other zones. ICAN is stuck in the search of substance over form.

4. Elections as an Albatross and a Conflict Resolution Mechanism

Sadly, but expectedly, since 2014, results have been disputed by members, each year, with accusations and counter accusations in social media, mainstream media and local branch relations. Election outcomes no longer reflected the wishes of the majority of members as persons who scored the highest votes are hardly known, even by members of their district! The main caucus has aggressively adopted the 'political solution' or the Chidi Ajaegbu strategy; and its members were required to annually contribute financially towards elections.

This comes with benefits, and as such offers a strong incentive. The benefits come in the form of chairmanship of committees, opportunity to nominate people into committees, opportunity to be nominated to go to NIPSS, Kuru and other esteemed entities as a nominee of ICAN, opportunity to recommend persons as government nominee-in-Council, opportunity to travel business class on flights for ICAN assignment anywhere in the world, recommendation of staff for employment, etc.

As bad as this may seem, some have argued whether this was such a bad idea to reward people for their services, and that the old approach is simply unsustainable. Others who occupy the middle-of-the-road position believe it was high time ICAN changed from its complacent ways and took the matter of the professional body much more seriously.

Whichever side one pitches his/her tent, what is not in doubt must be the acceptance that change is needed, the how is equally not in dispute anymore as members have woken up to the realisation that their individual triumphs cannot trump the reputation and perception of the Institute. It is in this regard that we see that the debate will get more energised once the fundamental question all parties seem to be agreed on, some more reluctantly or eagerly than others, is resolved. That one issue is the governance architecture and the process of electing members who have the ethical disposition and commitment to leading practice and values that underscores the very essence of the professional code of ethics.

5. ICAN – Of Values, Traditions and Turnarounds

By nature, free, fair, and credible elections are designed to produce unpredictable results. But where outcomes of elections are known even before ballots are cast, it calls to question the integrity of the process. The destruction of values is a process, and none is more apparent than an electoral process that delivers victory but not legitimacy to discharge a corporate mandate.

Looked at from an organisation change mindset, the weaponizing of **payments for indigent members' subscriptions** (whatever the end game is) indicates a poor execution, administration and management of membership subscription rules and cut-off dates. It also speaks to the value proposition question and adaptation

capabilities of ICAN to turn a problem into a solution for increased subscriptions for increased district society and committee operations.

Equally instructive must be the use of **sponsorships of activities of district societies** by deep-pocketed contestants. If and where, as has been seen, these have acted as quid quo pro or pressure points for members of such to vote in a particular manner, the rules of engagement need to be streamlined to eliminate inherent conflicts without discouraging sponsorships which are essential to the operations of such districts as membership fees alone cannot effectively fund their activities. The alternative is for the Institute to take sponsorships of any kind off the table. This may be a stretch too far.

That outcomes of elections of a professional Institute like ICAN are determined by the extrapolation of gaps in the rules of the Institute, such that compromises, alignments, groupings (declared illegal by AGM) and deference to sponsors are rife is an indication of an organisational malaise that the incoming Council must prioritise and resolve in the interest of its raison d'être.

That said, the tools of election influencing identified above should never be associated with ICAN. Much like some associations have done in the past, it has been documented in the past that ICAN elections attract such practices that go against its council approved electoral rules. For example, some contestants hire individuals, who are given members' telephone and email details to solicit for support. Confidentiality of members' database is recklessly breached thereby exposing members to avoidable risks.

The question has been asked – 'what is in it for members seeking such offices that desperation becomes an

attractive impulse'? An extrapolation of this question, leads to more questions, viz:

- Since Council members are not paid salaries, what is the motivation for such huge expenditure?
- How do these members intend to recoup such investments if not through financial malpractices?
- What is the end-game here?

