
ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODY AND THE FATE OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Elections are a fundamental aspect of democracy, and the quality of elections determines the legitimacy of democratic governments. In Nigeria, elections have been a significant challenge in the democratization process. Electioneering processes have been marred by ineffective administration, poor organization, and questionable outcomes, resulting in conflicts and litigations. Nigeria elections are not just in the hands of the powerful few but also a baton in the hands of the electoral umpire, the security and judiciary to wipe all kinds of opposition and sustain political power. This provokes thoughts about the violence, crises and unrests that perpetually characterize elections and election periods in Nigeria, hence, the desire to take a keen look at how election management may affect democracy in the country. The paper adopted secondary elaboration of extant literature techniques to examine issues bedevilling election management and democracy. Findings show rigging, electoral body biasness, political violence, weak institutions, vote buying, voter apathy etc., as major issues in election management. Based on these findings, this paper recommends measures such as electoral reform, voter education, and the promotion of credible and independent electoral bodies as necessary proactive measures to address the problems.

Keywords: Election, Management, Democracy, Nigeria

Introduction

Elections are the process of choosing a leader or representative through a vote. In a democratic system, such as the one we have in Nigeria, elections are held to select officials, such as presidents, governors, Local Government chairmen, and members of legislative bodies at different tiers of governance. Electoral activities help to promote activities that led to seamless transition of political authority and power from one person to the other. Efficient management of electoral processes can help to forestall rancour and litigation arising from succession to position of authority in nations and other social formations.

Elections are a fundamental aspect of democracy, and the quality of elections determines the legitimacy of democratic governments. In Nigeria, elections have been a significant challenge in the democratization process. The country's quest for sustainable democracy has been hindered by political contenders and players who subvert the electoral process through violence, rigging, and other forms of malpractices.

Types of Elections Conducted in Nigeria

There are basically five levels of elections in Nigeria which include, Presidential elections, National Assembly elections, Governorship elections, State House of Assembly elections, and Local Government Council elections. Before the main elections are conducted, primary elections (to select party candidates) within political parties are usually conducted. Referendums (to decide on policies or constitutional changes)

The Election Management Body (EMB)

The Election Management Body (EMB) refers to the body responsible for determining eligible voters, receiving and validating nominations, conducting elections, counting votes, and declaring results. In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the EMB responsible for organizing and managing elections since 1999. The challenges of elections in Nigeria are largely attributed to the weak institutionalization of INEC, which lacks autonomy, professionalism, and financial and administrative capacity (Nwokeke *et al.*, 2011).

Impact of Electoral Institutions on Elections in Nigeria

The importance of election administration relates to a wider set of activities that border on institutional frameworks in which voting and competition take place. Election administration involves the application of electoral rules, resolving electoral disputes, and the interaction of constitutional and institutional rules that determine electoral procedures and patterns of competition. The election management body, political parties, mass media, and the courts of law are critical institutions that influence the electoral process. In Nigeria, the electoral process involves:

1. Candidate nomination: Potential candidates declare their intention to run for office, and this declaration of interest is followed by sales of nomination forms and internal screening of candidates. Successful candidates are thereafter presented to the electoral body to bear the flag of the political parties in elections.
2. Campaigning: Candidates promote their platform, debate, and advertise to win voters' support. Electioneering campaigns are usually elaborate and capital intensive. Consultation of stakeholders and canvassing for votes extend to the grass roots for effective awareness and popularity of the candidates. In Nigeria, this process usually witnesses the donation of items and money to entice the electorates as well as the presentation of the party manifesto.
3. Voter registration: Eligible citizens register to vote. The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) which is saddled with the responsibility of conducting elections ensures that the voters register is reviewed to accommodate every citizen with the franchise to partake in the elections.
4. Voting: Citizens cast their ballots on election day
5. Counting and results: Votes are counted, and the winner is declared.

The Role of Elections in Sustaining Democracy in Nigeria

Global emphasis on the advantages of democracy over other types of government notwithstanding, in some parts of the world the principle is more of a paradox. Unlike the case in the advanced countries where actors play based on rules, in most of the developing countries of Africa, Asia and ACP Countries in other continents, it is characterized with fraud, impunity and violence perpetuated by the politicians; complacency of the election regulatory body, the security personnel and the judiciary. The ugly side of democratic system in the case of Nigeria include: vote buying (Essien and Oghuvbu, 2021); looming threats of violence, insecurity and contested election results (Usoro and Ben, 2020); the failure of the actors to abide by acceptable election norms and uncontrolled electoral spending (Igbokwe-Ibeto, et.al, 2016). Essien and Oghuvbu (2021) have argued that vote buying in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon but an integral part of elections and has escalated to the point that some candidates add buying of votes as part of the political strategy, in the belief that manifestoes and integrity alone are not enough to win elections.

