A Critical Review of Democracy and the Aftermath of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is no denying that Nigeria has democratized significantly since the end of military dictatorship in 1999. The paper examines democracy and Nigeria's 2023 general elections while accounting for various factors that affected the course of events and the outcome. The Nigerian state has experienced a surge of democratic advancements throughout the last several decades. A democracy is a system of governance where voters elect representatives to office via free and fair elections. The standard of democracy is a free and fair election. Put another way, democracy suggests that the people have the power to choose their leaders. A democratic system is distinguished from any other by the political right of the people to choose their leaders through a free and fair election process. The general election of 2023 is the seventh in a series of elections held since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999. Despite this, Nigeria's democracy has proven difficult to navigate because of the country's diverse ethnic and religious population, the frequency of military takeovers, and its underdeveloped economy. The introduction of new technology by the Independent National Electoral Commission, such as the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), to enhance poll administration in 2023 ultimately made the general elections that year in Nigeria a significant test of the country's democratic progress. The Electoral Act 2022, which brought changes intended to better organize pre-election procedures in a timely manner and to increase transparency in the collation and reporting of results, provided support for this confidence. The general elections of 2023 took place in a very controversial and contested environment, similar to other elections in Nigeria. This included significant insecurity and unclear government policies implemented prior to the poll. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that incorporated data from secondary sources and historical analysis, the study discovered that the election did not meet the legitimate and reasonable expectations of the Nigerian people. Several accredited election observation groups reported that the election's credibility was severely damaged by several procedural errors, including ineffective management of the distribution of permanent voters cards (PVCs), a breakdown in operational and logistical planning, malfunctioning election technology, instances of vote manipulation, political violence, a lack of transparency in the process of collating and declaring results, and inadequate crisis communication. Taking into account the urgent problems that Nigeria is currently facing, such as pervasive poverty, rampant corruption, and insecurity, in addition to a deficient electoral system that has impeded voter turnout in previous elections. Thus, the study suggested, among other things, bolstering the electoral body's independence, putting policies in place to guarantee that there is no fraud or manipulation of the election, and making sure that the election represents the will of the people. Future Nigerian general elections will be more successful in fostering better democracy and a more stable post-election environment if these strategies are put into practice.

Keywords: Nigerian State, Democracy, 2023 General Elections, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS), INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV)

Introduction

A political system's degree of embodiment of three essential components must be assessed to qualify as "democracy". A system is deemed "undemocratic" if it has few democratic components and a strong concentration of anti-democratic beliefs. A state is considered "democratic" if democratic characteristics are widely present. This begs the fundamental question of what exactly is supposed to be understood by "democracy," anyway. "Democracy is a system of government that is characterized by free and fair elections, the rule of law, the protection of individual rights and liberties, and the ability of citizens to hold their government accountable through peaceful and democratic means" (Freedom the House, 2021). Democracy is a form of government in which people have a say in the decisions that affect both their own and other people's lives (Diamond, 1999). Democracy is a form of governance where the people themselves, or their chosen representatives, hold the authority to exercise that power via the workings of the government (Przeworski, 1991). Democracy is a form of government in which people are empowered to exercise their rights to free and fair elections, freedom of expression, assembly and association, and the rule of law in order to influence decisions that impact their lives and the well-being of their society as a whole (International IDEA, 2021).

A democracy is a political system that gives people the ability to influence their government and take part in decisions that have an impact on their daily lives. It is characterized by the rule of law, respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Democracy is a form of government that embodies the principles of political equality, majority rule, and the protection of individual rights and freedoms. It also allows for the peaceful transfer of power through free and fair elections and the ability of citizens to participate in the political process and hold their leaders accountable (National Endowment for Democracy, 2021). According to Held (2006), democracy is a type of government in which citizens participate in decision-making processes, individual rights and liberties are protected, and public goods and services are provided in a way that is responsive to the needs and preferences of the populace.

As the aforementioned definitions make abundantly evident, democracy cannot be fully realized without placing a strong emphasis on the following: the ability of citizens to hold their government responsible; the protection of individual rights and liberties; the rule of law; the ability of citizens to participate in decision-making processes; and the existence of free and fair elections. Put another way, democracy is defined as a system of governance that gives people the ability to influence their government and take part in decision-making while guaranteeing the rule of law, respect for individual rights, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

Abraham Lincoln has widespread recognition for his support of democratic ideals, especially for his crucial role in maintaining national unity throughout the American Civil War and his steadfast support of the abolitionist movement. Democracy is one of numerous paradigms that coexist with other systems of administration, such as autocracy and aristocracy, each of which has unique mechanisms and traits (Becker & Raveloson, 2008; Ogunbanjo, 2024b). Free, fair, and transparent elections that provide every person an equal chance to participate in the political process are one of the cornerstones of a democratic

society. Democratic elections thus serve as a tool for progress. There should be no way to find out in democratic elections whose political party or specific candidate a voter has supported. They are then secreted when every voter can cast a ballot in an envelope in the privacy of the polling booth without being seen or coerced, and when that voter is likewise able to do the same thing later on when placing the envelope inside the ballot box (Ogunbanjo, 2024a). More importantly, democratic elections are free when voters are allowed to select from a wide range of contenders or political parties. Additionally, people must have the freedom to choose whether to use their right to vote or, if they would rather not, to refrain from doing so (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). Successful democratic elections have taken place in several nations, including Canada, Norway, and New Zealand, to name a few. Strong democratic institutions, impartial election commissions, and robust safeguards for civil liberties and human rights have all been created in these nations (United Nations, 2023). One of the emerging nations in the world, Nigeria has had many general elections since the return to democracy in 1999. It is not inaccurate to say that democracy is based on the rule of law and due process and that democracy turns into dishonesty in the absence of these components.

