

Addressing Electoral Hurdles in Nigeria: Analyzing the 2023 General Elections and INEC's Role

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the numerous challenges hindering the achievement of peaceful elections in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the 2023 general elections overseen by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Throughout Africa, several presidential and general elections have taken place, with some countries, such as Angola, Kenya, and Senegal, notably succeeding in organising free and fair electoral processes. Conversely, nations like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) and Nigeria have faced significant obstacles, including widespread electoral fraud and violence, despite concerted efforts to ensure credibility in their electoral systems. In 2021, the Global Conflict Barometer identified three armed conflicts each in the DR Congo and Nigeria out of a total of 20 worldwide. Elections in Nigeria have been particularly plagued by substantial violence, manipulation of ballots, vote buying, and loss of life—factors that have long hindered the country from conducting genuinely free and fair elections. Before the 2023 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission reported attacks on at least 53 of its offices nationwide, with ongoing violence persisting. However, this paper aims to critically analyse these barriers to peaceful elections, elucidating their underlying causes and proposing solutions to foster transparent and credible electoral processes in Nigeria. Employing a method of critical analysis, the paper argues that various stakeholders, including politicians, citizens, INEC, the judiciary, and the government, must take responsibility for ensuring the successful conduct of polls. Furthermore, it advocates for the adoption of strategies akin to those employed by successful countries like Senegal, Angola, and Kenya during their elections.

Keywords: Election, 2023 General elections, Election Malpractice, INEC, BVAS.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has seven general elections since returning to democracy in 1999. 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections. From 1999 until 2023, elections were plagued by anomalies, rendering INEC's declared victors not necessarily the people's choice (Ojukwu, 2019). This is due to INEC's failure to follow its procedures. This was seen in the 2023 general elections, Nigeria's seventh since democracy. The exorbitant expense of nomination papers deterred many qualified candidates from running in the elections. Nigeria and INEC promised Nigerians the freest and fairest elections utilising the new gadget (BVAS) before the 2023 general elections. But it was regrettable that INEC deluded and fooled Nigerians again (Badmus, 2017). INEC breached its pledges to Nigerians. The 2023 general elections were Nigeria's worst since 1999 (Osinakachukwu & Jawan, 2011). Rigging, underage voting, vote buying, burning ballot papers, deaths, delays, disenfranchisements, cancellation of results, inadequate physical arrangements, BVAS' failure to upload results, and widespread violence plagued the presidential

and National Assembly elections. The 2023 elections violated the 1999 Nigerian constitution as revised in 2011. In section 133 of the constitution of Nigeria, it says: A candidate for an election to the office of the president shall be deemed to have been duly elected to such office where being the only candidate nominated for the election- (a) he has a majority of YES over NO votes cast at the election; and (b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, but where the only candidate fails to be elected in accordance with this section, then there shall be fresh nominations (Solomon, 2022, p.54).

The constitution shows INEC was corrupted. THE INEC-proclaimed winner was notofficially nominated and did not have the majority YES because the election was substantially skewed. Not all states, including the Federal Capital Territory, voted for the winner. This study critically examines these inconsistencies and problems to find solutions. Starting by analysing a few topics below can assist clarify.

Election

Collins English Dictionary describes an election as a vote for an official position². Direct, indirect, open, or secret elections are possible. Direct election allows all eligible adults to vote for their preferred candidates (Okorie, & Igwenyi, 2022, p. 45). This election is democratic. In indirect elections, voters choose candidates indirectly. However, they elect representatives who vote for their ultimate representation. Nigerian elections began in 1959 with several political parties to elect delegates to the Federal Government and the states in the fourth republic (Sklar, 2015). In Nigeria's multi-party system, the APC, PDP, APGA, NNPP, and LP are electorally successful. Since 1999, when elections began, the PDP ruled the presidency until 2015, when Muhammadu Buhari won. The 1999 Nigerian Constitution created the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to organise political office elections. Not enough can be said about elections (Sule, et al., 2017). Election is the only valid way to choose officeholders, boosting democracy. It holds elected officials responsible by threatening to remove them in the next election if they underperform. In countries with inclusive political systems, elections guarantee smooth government changes. Nigerian elections since 1999 are continually threatened. It's manipulation; Nigerian leaders want to preserve power (LeVan, 2019). They work hard to keep power. This is why Nigerian vote-buying and other election scams are rising.