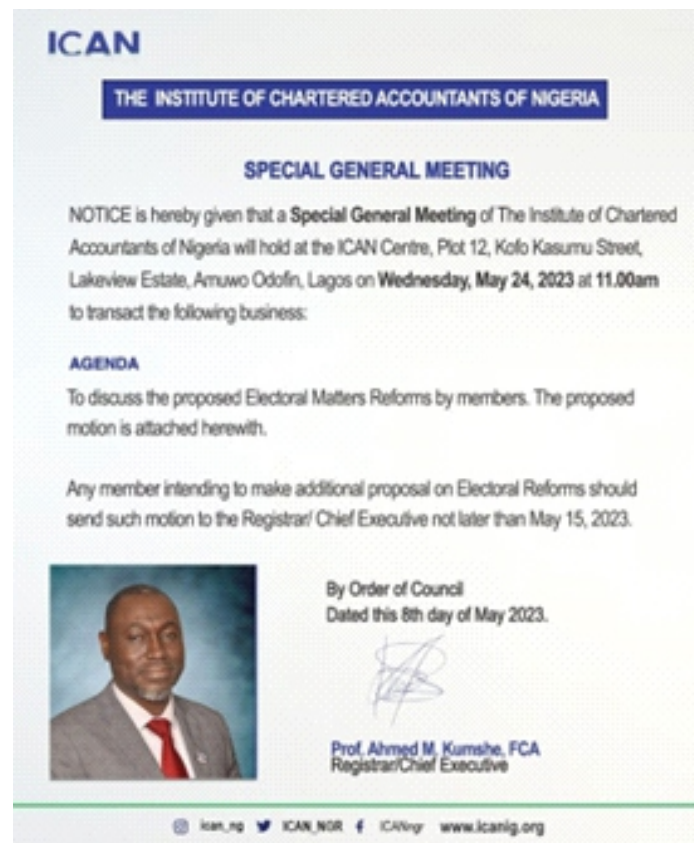
In the last Presidential year, as stated earlier, the traditional succession process within the Presidency was inexplicably altered such that the incumbent 2nd Deputy Vice President was made to remain in the same position for the second year running while a floor member was elected 1st Deputy Vice President over and above him. Today, rules on nomination to Council are changed arbitrarily without recourse to the Annual General Meeting (AGM) for ratification before implementation. The wise counsel of the Body of Past Presidents (BoPP) does not count for much anymore. Several of their interventions have falling on Council's deaf ears, literally.

6. ICAN E-Voting Initiative – The Journey Towards Redemption

As a trail blazer, the Institute started the electronic voting process which other bodies now emulate. The aforesaid caucus in the ICAN Council, with the help of the Head of Information Technology of the Institute, has been reported to engage in ignoble act of harvesting and using members' voting pins to vote on their behalf. The Registrar / Chief Executive (RCE) who attempted to transfer the HoIT was subsequently fired for "incompetence". It seems that reality of the political terrain found a playground at ICAN.

The Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) will appear to have taken a cue from the ICAN e-voting execution, made relevant tweaks and now enjoys hitch-free and transparent elections. The Institute of Chartered Accountants, Ghana (ICAG) conducts its election electronically during its AGM and all members monitor the screen as people are voting. As soon as the time allowed to vote is over, the results are announced by the Past President who chairs Electoral Matters Committee, the body that declares vacancies and screens contestants.

ICAN has such an opportunity at redress at its special general meeting which has been called to address a single matter – **Electoral Reforms** (see Notice)▶▶



7. The Court-Ordered Special Meeting – Hail Mary Toss or A Chance for Redemption

The Council has scheduled a special meeting of the Institute for May 24, 2023 at the ICAN Amuwo-Odofin Centre, Lagos in compliance with terms of the Consent Judgement given by a Lagos High Court on May 8, 2023. The litigation was initiated by some 'concerned members' of the Institute who

were distressed by the collateral damage done to the body and individual reputations by both the poor corporate governance culture of the Institute and the aforementioned fraudulent electoral processes which, since 2014, have continued to produce predictable but unacceptable

outcomes.