One of the main tenets of democracy is elections. Nigerian scholars have always been interested in elections in the country because, even though it is understood that only credible elections can strengthen and maintain the nation's democracy, the Nigerian government has been increasingly disappointed and concerned about its inability to hold peaceful, free, fair, and open elections with results that are widely acknowledged and respected throughout the nation (Igbuzor, 2010; Osumah and Aghemelo, 2010; Ekweremadu, 2011; Ojukwu, Mbah and Maduekwe, 2019; Gberie, 2011; Ogunbanjo, 2024b). The democratic process is fundamentally based on elections. It is a way to translate the fundamental component of citizen equality in democratic societies into relation through the state's electoral office constitution of "one person, one vote." This is only true, though, if elections are legitimate, fair, and free (Alemika, 2011). Elections that are credible, dependable, and palatable to a broad range of domestic and global stakeholders are essential to the health of democracy as a system of governance. A crucial step in a state's journey from transitional democracy to attempts to consolidate democracy is holding elections. The degree of electoral process freedom and fairness is shown by the relationship between the electoral process and democratic consolidation (Huntington, 1991; Ogunbanjo, 2024b). When there are no restrictions or conflicts in the electoral process, it is considered free. It is widely understood that the judiciary plays a critical role in the election process—possibly even more so when electoral petitions are involved.

Democratic societies are constitutionally entitled to choose their leaders, therefore democratic governance is an electoral contract between the governed and the governors through free and fair elections. By selecting a candidate to support or oppose, voters can also bargain with political candidates on the terms of government (Ifukor, 2010:404). According to Clapham (1993:32), democracy is a process that necessitates reaching an understanding amongst all parties involved. It entails a deal on how to control political rivalry, including the struggle for control of the country's top positions, without resorting

to more extreme violence unless necessary and under control. It demands that those in power answer to the governed by widely acknowledged protocols that can be used to suppress opposition on the part of the governed. Election fraud and the undermining of the people's sovereignty have been hallmarks of the Nigerian state since independence.

This may be related to the nature of the state or what the majority of academics refer to as "the politics of primitive wealth accumulation" in Africa. This is supported by Luqman's (2009:59) observation that Nigeria's electoral history has been uneven in its attempts at democracy. Election-related behavior in the country's democratic attempts has proven pointless since independence. This is because there have been several instances of bloodshed, corruption, and dishonest electoral methods throughout the political history of the country. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that previous attempts at democracy have failed due to tainted elections and the electoral process. The circumstances were so dire that the election season has since become linked to crises driven by politics and acts of violence. The idea that elections are contests to be won at any cost has been reinforced by the fact that politics has become a lucrative endeavor. Due to this, elections in the state of Nigeria are now conducted more like wars (Odoziobodo, 2015).

That being said, Luqman (2005, p. 59) goes on to say that although the political elite's attitudes and behaviors can be linked to many of the issues facing elections and the electoral process throughout the country's democratic history, a significant amount of the blame must also be placed at the door of the institutions tasked with holding Nigerian elections. Based on prior experiences, it has been demonstrated that previous electoral commissioners in Nigeria's political history were subservient to the ruling executive branch, rather than operating independently and impartially. Electoral commissions in Nigeria have demonstrated the reverse of all these qualities, instead of being impartial in their performance of their duties, independent of the executive branch of government, transparent in their dealings, responsible, and responsive to the stakeholders engaged in the process.

A quick examination of every election management body that Nigeria has had since 1959 demonstrates a startling level of extreme ineptitude and partiality in the performance of the holy tasks that these bodies were created to carry out for the people of Nigeria. Of course, Luqman (2009:60) believes that the country's attempts to enact a robust and credible democratic system have suffered as a result of their incapacity to properly oversee the conduct and administration of elections and the electoral process. The most obvious of these consequences was the military's participation in the country's politics, which ended the democratic process (Odoziobodo, 2015).

It is significant to remember that since Nigeria gained its political independence in 1960, ten general elections had previously taken place as of the time of the general election in 2023. 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019 were some of these. Of them, the transition elections held in 1979, 1993, and 1999 when the nation switched from military to civilian rule were managed by the armed forces. On the other hand, when one civilian administration gave way to another, general elections were arranged by civilian administrations in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019.

Oronsaye (2008: 80) notes that it is instructive to mention that the seven civilian government elections—the ones that were organized in 1964, 1983, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019—had credibility issues as a result of the electorate's belief that the elections were not credible because they were not free and fair. They charged that the several electoral commissions—FEDECO, NEC, NECON, and INEC, in that order—were biased and catered to the whims and schemes of the ruling administration. Specifically, several domestic and international election observation organizations, including Yiaga Africa, the International Republican Institute (IRI), the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, and IFRA-Nigeria declared the 2023 elections to be the worst it has ever had since gaining its independence. This comment was made as a result of INEC's inadequate planning and implementation of the election, which resulted in contested results in almost every election held in 2023 for different political posts.

Numerous reports have stated that the conduct of voters during each election cycle has largely determined the outcome of the general elections held in Nigeria, aside from the readiness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is the electoral management body (EMB), and the willingness of the ruling party in government to organize an election that can be considered credible. This is not too difficult to verify because voter cooperation and enthusiasm have been essential to the success of every step of the EMB's preparations for the upcoming general elections, from updating the voter registration to conducting the polls and announcing the results.

On the other hand, a variety of domestic and foreign electoral observation organizations have expressed differing opinions on the validity and standard of the results of past elections. While some have said that the outcome is going away from what is considered appropriate for democratic processes, others have said that it is changing from poor to excellent. The question to be investigated is whether voter behavior and disposition play a significant role in the outcome of Nigerian elections, or if the government's and the EMB's attitudes alone affect the quality and reliability of the results. Without a doubt, voter attitudes and actions influence the results of each election. Voters ultimately determine whether there is high voter turnout or voter indifference during elections. Voters are those who engage in thuggery, pack ballot boxes, steal ballot boxes, and even murder, maim, or damage election-related items. Voters are the ones who give in to the pressure of bribery and vote buying to band together and rig the results. This means that things will be different if voters decide to abstain from these vices to give election results the respectable quality and legitimacy they deserve. This, however, does not justify the conduct of the political elite, which uses every tactic to influence and sway people to win an election.