Malpractice in Elections

Also called electoral fraud, electoral malpractice. This includes “any wrongdoing affecting the electoral procedure, electorate, and electoral material which influences election outcomes to benefit individuals over the public interest” (Aliyu, et al., 2020, p. 64). It includes unlawful, wrong, and unfair conduct before, during, and after elections. Desperate politicians, security agents, electoral commission officials, political parties, party followers, thugs, etc. may do these unjust crimes to win an election. Election malpractice includes ballot box damage, underage voting, ballot box stuffing, vote manipulation, vote rigging, intimidation,

disenfranchisement, electoral device manipulation, and vote-buying (Opeyemi, 2015).

INEC

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Abudulsalami Abubakar founded it in 1998 before Nigeria became military. Nigerian elections are administered by INEC (Charles, et al., 2020). As Nigeria's election arbiter, it oversees all elections. INEC operates independently of the government. INEC performs crucial duties, which we will examine.

INEC duties

INEC personnel teach voters to prevent errors while voting. This is done by orienting voters on how to thumbprint the ballot paper to eliminate errors, avoid duplicate voting, and fold it to prevent ink discoloration. This may be done via media, churches, workplaces, and markets (Umeh, 2021). INEC uses ad-hoc workers during elections due to the limited number of officials and big population in Nigeria. Before elections, these workers must be thoroughly taught to prevent errors while calculating results. Does INEC adequately educate these people? Some of the 2023 election anomalies and cancellations indicate INEC failed its role. Voter education and awareness campaigns for women, youth, and marginalised groups are needed to guarantee legitimate elections.

Political Party Registration

Forming political parties is necessary before each election in the nation. After formation, INEC must register them according to section 221, sub-section (a) of the Nigerian constitution, which states that “no association by whatever name called shall function as a political party unless the names and addresses of its national officers are registered with the independent National Electoral Commission” (Abuza et al., 2022, p.65). Over-registering political parties in Nigeria has led to constant cross-carpeting of politicians during elections. This hinders free and fair elections in Nigeria (Abutudu, 2014).

Monitoring Political Parties Campaigns

Nigerian political parties may conduct campaigns after registering. Nigeria's constitution mandates political parties to follow certain ideals (Babalola & Abba, 2017). Thus, the INEC must uphold the ideals. Unfortunately, the INEC does not do this function. The INEC would not sanction most political parties that violate these norms. A party gave delegates billions of naira during primaries but did nothing. Lack of control over these parties has led to increased corruption during elections (Ojo, et al., 2019).

Registration of voters is the responsibility of INEC for those above 18 years old. After completing registration, the voter's card will be provided. The voter's card contains all needed information about the voter. This prevents electoral misconduct while voting. Without a voter's card, you cannot vote in elections. Underage voters cast ballots in the 2023 elections to demonstrate INEC's failure. This proves INEC is untrustworthy and breaks its regulations. Nigerian voter registration remains a

concern (Erhunmwunse, 2023). INEC promotes democratic knowledge related to the electoral process in Nigeria. INEC must improve their democratic awareness. INEC seems undemocratic and unindependent.

In INEC, there is a hierarchy of positions and delegation of powers. From Chairman to Residential Electoral Commissioners, Electoral Officers, Returning Officers, and Collation Officers. INEC may appoint someone to undertake a function on its behalf. Governments may prevent INEC from doing its job (Odunlami, et al., 2020). If the administration is corrupt and greedy, it may use INEC to stay in power. Democracy is beautiful because of its credibility; INEC fails when it follows foreign organisations.

NIGERIAN FREE AND FAIR ELECTION CHALLENGES

Peaceful elections in Nigeria have several problems, including;

Nigerian elections are plagued by persistent violence before and during elections. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria continue a history of election violence, which is awful. This violence occurred in almost all 36 Nigerian states. Lagos was the epicenter (Ifedi, et al., 2023). Political parties deployed thugs to disrupt votes in Rivers, Lagos, Enugu, Abia, Adamawa, and others. In Enugu, a Labour Party House of Representatives candidate was brutally killed two days before the HOA election. A Rivers State REC was warned not to call a local government's presidential results. Violence between Igbos and Yorubas in Lagos State led to an ethnic crisis. A voter in Njikoka LGA was shot dead at the polls during the election, while policemen in Ihiala LGA stopped hoodlums from stealing ballot boxes. This violence during and after elections has harmed Nigerian elections. It also contributes to poor INEC election turnouts (Dii 2023).

Vote Buying

Money influences leadership in Nigeria. Nigerian elections are now centred on wealth, making them a “do or die affair”. Money politics are widespread in Africa. Due to skilled and incorrupt leaders, Nigeria remains unfortunate (Alaye, 2023). Most Nigerian politicians still purchase votes, which renders election outcomes unrepresentative of the people. Vote buying was revealed in the 2022 APC primaries. This helped most primary candidates win (Musa & Musa, 2023). We failed to abolish vote-buying in the 2023 general elections. The more government tries to limit it, the more politicians find ways to encourage it. The exorbitant cost of nomination forms is blamed for vote-buying. After spending so much on nomination paperwork and campaigning, no one wants to lose an election. Vote-buying is another way political elites stay in power because they would do everything to stay there.