Democracy and election are synchronistic as one cannot take place without the other. Globally, there has been increasing concern about the future of democracy, as there is considerable dissatisfaction in many countries with how democracy is working in practice (Desilver, 2019). In every democratic state, election is organized by a legally constituted authority. To Lopez-Pinto (2000), effective management of electoral systems requires institutions that are inclusive, sustainable, just and independent and have electoral management bodies (EMBs) with the legitimacy to enforce rules and assure fairness, transparency and the cooperation of all stakeholders, including citizens and political parties. This institution or authority wields the power to propose, plan, design the structure, organize, devise methods, conduct and enforce the rules governing the conduct of elections. Ultimately, such an institution wields independent power in its responsibilities without interference by the government, political parties and politicians. In Nigeria such institutions since 1960 included the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), National Electoral Commission (NEC), National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON) and the present Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

In most of the world's democracies, elections are conducted with the use of technologies such as the State Automated System in Russia, Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) in India and, in the United state of America where the five-phase voting technologies comprising hand-counted paper ballots, mechanical lever machines, computer punch cards (Votomatic and Datavote), mark sense forms (optical scan), and direct recording electronic systems (DRE) are adopted. The diverse technologies applied in elections in the different countries are basically to guarantee a free and fair electoral exercise and smoothen the democratic

system with minor skirmishes. In Nigeria, the interest for a responsible democracy and acceptable electoral process was launched after the appointment of an electoral commission by the Governor General in 1958. This was exactly when voting and manual counting of the ballot papers started and ran until 1999 (Nigeria's third republic elections) when the electoral body with the nomenclature, Independent National Electoral Commission adopted the Card Reader technology and incident form to smoothen voting and counting of ballot papers. Yet, in the 2023 general elections, the old technology was swept aside for the new one called the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). As is the case in other countries that have used technology to conduct and monitor elections, Nigeria's quest was also to attain a standard of freedom and fairness in her electoral process.

Votes are the building blocks of democracy (Nsima, 1992) just as elections are central features of true democracy (Usoro and Ben, 2020). As argued by the United States Election Assistance Commission, electoral system and voting options propelled by the new technology provide accessibility, security and privacy for the voter. With the new technology, in nation states that follow democratic principles, elections are a celebration of democracy and can be considered the backbone of the democratic process that should ideally be trusted by everyone-not just a select few (Wolf and Zander, 2014). Regrettably, in Nigeria, elections are not just in the hands of the powerful few but also are a baton in the hands of the electoral umpire, the security and judiciary to wipe all kinds of opposition and sustain political power. This thoughts about the violence, crises and unrests that perpetually characterize elections and election periods in Nigeria, serves as one of the major inspirations for this study.

Many studies such as Richard (2021), Essien and Oghuvbu (2021), Usoro and Ben (2020), Lawal (2007) among others, have chronicled election-related infractions that distorted public order in different states in the country. According to Lawal (2007) electoral politics in Nigeria manifest in acrimony, assault, assassination, intimidation, harassment, maiming and killings while for Ayanleye (2013), election infractions in Nigeria are caused by corruption, massive rigging, ballot box snatching and political violence as well as the winner-takes-all syndrome which has impacted negatively on the democratic process. Also, Isma'ila and Othman (2015) have identified imposition of candidates, rigging, stuffing ballots, violence etcetera, as the causes of elections infractions in Nigeria. Reports have it that in 2003, more than one hundred people were killed and many injured during federal and state elections in Nigeria while in 2007, over 300 people were killed in the course of presidential and gubernatorial elections (Paul and Pedro, 2008). These are evidence of elections in Nigeria wearing an atmosphere characterized by disorder during elections.

A catalog of public disorder scenarios and the resulting casualties include the clash between the supporters of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) over the manipulation of a bye-election result by the PDP which led to the death of two persons in Gombi Local Government Area of Adamawa State on July 1st, 2005; the death of two persons killed in the wake of the PDP's Ward and Local Government Congresses on Edo-State in October 14th and 15th, 2005; and the violent protests over disputed gubernatorial election results in Ekiti, Kogi, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Sokoto States. A study by (Shaapera 2011, and Abdulrahman 2014) also revealed that election-related crises since 1999 and the aftermaths of the 2011 general elections have posed great security challenges for the country, particularly as over 20,000 Nigerians lost their lives, hundreds of thousands were displaced and property worth billions of naira was destroyed in election crisis.

In Akwa Ibom State, the governorship and federal constituency elections did not hold and conclude without hassles. Eyewitness accounts revealed that in both the 2019 and 2023 governorship and federal constituency elections in the state, there were skirmishes in parts of the state. This was Similar to the clash between the supporters of PDP and ACN in the 2011 penultimate gubernatorial election where public and private vehicles were burnt, private buildings set ablaze and many lives taken in the violent protests/riots at Ikot Ekpene and Uyo. In the 2019 and 2023 governorship and federal constituency elections, so many violent crises took place in parts of the state. Media reports also had it that during the 2019 governorship and federal elections in the state, 14 persons were killed and several properties including houses and vehicles were destroyed. Specifically, one Idorenyin Umoh was shot dead in Abak Federal Constituency in the 2019 general elections. In the 2023 general elections, violence started from the primary elections in

almost all local government areas of the state. In Ini Local Government Area, three persons were killed, while vehicles and houses were destroyed during the election primaries. The general election was also characterized by election malpractices, killing and destruction of properties: at least three persons were killed in Ibiono Ibom; at least one was killed in Etim Ekpo Local Government Area, while an NYSC member was killed in Ikono rerun election, according to eye witness account.