More inspired hopes were presented by the general election scenario in 2023 than by any other election held in the nation. Several initiatives were launched by the governing administration in 2023 to reduce electoral fraud. The Economic Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) would play a more active role in regulating the movement and deposits of cash during the elections. Examples of such measures

include the redesign of the Naira, currency cash swaps, limitations on permitted amounts on deposits and withdrawals, and more. All of these factors, along with the EMB's guarantees that the INEC Voter Enrollment Device (IVED), the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV) would be deployed as foolproof electronic tools to thwart any attempt at voter fraud, may have had an impact on the attitudes and actions of voters in the general elections of 2023. During the accreditation process, the BVAS was used to biometrically authenticate voters. After Election Day, it was also utilized to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results to the IReV internet site. It was generally expected that the release of polling unit-level results via IReV would represent a major advance in election transparency over the 2019 polls. To ensure a genuine election was a novel idea, but how impartial, objective, and creative are the operators? In light of this, this research looks at the general elections of 2023 to determine if BVAS and IReV were successful in conducting the elections and advancing democracy in the Nigerian state.

The Nigerian State

Before the British conquest in 1861, the modern-day nation of Nigeria was home to a multitude of independent groups with unique cultures and traditional governmental institutions (Oni, 2014; Ogunbanjo, 2020). History records a range of exchanges between these civilizations, including trade and conflict. These independent states were home to Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Urhobo, Tiv, Bini, and Nupes. But in reality, they are made up of three main tribes: the Yoruba in the west, the Igbo in the east, and the Hausa/Fulani in the north. In 1900, British soldiers unified the area above the Niger and Benue Rivers to form the Northern Protectorate. From the areas in the southern half, they built the Southern Protectorate in 1906.

When Britain merged the two protectorates in 1914, Nigeria as it exists today was created (Eliagwu, 2007). Several countries with dissimilar historical narratives, cultures, and religious practices were compelled to unite throughout this period. The residents of the different zones were not consulted or included in the merger process. Nigeria was, thus, from its inception, according to Kirsten (2016: 506), "an artificially constructed state and the result of colonial power enforcement in Africa". Administrative ease and economic concerns were given precedence by the British above historical, ethnic, and religious differences (Eliagwu, 2007). The combination of the two protectorates reduced the cost of colonial enterprises. The idea was for the infrastructure development in the northern region to be "sponsored" by the naturally resource-rich southern area. Despite the northern part of Nigeria being renowned for its excellent agricultural output, the southern part was disregarded in the pursuit of natural resources. However, Oni did observe that:

> to amalgamate such nationalities in a marriage of inconvenience was to anticipate a failed relationship, a relationship which no doubt has been characterised *inter alia* by mutual suspicion, hatred, deep animosity, violence, sectionalism, and ethnic chauvinism till date (Oni, 2014: 8).

Notwithstanding its motto of "unity in diversity," the Nigerian state remains afflicted more than a century after the merger due to the adverse consequences of blending several nations and unique features. Nigeria is a nation in West Africa that shares boundaries with the Gulf of Guinea to the south, the Benin Republic to the west, the Niger Republic to the north, Chad to the east, and Cameroon to the east (Otobo, 2009). The country's land area is 923,768 km2, and its population is expected to reach 210.2 million in 2018 (AfDB, 2020; United Nations, 2020: 16). Nigeria is the largest populated country of African origin in the world, with over 250 ethnic groups and 500 languages and dialects. It has also been rated as the most pluralistic nation (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). In the 1960s, there were over 3000 ethnic groups worldwide, with 1000 of them residing in Africa, with Nigeria accounting for 25% of the continent, according to Onwujeogwu (2007). In the former USSR, there were over 127 different ethnic groups. In comparison, there were over 40 ethnic groups in China and India, less than 50 in the USA (not including American Indians), 4 in England, 7 in France, and about 15 in Germany. The Nigerian state has a more complex degree of pluralism than other nations, claim Abimbola and Ojo (2019). Furthermore, Nigeria is home to more than a hundred different religious groups, most of which fall under the umbrella of Islam, Christianity, and traditional beliefs. About 50% of the population was Muslim, 40% was Christian, and 10% practiced native African faiths as of 2021 (Brinkel and Ait-Hida, 2022). Roughly two-thirds of the population identify as Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa-Fulani (Agbiboa, 2023). Diversity in terms of ethnicity and religion is a part of plurality, claims Khan (2019).

The necessity to foster national cohesiveness led to the development of a federal system of government in Nigeria in 1954, despite the country's varied population (Kirsten, 2016; Ogunbanjo, 2023). Still, the independence dispute delayed any significant moves to reorganize the political system. The nationalist leaders who fought for independence "suspended" racial and religious divides to attain political freedom. A limited unity was established to negotiate the departure of British authority in Nigeria. Consequently, Nigeria was split into the North, West, and East Regions upon its independence from Great Britain on October 1, 1960. The main ethnic group built powerful regional administrations that they controlled: the Hausa-Fulani and Muslims in the north, the Igbo and Christians in the east, and the Yoruba majority with about equal proportions of Muslims and Christians in the west (Schwarz, 2005). The Mid-West region, which was created in 1963 (Schwarz, 2005) to reduce the dominance of the three major ethnic groups, is mostly inhabited by Binis and other minority groups.

The military's entry into politics in 1966 further divided the nation by eroding the power of minorities and further serving the interests of military elites. Consequently, the four regions that comprised the nation were split up into twelve states in 1967. 19 in 1976, 21 in 1987, 30 in 1991, and 36 in 1996 were the higher numbers (Kirsten, 1996; Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). The endeavor to recognize plurality resulted in the establishment of 774 local governments. As a result, some areas have seen the rise of formerly disadvantaged groups, while "emerging" minorities are presently battling marginalization. The 1995

Constitutional Conference proposed six geopolitical zones to accommodate nations based on their ethnic composition (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005: 7). Pate (2021: 2) enumerates them:

> North-East: Taraba, Borno, Bauchi, Adamawa, Gombe, and Yobe; North-Central: Kogi, Niger, Benue, Kwara, Plateau, Nasarawa and the Federal Capital Territory; North-West:Kaduna, Kebbi, Zamfara, Sokoto, Kano, Jigawa and Katsina; South-East: Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Abia and Anambra; South-South: Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Edo, Cross-River, Rivers and Delta; and South-West: Ekiti, Oyo, Ogun, Lagos, Ondo and Osun.