The cost of running elections is high.

Nigerian elections have become more expensive without any effort to reduce them. This enormous cost offers unfit politicians the motivation to rise to top positions and stay in power (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). This implies that when these individuals take power, they will first hunt for methods to pilfer public money to replace election spending, and at the end of their term, they will have done nothing.

The Multi-Party System

This is a major difficulty and waste of INEC's money. Nigeria has too many political parties, wasting money throughout elections (Olarinmoye, 2008). This also allows politicians to constantly switch parties. Everyone wants to create a political party, but INEC struggles to fit everyone on one ballot.

Poor funding

Poor finance is another INEC issue. INEC complains about low funds despite millions of naira for election organization (Fourchard & Sikiru, 2023). Election-related ad hoc personnel should be compensated handsomely. All these unlawful vote-buying methods stem from their low salary. Thus, the INEC must raise their honoraria and pay them on schedule.

Electoral Acts

INEC is autonomous, yet the HOA often passes laws that hamper its functioning. Electronic voting has been around for a while, but INEC needs an electoral act to execute it. In certain cases, INEC breaks the law to help the government. Electoral Acts need 25% of votes in all 36 states and FCT to become president. This legislation does not apply to 2023 general elections. Even if the electoral legislation requires additional elections in cases of violence. INEC did not evaluate these factors in the 2023 general elections.

Underage Voter

The underage voter is another Nigerian election issue. Despite the implementation of BVAS, underage voters voted in the 2023 general elections (Dele-Dada, et al. 2023). Who registered these people? Why could underage voters vote? This shows INEC's inability to do its duties.

Ballot Box theft

In Nigeria, lawbreakers are lawmakers, which is unfortunate. Ballot box stealing is nothing new (Obiefuna, 2023). This horrible affair involves desperate politicians. After realising they won't win in a state or ward, they don't deploy hoodlums to assault. Criminals are always aggressive, willing to murder and destroy ballots. Unfortunately, this horrible occurrence has killed several INEC officials and coppers.

Logistics

Transportation of persons, sensitive and non-sensitive items is challenging during elections. Logistics have caused elections to start late or not at all. There are spots that are hard to find or get there on time, such riverside and dangerous neighbourhoods. INEC also worsens these issues (Brusnahan, et al., 2022). INEC sometimes forgets to plan. Planning beforehand and not making plans on election day helps avoid these delays. The INEC should also provide secure housing for ad-hoc personnel. Allowing them to convey at INEC offices on election day is inappropriate and might create delays.

Increased population

Nationwide population grows regularly. People are ageing, moving, and dying. Tracing advanced and moved candidates to prevent disenfranchisement and deceased candidates to delete from the register becomes a major task for the INEC (Oji & Oji, 2010).

Delay in Ad-Hoc Staff Honorarium Payment

INEC relies on ad-hoc election workers. The ad-hoc personnel includes students, NYSC members, and some government officials (Aboh & Obem, 2022). They lead, yet their honoraria are delayed or not paid, despite their vital and tough work. After the presidential and House of Assembly elections in 2023, thousands of ad-hoc personnel protested not being paid. Shortpaid workers were among them. Incompetence and neglect by the INEC allow desperate politicians to pay them to rig elections. Their wellness is crucial due to compromise and tough living situations. Honestly, their payment has been delayed. The 2023 general elections were not the first. INEC must provide for the welfare of ad-hoc workers (Aboh & Obem, 2022).

THE ROLE OF INEC IN THE 2023 NIGERIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Former president Buhari and INEC chairman Prof. Mahmood Yakubu promised free, fair, and credible elections in 2023 (Nnoruga, 2023). INEC allocated N355 billion for logistics and the implementation of BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing, IREV, platform (Musa, 2023). This ensures calm, unmanipulated elections. The INEC chairman constantly promises Nigeria that BVAS would dramatically minimise voting malpractices. As Uzoanya says: The 2023 general elections were anticipated by many Nigerians due to the fact that they were not a two-horse race, INEC's repeated assurances, the signing of the 2022 Electoral Act, which included technology, and the economy's worsening state. Thus, the election season was filled with nostalgia, worry, trepidation, and optimism that we might finally get things right. Did we? (Agbim, et al., 2023).

In order to improve the credibility and transparency of Nigerian elections, INEC introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System. This BVAS should eliminate manual figure manipulation. It verifies voter cards and authenticates them during accreditation. This technology functioned well in the September 2021 Delta State Isoko South Constituency by-election. Despite government and INEC promises that the IRAS will upload all results instantly during accreditation and voting, the almighty BVAS failed miserably. Did the umpire body deliver? No!