In line with the provisions of the ICAN Act and Rules made by

Council pursuant to the Act, these concerned Members submitted a motion for electoral reform to Council and requested that it should be listed as an agenda item at ICAN's 57th Annual General Meeting (AGM) held on May 27, 2022.

MOTION TO THE 2022 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF INSTITUTE OF CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS OF NIGERIA (ICAN) ON ELECTORAL REFORMS

Preamble

The Institute has evolved over the years from a small, manually driven professional accountancy organization (PAO) to an entity with very dispersed and enlightened stakeholders who are increasingly asking for improved quality services, responsive and responsible governance. As a body, the Institute has continued to set the pace and blazed trails in its certification, training, electoral and succession processes.

Whereas the Institute has made significant progress in these areas, its members and other stakeholders are asking and rightly so, for more value, more transformation, more institutional reforms and in particular, more open and transparent election processes which will enhance the trust of members in those charged with governance responsibility. The Institute, as a dynamic organism, has a duty to respond to these challenges in accordance to the democratic norms and standard of a civilized society.

Whereas leaders are representatives of the entire membership, the process for their election provides an opportunity for members to determine who their flag bearers should be. Such a process should abhor opaqueness in line with the motto of "Accuracy and Integrity" of our Institute and produce selfless leaders who are committed to the overall interest of the Institute as directed by members and to the public interest. It therefore follows that every repugnant procedures or processes are to be discarded in our collective attempt at recruiting for the institute an enduring cult of leaders not only for now but also for the future.

Acknowledging the fact that the Annual General Meeting is the supreme governing body of the Institute in line with Section 17(2) of the ICAN Act, 1965, members agree and believe that any proposed changes should be approved by the membership.

Accordingly, it is hereby desired and proposed that the Committee in charge of the Institute's election, Electoral Matters Committee (EMC), should be absolutely independent and be seen to be so (this is the standard all over, that independence and impartiality of Electoral Committee should be secured and not to be compromised in any way). To achieve this, it is proposed that the composition of EMC, each year, should consist of one each from the four ICAN zones (i.e., Northern, Western, Eastern and South-south) and to be chaired by a Past President appointed by the Body of Past Presidents and presented to the AGM for ratification and consequently, the EMC reports to the AGM only.

As assurance experts, the Council elections should be subjected to independent assurance before election results are declared. The Terms of Reference (TOR) of the Independent Assurance Provider (IAP) should include accreditation of prospective voters and validation of votes cast to reassure members of the integrity of election results. Consequently, this will replace the Scrutineers committee role in the current election process

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MOTION TO THE 2022 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF INSTITUTE OF CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS OF NIGERIA (ICAN) ON ELECTORAL REFORMS

Be it resolved that

- 1. The composition and operation of the Electoral Matters Committee should be absolutely independent, impartial, transparent and responsible only to members at Annual General Meeting.
2. The membership of the Electoral Matters Committee shall consist of a Chairman; who shall be a Past President of the Institute, and shall be appointed by the Body of Past Presidents of the Institute, and four other financial members in good standing who shall be appointed by each of the ICAN Zones (Northern, Western, Eastern and South Zones, and any such Zone as may be created by council) and shall be ratified at the Annual General Meeting.
3. The Electoral Matters Committee shall hitherto have the power to:- (i) Formulate and implement policies relating to the election of members into the council of the institute (ii) Receive complaints regarding all election matters and the resolution of such matters as may be brought before it. (iii) Appoint the Independent Assurance Company, subject to the approval of members at Annual General Meeting except in respect of the appointment in the first instance which they are authorized to do for a 1-year tenure only.
4. The tenure of each member of the Electoral Matters Committee, shall be for a maximum period of one year; except that only the chairman of the committee shall be eligible for re-appointment for another term/tenure of not more than one year, after a period of 3years immediately following the initial period during which the Chairman had first served as a member of the EMC.
5. Voters at ICAN Council elections shall be accredited by an Independent Assurance Provider (IAP); and the votes cast shall be validated before the results are announced.
6. To give effect to the resolution upon approval at the 2022 AGM, an Extra-ordinary General Meeting (EGM) of members shall be held not later than 90 days after the 2022 AGM to ratify the membership of the Electoral Matters Committee for the 2023 electoral process and agree the Terms of Reference for Electoral Matters Committee.