However, the proposal to recognize the nation's six geographical groupings was absent from the 1999 Constitution. The northeast (in the northern part) is home to Boko Haram's stronghold, and this area is more severely impacted by the group's reign of terror than other areas.

Despite the creation of regional zones, the regional identities that developed under the First Republic (1960–1966) are still apparent. One of the features of this age was uneven growth in the different places. The autonomous development of the regions hindered economic growth. The country was renowned for its excellent agricultural output, even if this was restricted to a few areas that focused on certain crops. For instance, the Northern Region enjoyed producing groundnuts and onions, the Eastern Region was rich in producing palm oil, while the Western Region concentrated on cocoa plantations. Not insignificant differences in socio-religious values were also noted. Northern Nigeria, where Islamic education predominated, had less effect from the Western educational system than the south of Nigeria, where Western educational institutions had a significantly higher influence (Fafunwa, 1974; Schwarz, 2005; Ogunbanjo, 2023). Okpanachi highlighted the ethno-religious diversity of Nigeria:

> The Hausa-Fulani and other communities residing in Northern Nigeria are mainly Muslims while the South-South minority areas and Igbo speaking areas in the South East are predominantly Christians. The Middle Belt (or North – central zone) is a mixture of Christian and Muslim populations, while the Yoruba-speaking communities in the South West are about half Muslims and half Christians. This differentiation underlies the North-South cleavage (in terms of the North being predominantly Muslim and the South predominantly Christian) and sharpens ethnic cleavages in the country, especially in the North (Okpanachi, 2019: 7).

This illustrates the differences in Nigerian ethnicity and religion. However, religious divisions are widespread, especially in Northern Nigeria, where the majority of Muslim tribes set themselves apart from the smaller non-Muslim population (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005). Therefore, Nigeria stands out for being the most ethnically diverse country in the world as well as for its complicated religious practices (Ogunbanjo, 2020; Agbiboa, 2023). The southern part of the country was the first destination for European explorers due to its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. They introduced Islam, which moved southward, and Christianity, which moved northward; the middle belt marked the meeting place of these two religions (Tajudeen and Adebayo, 2018). While there is coexistence between Christians and Muslims in the Yoruba-

dominated South, Islam is more prevalent in the Northern Region, which may assist in explaining Boko Haram's strong religious links.

After military rule ended in 1999, Nigeria returned to its current democratic system (Ogunbanjo, 2021). The Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution provides the legal framework for democracy in the nation. As Head of State and Head of Government, the President is granted executive authority under the Constitution. The President is chosen by the people for a four-year term, renewable for up to two terms (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). The Senate and the House of Representatives make up the National Assembly, which is the name of the legislative arm of government. The House of Representatives has 360 members who are assigned to the states according to their respective demographics, while the Senate has 109 members, with three senators representing each state. The National Assembly's primary duties include passing laws and supervising the executive branch (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

The Chief Justice of Nigeria, who is in charge of interpreting the Constitution and settling legal issues resulting from its interpretation, leads the judiciary. The judiciary functions autonomously from the executive and legislative departments, and its rulings are legally obligatory on all branches of government (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999; Ogunbanjo, 2023).

The Nigerian state has made some strides toward fortifying its democratic institutions, including the creation of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998 to oversee free and fair elections and the reinforcement of the judiciary to uphold the rule of law; the National Orientation Agency (NOA) in 1993 to foster patriotism, national unity, and social integration in Nigeria; the National Assembly Service Commission (NASC) in 1990 to oversee the National Assembly's administrative affairs; the Public Complaints Commission (PCC) in 1975 to investigate and resolve complaints against government agencies and officials in Nigeria; the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003 to investigate and prosecute financial crimes in Nigeria; and the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) in 1930 for maintaining law and order, preventing crime, and protecting lives and property in Nigeria and among others.

A perfect democratic state is still a long way off, even with institutions in place. Several issues have plagued the nation's political system, including insecurity, election fraud, and corruption (Chibuzor & Polycarp, 2021; Ogunbanjo, 2021). The Rule of Law, separation of powers, judicial independence, regular, free, and fair elections, protection of human rights, equality, citizen participation, political tolerance, taking public opinion into consideration, accountability, transparency, and acceptance of election results are just a few of the essential elements of democracy (Becker & Raveloson, 2008). Nigeria's political system exhibits anomalies in contrast to these democratic ideals.

Theoretical Underpinning: Explaining and Understanding the Institutional and Rational Choice Theories

This study uses the Institutional Theory (IT) and the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) as frames of reference. The rational choice theory offers an understanding of individual behavior, economic behavior, and social actions, while the institutional theory can be used to understand the malfunctions of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political institutions in Nigeria's general elections of 2023, especially in the context of political institutions.

Institutional Theory

Paul DiMaggio is a well-known academic who specializes in institutional theory and has published a great deal about it. DiMaggio contends that institutionalized practices and ideas become firmly embedded in organizational behavior and are difficult to modify, even in the face of new knowledge or evidence, in his key study "Culture and Cognition," which he co-authored with Walter Powell (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). An institutional theory places a strong emphasis on the role that legitimacy—the belief that an organization's activities are proper and desirable—plays in influencing the behavior of organizations. Organizations may choose to implement procedures and frameworks that, while not always productive or efficient, are seen as acceptable in their institutional setting. The notion that organizations are not just rational actors but also products of the larger social, cultural, and political settings in which they function is a fundamental tenet of institutional theory.