Nigerians voted in droves on February 25, 2023, assuming that the electoral malpractices of the previous elections would not occur again. No doubt, attendance was high (Balogun, 2023). People arrived at voting stations at 6 am. Some camped at polling stations and provided generators to prevent tampering. The umpire agreed to publish the results to the IREV site, so everyone worked hard to ensure their votes counted. Nigerians wanted to see the umpire boss's promises fulfilled. Unfortunately, the opposite happened. Their experiences included disillusionment, dishonesty, intimidation, and failure. Things Nigerians learned they lost tainted the

February 25, 2023 elections. Only to discover that the INEC boss indoctrinated, manipulated, and cajoled them. Uzoanya in his words observes that: The election was marred by irregularities, ranging from voter suppression, intimidation, raw violence, sporadic shootings, snatching of ballot papers, and vote buying, among others. Both international and local observers attested to the fact that the election was grossly below standard. A key factor of uploading results from the polling units to the IREV portal looked like “the more you look, the less you see”! (Abada, et al., 2023, p. 32).

The main goal of revamping the Nigerian currency was to dramatically eliminate vote-buying. Unfortunately, these politicians shared dollars with people at the polls on Election Day. We also remember that the CBN governor's limit on bank withdrawals during the Naira swap cost many lives. The hardship and grief Nigerians endured for an effective government were wasted. Sadly, several people died during the elections. In Lagos, Rivers, Kano, and Adamawa States, violence was nothing special. Many issues plagued the 2023 elections, according to local and foreign observers. INEC did not provide enough trucks to transport ad-hoc workers and supplies. This has disenfranchised many qualified voters in certain states. Slow results aggregation and announcements worried and tense voters. Election ad-hoc personnel were not given honoraria.

The status of Nigeria during the 2023 general elections was worse than Hobbes' “state of nature” (Isike & Olasupo, 2023, p. 50). Unfaithfulness and distrust make most people distrust the government. They even destroyed their voting cards due to disloyalty. After 23 years, Nigerian electioneering seems to have stayed unchanged, as shown by the 2023 national elections. The question is: what went wrong? The issue is weak leadership and INEC's inability to act as an independent organisation. Politicians have been the weakest link in electioneering. Our leaders today are terrible for causing these hardships to their populace. Despite spending money on elections, nothing changed; things became worse. Sowore argues in an interview that free and fair elections are unlikely without a revolution similar to that in Sudan or Algeria. He believes Nigeria must realise that ideas cannot win elections without dramatic action. He says politicians killed progressive politics. In Nigeria, smart young individuals are invited to run for councillor, while outdated ideas are proposed for president.

INEC improved despite these failures. BVAS decreased overvoting, unlike in manual elections (Onyekwelu, 2023). Nigerians just learned the voter count in high-voter-counting northern regions thanks to BVAS. Due to high knowledge and engagement, the 2023 elections saw the most diversified political parties—PDP, LP, APC, YPP, NNPC, and APGA—elected. Usually, only two parties run.

SOLUTIONS TO NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL CHALLENGES

One thing is recognising issues; another is proposing answers. Some issues plagued the 2023 general election. Nigeria's political parties' poor performance is the primary issue (Obe, 2019). The second issue is INEC's incapacity to deliver on its core duties. BVAS failure and manipulation are the third issue (Uchendu, et al., 2023). In light of these issues, what can Nigerians do to overcome them as African giants? First, INEC must maintain its duties and not compromise. It must train and

qualify its ad-hoc and permanent workers to perform successfully during elections. This will greatly reduce election cancellations and discrepancies.

Second, the government controls the nation's development and sustainability. They know how to advance our nation. Let those with excellent intentions for Nigeria solve it. The people must persevere. Since justice must prevail one day, people must stand on the truth and vote for the proper leaders in large numbers. The judge must stick to the facts and uphold the law. If desperate politicians must reign, they should model these African leaders with stable democracies. Countries like Botswana. When everyone does their part, this will help repair the country.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria is where it is because political elites have failed to make space for capable and dedicated leaders. Nigeria can be great again if our leaders consider and find methods to improve it. Nigeria should follow Senegal, Angola, and Kenya's trustworthy election leaders. Senegal, Angola, and Kenya attended President Biden's democracy meeting. These three nations demonstrate the necessity for independent institutions, notably election boards and the courts, and campaign funding reforms that widen participation and reduce patronage. Their action is crucial to deterring Africans from destabilising violence and boosting faith in elections as a means of democratisation.

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