This motion is moved by

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The Council did not only decline the request by not listing the properly submitted Motion but also sought an injunction from a Lagos High Court to preclude the concerned members from attending the AGM. Unfortunately for the Council, the case was assigned to a Judge, several months after the AGM was successfully held and members at the meeting passed a Resolution mandating the Council to call for a special meeting to consider the motion for electoral reforms.

The AGM resolved that the special meeting should be convened within 90 days such that the 2023 elections to Council will be conducted based on the proposed electoral reform process. The ICAN Council refused to comply by not calling the special meeting. It was this refusal that prompted the 'concerned members' to seek the intervention of the Court which resulted in the Terms of Settlement between Council and the Concerned Members (see below).

Legal document titled 'SETTLEMENT TERMS' and 'ANCILLIARY TERMS' between the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria and concerned members. Includes background facts, settlement terms (1-13), and ancillary terms (1-13). Signed by representatives of both parties.

Source: Court Judgment of 5th May, 2023

One key point in the Consent Judgement was the convening of a Special General Meeting (SGM) to deliberate on the said

motion and any other electoral reform-related motion that may be submitted within seven (7) days of the Notice of the Meeting.

8. Call To Action – Getting Back to Governance

This broad-reaching group of concerned members, reflecting the demographics within ICAN is seeking a middle of the road approach that recognises the impetus for change and the restoration of a governance architecture that allows elections to reflect a commitment to the ethos of the profession. It has those proposed a reform of the electoral processes such that the outcome of elections from Year 2023 will become credible and acceptable. This will encourage brilliant and passionate members with clout to

contest elections to raise the quality of Council and by extension, the Institute in the comity of professional accountancy organisations.

The above **Motion for Reforms** will now be discussed at the special general meeting (SGM) scheduled for May 24, 2023, at the ICAN Centre, Amuwo-Odofin, Lagos State. We have taken time to provide a comparative review of the changes sought, offering an explanatory note under each below.

9. MOTION TO ENHANCE THE ELECTORAL PROCESS OF ICAN: A COMPARISON BETWEEN CURRENT PRACTICE AND THE PROPOSED PRACTICE

S/N	Current PRACTICE	Proposed PRACTICE	Explanatory NOTES
1	The Council's Election are organized by the Electoral Matters Committee (EMC) which reports to Council.	The Council's Election will be organized by an Independent Electoral Matters Committee which will report to members at AGM.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The EMC is appointed by Council The Council makes the rules which guide the conduct of elections by EMC Yet, Council members participate in these elections thereby enjoying undue advantage over non-council members who stand for elections. To change this scenario, the EMC should be appointed by the AGM while its rules will also be approved by the AGM. The INDEPENDENT of the EMC should and must be clear. This Motion seeks to make the EMC to be truly independent and apparent to start with.
2	The Electoral Matters Committee is chaired by a Council approved Past President who represents the Body of Past President. In this case the predecessor of the Immediate Past President (IPP).	The Electoral Matters Committee is to be chaired by a Past President appointed by the Body of Past Presidents (BoPP).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although the EMC is chaired by a Past President, the Body of Past Presidents do NOT play any role in the selection of their representative. The Council rules provide that the predecessor of the Immediate Past President will always chair the EMC. Chairmanship is therefore known and automatic! This Motion seeks to make the Body of Past Presidents to own such process of appointment with its full consequences.
3	The Terms of Reference (TOR) of the Electoral Matters Committee are approved by Council.	The Terms of Reference of the Electoral Matters Committee will be approved by members at the Annual General Meeting (AGM).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The TOR of the EMC is currently approved by Council members who also participate in the elections This Motion seeks to have EMC appointed by Annual General Meeting while its Terms of Reference should similarly be approved by members at AGM
4	Members of the Electoral Matters Committee are appointed by Council based on ICAN geographical representation.	The current 4-ICAN Zonal Districts are to elect their representatives who will serve on the Electoral Matters Committee. This will promote inclusiveness, better representation and consequently make ICAN Zonal Districts own the process of appointing members of the EMC.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although members of the EMC represent ICAN recognised geographical zones, they are selected by Council members. The Zones do not make any input into the selection process of their representatives in EMC This Motion seeks to give powers to the membership through zonal participation. The various Zones will now elect their representatives. The endorsement of representatives by the zonal committees will give more credence to the process and a feedback mechanism is created for possible improvements in the electoral process from the zonal levels.