Scott Richard is another important figure in institutional theory. According to Richard, this process is motivated by the need to adhere to established institutional standards and the need for legitimacy (Scott, 2014). A sociological method for comprehending how institutions and organizations influence people's behavior is called institutional theory. It focuses on how social structures are shaped by norms, values, and beliefs and how these structures affect how people behave both individually and as a group. Institutional theory holds that people and organizations follow established social norms and institutional regulations even when doing so may not be in their best interests.

Understanding the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) and political institutions' shortcomings in Nigeria's general elections of 2023 may be done through the application of institutional theory, especially when it comes to political institutions. Electoral anomalies, electoral fraud, and corruption have long plagued Nigeria's political system. Political parties, the election commission, and the court make up the institutional structure, which has come under fire for being flimsy, unreliable, and manipulable. The idea that organizations and individuals follow institutional rules and prevailing social norms even when doing so may not be in their best interests is a fundamental principle of institutional theory. Particularly among the political elites, it seems that anomalies during elections are normal and even anticipated in the case of Nigeria's general elections. Numerous variables, such as a history of corruption, lax institutional enforcement, and a lack of openness in the political process, all contribute to the perpetuation of this pattern.

A feature of institutional theory is legitimacy, which is the idea that an organization's acts are right and desirable. Legitimacy in Nigerian politics is frequently associated with the election's perceived fairness and

openness. However, because it is commonly believed that elections are controlled, rigged, and fraudulent, the Nigerian political system has come under heavy criticism for lacking credibility. The institutional system, which includes the courts, political parties, and the election commission, has to be improved to address this. In the political system, initiatives should also be taken to advance accountability, transparency, and democratic principles.

The Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice theory (RCT) offers insight into social, economic, and human behavior. According to Elster (1989), the RCT explains why people often select the course of action they believe would most likely result in the greatest overall outcome when presented with several options. Friedman (1953) pointed out, however, that the RCT definition of "rationality" is that individuals behave in a way that weighs advantages against costs to decide on the course of action that will maximize their benefit. The behavioral revolution in American political science, which sought to employ empirical methods to study human behavior, gave rise to rational choice in the 1950s and 1960s. The RCT was initially used for election behavior and political party competition by Downs (1957). After reviewing his work, Hinich and Munger (1997) significantly advanced electoral research. Individualism is the fundamental tenet of rational choice theorists. They propose that, as participants in society, people are ultimately in charge of making decisions. Additionally, they behave like self-aware, self-maximizing, self-calculating rational individuals, and these individual social activities eventually lead to better social results (Ogu, 2013).

It is suggested that some RCT strengths be used as a model for a deductive approach in political analysis. Besker (1976) defined the rational choice model as a single, comprehensive framework for comprehending all human behavior. According to Rogowski (1997), the model is very rigorous and a theory that may be applied broadly to social activity in the twenty-first century. It was also called the "universal language of social science" by Hirshleifer (1985). According to Ogu (2013), the RCT also has advantages in generality, predictability, and parsimony. Various academics and critics have identified certain drawbacks with the RCT. These include the complexity of human interaction and social actions, which may be better explained by alternative theories; challenges arising from inadequate information and ambiguity; the possibility that actions will be determined by habits and norms, which, once deeply ingrained, may be used by individuals to carry out significant social actions; and the fact that every deliberate course of action in a rational choice reveals how the standards defining what is rational and what is not are constructed (Ogu, 2013).

Review on Electronic Voting System

The reasons for and against the use of electronic voting, or "e-voting," in the conduct of elections in various nations have been shown by some academic research. While some nations started using electronic voting and then stopped, others have kept up with the practice. There are still several nations that hold elections using both paper ballots and electronic voting. According to Carter and Campbell's (2011) study, individuals' intentions to utilize the US online voting system have been considerably impacted by relative

advantage, internet confidence, and the utilization of e-governance information. Warkentin et al. (2018) validated the findings of Carter and Campbell's (2011) study about how technological factors, social identity, and trust impact users' intentions to embrace online voting systems. Their results clarify that users' behavioral intention to use an online voting system is highly influenced by perceived utility and trust.

According to Choi and Kim (2012), the desire to utilize electronic voting is both directly and indirectly impacted by perceived simplicity of use, practicality, secrecy, and accuracy. Schaupp and Carter (2005) conducted research on adoption from disinterest. Through their research, they were able to show how users' perceptions of an electronic voting system's confidence, utility, and compatibility affect their inclination to use it. Agbesi (2020) investigated the factors that affect young voters in Ghana's adoption of electronic voting, including effort expectation, performance expectancy, expedited circumstances, trust, and social effect. The results indicate that among young people who are university students, accuracy, effort expectation, and performance expectancy are the most important elements influencing voters' inclinations to utilize the online voting method.

E-voting, according to Achieng and Ruhode (2013), is a crucial component of ICT-enabled democratic government. According to Adeshina and Ojo (2014), who shared this opinion, the goal of electronic voting is to address the problems with traditional voting procedures to enhance election outcomes and promote citizen engagement in the political process. So, from registration during the pre-voting phase to balloting and voting and verification to vote counting, e-voting technologies support one or more of the key election stages (Ojo, Adeshina & Ayo, 2005; Sampigethaya & Poovendran, 2006). According to Adeshina and Ojo (2020), there are differing opinions about the practical acceptability and use of electronic voting technology in several different nations. For instance, several nations, including the Netherlands, Ireland, and Germany, switched back to paper ballots after first using electronic voting (Achieng & Ruhode, 2013). Additionally, there is still debate in the US concerning the usage of electronic voting methods. Though e-voting has a reputation for being extremely dangerous, in general, the advantages do not exceed the dangers (Bannister, 2005).