These developments impacted greatly lot on the indigenes and other population of people living in the state, the different families, groups and the government. For the individuals, families and groups, everyone is thrown into serious trauma in the event of the unfortunate loss of life of a loved one, loss of properties due to arson and or looting by thugs and criminals, displacement of residents, and hospitalization due to sustained injury. On the contrary, the government is imposed with additional burden of reorganizing its security apparatus to give instant remedy to the security challenges for the safety of lives and properties of its population. Also, the government is forced to commit additional resources to give assistance where there are large numbers of casualties as well as to replace damaged public properties.

In the view of the former Chief Election Commissioner in India, T. S. Seshan cited in Lekorwe (2005), a good election requires four elements, namely, election law that is fully tuned to provide free and fair elections, an election commission which is truly autonomous and fearless, administrative procedures that ensure that even the least privileged men and women can exercise their franchise freely without fear and, an electorate which is fully aware of its rights and responsibilities. Again, a credible election management abhors violence, intimidation, thuggery, rigging, ballot box snatching and stuffing and all manner of electoral malpractices which prompt most candidates and their political parties to reject the outcome of elections and engage in post elections litigations.

The Benefit of Effective Management of Election Processes

Well conducted elections are key in building the foundation and consolidating the gains of democratic culture in societies it operates. Democracy is popularised by a one-time American President, Abraham Lincoln as the government of the people by the people for the people. It ideally gives the people a bold voice to decide as critical stake holders in the process of electing political office holders. To this extent, election will benefit the society in many ways including the following:

1. Accountability: Leaders are held accountable to the people.
2. Representation: Citizens' interests are represented in government.
3. Change: Elections allow for peaceful transfer of power and new ideas.
4. Legitimacy: Governments gain legitimacy through free and fair elections.
5. Free and fair elections are crucial for democratic health, and international organizations often monitor elections to ensure their integrity.

The Socio-cultural Factors Influencing Election Management in Nigeria

According to Nwokeke *et al.* (2011), the conduct of elections and its management at all levels are influenced by enumerable factors which include but not limited to the following:

- 1 Election rigging: Nigeria has a history of election rigging, which has undermined democratic consolidation. Rigging methods include illegal printing of voters' cards, ballot stuffing, falsification of results, and more ¹.
- 2 Electoral body bias: The electoral body has been biased in favour of certain candidates, leading to a lack of trust in the electoral process ¹.
- 3 Political violence: Election rigging has led to political violence, intimidation, and even death, discouraging citizens from participating in the electoral process ¹.
- 4 Low voter turnouts: The rate of citizen participation in elections has drastically reduced due to election rigging, disenfranchisement, and a lack of qualified candidates
- 5 Lack of democratic consolidation: Election rigging has hindered democratic consolidation in Nigeria, leading to a lack of political stability and undermining the legitimacy of governments.
6. Ineffective administration and poor organization
7. Questionable outcomes resulting in conflicts and litigations
8. Lack of autonomy, professionalism, and financial and administrative capacity of INEC
9. Weak institutionalization of INEC

- 10 Political instability and unstable election management system
11. Military incursion in the politics of Nigeria
12. Unbiased and fair electoral umpire
13. Ensuring fairness, openness, and transparency in elections

Other factors confronting elections management in Nigeria are highlighted by some scholars (Adetula, 2007, Agbaje, & Adejumobi, 2006, Animashaun, 2010, Birch, 2008 and Bratton, 1998) to include the following:

- Logistical challenges and poor preparation
- Inconsistent voting rules and regulations
- Vote-buying and other forms of electoral malfeasance
- Lack of autonomy and professionalism
- Limited financial and administrative resources
- Ineffective administration and organization
- Ethnic and religious bias
- Political party disputes and litigation
- Judicial politicization and corruption

Conclusion

The challenges of elections in Nigeria are attributed to the weak institutionalization of INEC, which lacks autonomy, professionalism, and financial and administrative capacity. The atmosphere of general elections in Nigeria has been quite worrisome and of serious concern. Most disturbing is the fact that it endangers peace and causes insecurity of life and property. This study attempts to explore and examine the challenging political atmosphere of Nigeria which poses serious problems to effective election management and is a potential threat to Nigeria nascent democracy. Evidence-based data generated from this study will provide useful recommendations that if taken seriously, will help to curb the menace of election violence and impunity in our general elections Nigeria.

Recommendations

To address these hydra-headed issues, measures such as electoral reform, voter education, and the promotion of credible and independent electoral bodies are necessary. The study recommends that the Act establishing INEC should be reviewed to enhance its autonomy and capacity to conduct free, credible, transparent, and acceptable elections in Nigeria.

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