5	The tenure of members of Electoral Matters Committee is 3 years.	The Tenure of members of the Electoral Matters Committee will be one year, non-renewable.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the increase in membership, there is need to involve as many members in the governance of the Institute as possible. • The one-year tenure will promote more inclusiveness and representation including freshness of ideas and views which will progressively improve the process.
6	Council appoints Scrutineers based on various parameters, e.g., senior, middle-age & young members, gender, etc.	Scrutineers will no longer be required. Their functions will be taken over by the Independent Assurance Provider.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Scrutineers are appointed by the Council members who also contest elections. • Presently, the independence of the Scrutineers cannot be relied upon • The role of Scrutineers will now be performed by the Independent Assurance Provider appointed by EMC but ratified by the Annual General Meeting.
7	All financial members are eligible to vote. No accreditation is required.	All financial members will be eligible to vote but must be ACCREDITED using any nationally accepted identification.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presently, eligible voters (financial members) are not accredited, unlike what is done in conventional elections of the country. • It is common knowledge that not all financial members (eligible voters) come forward to vote. • Like national elections, only those who present themselves should first be accredited and validated before exercising their voting rights. • This Motion wants members to be accredited for Council elections. This is to ensure that only those accredited and who voted, are counted
8	Council elections are subjected to validation by 2 of the Big 4 firms before votes are cast and after results have been declared.	Council elections should be subjected to independent assurance before votes are cast and before results are declared.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently, the Big 4 firms carry out validation services before votes are cast and after the results have been announced. • However, Partners of the Big 4 firms contest elections to Council thereby raising the issue of independence. • This Motion seeks to provide for the appointment of an Independent Assurance Provider whose role will be to validate all aspects of the electoral process and particularly validate the results before they are declared.
9	The 2 Big 4 firms are appointed by the Council.	The Independent Assurance Provider will be appointed by the Electoral Matters Committee and ratified by members at the Annual General Meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Currently, the Big '4' firms are appointed to carry out validation and assurance services • This Motion provides that the Independent Assurance Provider should be appointed by the EMC and ratified by the AGM • This is to enhance the independence of the process by making members of the Institute own the process directly.
10	The Terms of Reference of the 2 Big 4 firms are approved by Council.	The Terms of Reference of the Independent Assurance Provider will be approved by members at the AGM.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This Motion provides that EMC would appoint the Independent Assurance Provider and the appointment would be ratified by members at the General Meeting • The Motion wants members to completely own the election processes.

It is therefore obvious to all why this special meeting is considered by all stakeholders as an all-important one, not just for the institute but as a sign-post for other professional bodies and associations seeking to achieve a fit-for-purpose and members-led governance structure; especially as it pertains to the integrity of its electoral processes. ICAN has always been able to pull members together towards a cause and this time should be no different as members are expected to attend in large numbers to discharge their professional

obligations and to see the propriety of the reform process by attending the Special Meeting and exercising their vote. For one, having people travel down from across the 36 states and FCT for an election in Lagos state in 2023 shows how it is possible to compromise outcomes.

A lot will be learned about the character of the Institute and its disposition to modernising its practices from the outcome of the May 24, 2023 Special General Meeting (SGM) at the ICAN Centre, Amuwo-Odofin, Lagos State.