There are not many studies that look at the difficulties of using electronic voting equipment during real elections. The factors that influence people's acceptance of online voting have been examined in previous studies on the subject (Bakon & Ward, 2015; Jacobs & Pieters, 2009; Schaupp & Carter, 2005); the advantages and difficulties of e-voting implementation in developing countries have been discussed (Thakur, 2015; Ojo et al., 2005; Ahmad, Abdullah, & Arshad, 2015; Jegede, Aimufua, & Akosu, 2012); additionally, the effects of cultural diversity on people's confidence in e-voting technologies have been acknowledged (Gefen, Rose, Warkentin, & Pavlou, 2005). Using a multi-level innovation adoption scheme as described by Wisdom et al. (2013), Adeshina and Ojo (2020) support voter registration for the 2011 Nigerian General Elections by drawing on the direct involvement of one of the authors as a key player in the pre-adoption and adoption stage of e-voting. Five recommendations were made by the study for scholars,

important players in the e-voting technology adoption process, and policymakers collaborating with election authorities:

> First and fundamentally, any e-voting solution should be considered as a part of the ensemble of important elements for organising successful elections. Second, the Electoral Authority responsible for driving the use of the e-voting technology must have the capacity to efficiently support the use of e-voting solution not only at major election centers but also at remote and rural locations. Third, communication with stakeholders and among the various institutions (both government and nongovernmental) involved in the adoption and use of the e-voting solution must be carefully planned and executed. Fourth, while it is clear that training will be required for all personnel involved in the adoption and use of the new e-voting solution, emphasis must be put on the efficacy of the training programmes. Fifth, given that most e-voting innovation involve relationship with technology vendors, adequate time must be given for localisation and customisation to fit the reality of the adopting environment (Adeshina and Ojo, 2020: pg. 11).

Assessment of the Quality and Credibility of Nigeria's General Elections from 1999 to 2023

In the retrospective examination of the 1999–2023 Nigerian elections, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) serves as a crucial standard. Article 21 (3) of the UNDHR states that "the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures" (Sanubi, 2016, p. 1). The Nigerian election scene has been tainted by complications throughout this era, ranging from voter indifference to electoral violence and intimidation. Nigeria, the biggest country in Africa in terms of GDP and population, saw more than three decades under military dictatorship following its independence in 1960. In recent years, Nigeria has held several general elections (Aina, 2023). Ten general elections have been conducted in the nation since 1999 when the Fourth Republic was ushered in with the return of democracy. While there have been anomalies in some of these elections, others have been utterly terrible.

The first three elections of the Fourth Republic (1999, 2003, 2007) were marred by various types of violence, ballot snatching, fraud, and manipulation, according to Sa'eed (2023). An alliance of civil society organizations called the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG) called the 1999 election results a farce in which a predominant pattern of awarding high votes was observed (TMG, 1999). According to Kew (1999), the results from the Southeast states were mostly fictional, while certain Niger Delta regions' results were so skewed that numerous local governments reported 100% voter turnout—an almost impossible feat. According to Omotola (2004:30), the first civilian-to-civilian transition elections held in 2003 under military rule were likewise characterized as "filled with potholes which were either filled aimlessly or left unfilled before the conduct of the elections." The president in office at the time altered the election's sequence so that the presidential contest could take place first, ensuring a bandwagon effect in the elections that followed. According to Kurfi (2005), there was a lack of

confidence in the 2003 elections due to the widespread use of voting machines and other forms of electoral fraud, including stuffing ballots.

With more than 70% of the votes going to the ruling PDP in the 2007 general elections, the results were widely criticized for deviating from democratic standards (Suberu, 2007; Omotola, 2009). President Musa Yar'Adua, who was chosen in the contentious 2007 election, acknowledged the flaws in the election as a result of this. According to some, the voting in the general elections in 2007 was blatantly fraudulent, even if the elections in 2003 were hardly credible (Ogunbanjo, 2024a). The Nigerian legislation and international standards were not followed in the conduct of the elections, according to the European Union Election Observation Mission (EUEOM) (EUEOM, 2007). The 2007 elections were deemed to be the worst since the first elections held in 1922, according to the report that the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC) provided to the government (FGN, 2008). Human Rights Watch (HRW) asserted on its behalf that the 2007 polls were the worst it had ever seen conducted anywhere in the world.

But the 2011 elections were a watershed, gaining praise for their legitimacy and the way they were handled by Attahiru Jega, the INEC's chairman at the time (Sa'eed, 2023). According to the Commonwealth Observer Group (quoted in Sa'eed, 2023), these elections honored Nigeria's democratic heritage. Still, difficulties remained. Violence leading up to the election that resulted in deaths persisted as a worry. According to Ibeh (2015), there were 61 instances of electoral violence in 22 states in less than 50 days, resulting in 58 fatalities. The fact that this violence occurred throughout Nigeria's six geopolitical zones suggests that its effects were widespread (Ibeh, 2015). According to Amao (2020), there were some signs of improvement in the 2011 elections because of the electoral body's alleged better management and the Goodluck Jonathan administration's seeming lack of meddling in the EMB's functions. According to Akhaine (2011), some detractors have questioned if Jonathan's non-interference was an attempt to support his belief in the EMB or only an expression of it. The results of the 2015 elections marked a significant improvement over the electoral fraud and violence that characterized previous elections in Nigeria because of innovations like the Permanent Voters Card (PVC), card reader technology, thorough audit of the voter registers to filter out numerous and false registrations, and modification of ballot papers and boxes at every polling unit to prevent ballot grabbing and stuffing (Onapajo, 2015).

Even though the 2019 General Election was supposed to be better than the last one, it brought back old problems. According to Ogunbanjo (2024a), among the security risks were insurgency, violent campaigns, and godfatherism. Concerns over responsible election administration, violence prevention, transparent results collation, and fair campaign grounds were noted by the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (Ogunbanjo, 2024b). Amao (2020) reports that several observers contended that the general elections of 2019 represented a dramatic reversal of the gains in democracy made in 2015.

Why the gains from the 2011 and 2015 elections were not maintained in the 2019 elections is an obvious question that has to be answered. The quality and legitimacy of Nigeria's general elections are largely determined by the character and nature of the existing administration, which may be overstating the obvious. The implication made by detractors that Jonathan's non-interference in the 2015 elections was an indication of his faith in the EMB or that he want to encourage that belief (Akhaine, 2011) amply illustrates Jonathan's "belief" and "desire," both of which were absent from the previous government. This explains why democratic development has significantly deteriorated as a result of the elections that have been held thus far (Amao, 2020).

But since Nigeria restored its democracy in 1999, there have been seven straight general elections, starting with the one in 2023. The elections celebrate the longest period of continuous democracy in Nigerian history—24 years. The first national elections held under the new Electoral Act, which President Buhari signed into law in February 2022, were the general elections of 2023. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), upholding Nigeria's tradition of employing cutting-edge technology in elections, made use of two technical advancements to raise the standard of electoral integrity and transparency. The INEC will implement a countrywide voter tabulation system that is accessible to the public, known as the INEC Results Viewing Portal, in addition to the Bimodal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS), which validates and authenticates voters (Table 1).

There was a great deal of uncertainty leading up to Nigeria's general election in 2023. This was mostly brought about by the electorate in Nigeria's prior experiences since many of them have long believed that their ballots are meaningless. This notion is a result of their sense of helplessness in choosing their elected leaders on different levels. One of the most hotly contested general elections in Nigeria's history was held in 2023. Many Nigerians saw President Muhammadu Buhari's victory in 2015 as a chance to turn the nation around after it had fallen precipitously into a backward state as a result of what was thought to be the egregious ineptitude of the previous government. Security concerns were to be addressed by the Buhari government, in particular the ongoing danger that Boko Haram and its breakaway province, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), presented in the northeast (Aina, 2023). At the time, other pledges that won over Nigerians' hearts and minds included putting the economy first and combating corruption.

Table 1: Electoral Statistical Information

Election Date	Figures
Presidential and National Assembly Elections	February 25, 2023
Governorship and State Houses of Assembly Elections	March 18, 2023
States	36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT)
Local Government Areas (LGAs)	774 LGAs
Total No. of Registered Voters	93,469,008

Males	49,054,162 (52.5 percent)
Females	44,414,846 (47.5 percent)
Persons with Disabilities	85,362 (Data from the 2021–22 Registration
Youth (aged 18–34) Years	Exercise)
	37,060,399 (39.65 percent)
Registration Areas/Wards	8,809
Polling Units	176,846
No. of Electoral Constituencies for the Available Seats	
Presidential Constituency (36 States and the FCT)	1
Governorship Seats	28 States
Senatorial District Seats	109
House of Representatives Seats	360
State Houses of Assembly Seats	993
Total	1,491
Political Parties	18 Registered Political Parties
Total No. of Candidates	15,309
Men	91.7 percent
Women	8.3 percent
Youth	28.6 percent
Campaign Expenditure Limit Based on the Type of Position Competed for	
Presidential Candidates	5 billion naira ($10,848,800 USD equivalent)
Governorship Candidates	1 billion naira ($2,169,760 USD equivalent)
Senate Candidates	100 million naira ($216,976 USD equivalent)
House of Representatives Candidates	70 million naira ($151,883 USD equivalent)
Houses of Assembly Candidates	30 million naira ($65,092 USD equivalent)

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into Percentage was made by the Researcher)

After eight years, President Buhari's assertion that the insurgency has been "technically defeated" has been contested by several people, including policy analysts and observers, even though Nigeria has achieved some notable progress in weakening Boko Haram and ISWAP (Aina, 2023). Likewise, the majority of people believe that the battle against corruption is "selective" and driven by politics. In addition, the nation's economy has not improved much during the last eight years due to a heavy debt load and steady inflation increases. Nigerians are experiencing severe economic hardship as a result of this.

More than half of the population, according to a National Bureau of Statistics report released recently, lives in multidimensional poverty.

Apart from the seeming inability to fulfill some commitments, the Buhari government has encountered further difficulties. For example, the criminal actions of armed bandits in the North-West have resulted in thousands of deaths and the forced relocation of countless others. Yoruba Nation agitators and the Indigenous People of Biafra's paramilitary Easter Security Network have both committed crimes and expanded separatist agitations in recent years. State-society ties were further strained by concerns over the administration's handling of the #EndSARS campaign, notably between the government and young people who were protesting police violence that they believed was primarily directed at them. Another more recent example is the Central Bank of Nigeria's poorly thought-out cashless policy, which not only caused a cash crisis nationwide but also partially harmed Nigeria's informal sector, which affects small enterprises and subsistence households. Therefore, Nigerians have the chance to choose new political leaders in the general election of 2023. The Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal are two technologically driven interventions that the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced before the elections to ensure the legitimacy of the voting process. Due in part to these early promises, over 9.5 million first-time voters registered to vote, demonstrating their excitement. The abrupt appearance of a populist candidate in the form of Peter Obi of the Labour Party and his "Obedient Movement" was another noteworthy development that defined the lead-up to the general election. This marked a paradigm shift in the conventional two-party electioneering process that has come to define Nigeria's general elections.

To summarize, the general elections in Nigeria since 1999 have been characterized by a complicated interaction between obstacles and advancements, frequently deviating from the tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Even if progress has been achieved, lingering problems cast doubt on Nigeria's ability to achieve its ideal form of democracy.

INEC and the Use of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) for 2023 General Elections

Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS)

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is an electronic device that is intended to read Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and verify voters' eligibility to vote at a specific polling place by utilizing their fingerprints. Before casting a ballot, voters can employ facial recognition and fingerprint identification through the use of technical equipment called the BVAS. To verify and authenticate the voter, the Assistant Presiding Officer (APO 1) must either scan the barcode or QR code on the PVC or voter's register, input the voter identity number's last six digits, or type the voter's last name. The second goal is to swap out the Z-pad so that on election day, real-time polling unit results may be uploaded to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). When registering to vote, BVAS also serves as the INEC Voter Enrollment Device (IVED). Using incident forms during accreditation on election day has also been eradicated as a result of its use.

To enhance the management of the 2023 elections, INEC implemented innovative technology such as BVAS and IReV. During the accreditation process, the BVAS was used to biometrically authenticate voters. After Election Day, it was also utilized to electronically transmit a photo of polling unit-level results to the IReV internet site. It was generally expected that the release of polling unit-level results via IReV would represent a major advance in election transparency over the 2019 polls. However, the management of these technologies, their national functioning, and public trust in the systems are all necessary for their success (IRI/NDI study, 2023). INEC never carried out a comprehensive national stress test before the February polls, despite successfully piloting both systems during three off-cycle elections. The BVAS hardware and software were field tested at INEC state offices in January 2023, following the completion of the acquisition of equipment for the 2023 elections. It is alleged that the exercise was not supposed to be publically accessible, thus citizen watchers Yiaga-Africa were able to see the field testing in some, but not all, places (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Positively, on February 4, 2023, INEC held a public mock accreditation exercise. During this exercise, results and accreditation data were also sent to the IReV via the BVAS devices. Nevertheless, public involvement was limited and the experiment only included 436 polling places nationwide, or less than 3% of all polling places.

The INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV)

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria developed the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) as a platform to allow real-time election results transmission from polling places to the central collation center.

The public may observe election results in real-time from different voting places throughout the nation thanks to IReV (Businessday, 2023). Results at the polling unit level are uploaded, relayed, and published for public consumption via the IReV web platform. The public can register personal accounts on the front end of the internet portal, granting them access to all uploaded results that are saved as PDF files. Images of the election results from each polling place, including the percentage of total votes cast and the number of votes cast for each candidate, are available on the portal. The public's faith in the process is increased by the accessibility of polling unit-level results. Therefore, the goal of IReV is to decrease the frequency of election manipulation and vote rigging while increasing the electoral process's openness. When Nasarawa state had a by-election in 2020, INEC introduced IReV. The electoral authority and other key players in the process gave the IReV's usage in the most recent off-season elections, which included the gubernatorial votes in Ekiti and Osun.

The 2022 Electoral Act, which grants INEC the authority to use suitable technology for the country's election administration, also supports the portal. The commission is mandated by Section 41(1) to supply appropriate boxes, electronic voting machines, or any other voting apparatus for elections. According to Section 47(2), the presiding officer must check, confirm, authenticate, and accredit voters using a smart card reader or any other technology tool recommended by the commission. According to Section 50(2), voting in an election and transmitting the results must follow the process established by INEC, subject to

Section 63. The INEC chairman, Mahmood Yakubu, stated during a briefing before the general election that the commission had extensive experience transmitting election results using the iReV.

Results of the 2023 General Elections

Bola Tinubu (APC) received 8,794,726 votes (36.61 percent), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) received 6,984,520 votes (29.07 percent), and Peter Obi (LP) received 6,101,533 votes (25.40 percent), according to INEC's announcement on March 1, 2023. It was announced that Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP) had received 1,496,687 votes or 6.23 percent of the total. Based on the statistics, just around 25 million (or 27 percent) of the approximately 93.5 million PVC card holders registered to vote had done so. YIAGA Africa (2023) said that the results of the presidential elections in Imo and Rivers did not align with its conclusions, based on its tabulation of parallel votes.

The New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), the Labour Party (LP), and the opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) all contested the results process that resulted in Bola Tinubu being declared the victor. To the Court of Appeal (CoA) went PDP and LP. The Court of Appeal acted swiftly, granting the PDP and LP access to verified copies of INEC materials and technical data utilized in the polls on February 25 on March 8. Additionally, it allowed INEC to get its electoral technology ready for the polls on March 18. Further judicial interventions are being considered in light of the allegations made by LP and PDP that INEC disregarded court rulings that were in their favor. PDP went back to the Court of Appeal, but on March 15 it withdrew once more, claiming that INEC had begun to supply the requested papers (Table 2). Even though the Labour Party was given guarantees that the needed data would be sent, as late as March 16th, they continued to accuse INEC of noncompliance. The Labour Party added that they were unable to complete the petition's drafting due to a lack of information. The atmosphere following the election on February 25 was mainly quiet, with parties pleading with voters to remain composed. But only a few days before the polls on March 18, there was a sudden uptick in violence, with over a dozen attacks and kidnappings of candidates by thugs and unidentified shooters, some of which were fatal. Violence shortly before and on Election Day appeared to strategically suppress voter participation.

Table 2: 2023 Presidential Election Results (As Announced by INEC)

Candidate	Party	No. of Valid Votes	%
Bola Tinubu	All Progressives Congress	8,794,726	36.6
Atiku	(APC)	6,984,520	29.1
Abubakar	People's Democratic Party	6,101,533	25.4
Peter Obi	(PDP)	1,496,687	6.2
Rabiu	Labour Party (LP)	648,474	2.7
Kwankwaso	New Nigeria People's Party	24,025,940	100
Others	(NNPP)		
Total	-		

Source: BBC News Online, 30th March, 2023, "Nigeria Election Results 2023:

Up-to-Date Results of Presidential and Parliamentary Races"

The INEC released the lists of victors for 428 of the 469 National Assembly seats on its Twitter account on March 7, 2023. Following the state-level polls, supplemental elections were held in response to the declaration of inconclusive results in seven Senate districts and thirty-two House of Representatives (HoR) constituencies. In response to the assassination of the LP senatorial candidate in Enugu-East on February 22, INEC moved the district's elections forward to align with the state polls. First-past-the-post voting was used in all 360 federal constituencies to elect representatives to the Nigerian House of Representatives in the 2023 elections, which took place on February 25 (Tables 3a and b). All districts' most recent regular House elections were held in 2019. The 10th Nigerian National Assembly will be presided over by the House election victors. Since the 2015 elections, the APC has possessed a majority in the House of Representatives, and in 2019 they cemented that dominance. APC was reelected with a majority of 59 Senate seats and 176 House of Representatives, according to results that were made public. The NNPP gained two senatorial and nineteen House of Representatives seats, while the PDP secured 36 and 118 seats, respectively. The LP was returned with eight Senate and thirty-five House of Representatives seats (Table 3a). There are now eight parties represented in the National Assembly. The lowest level of female participation in the National Assembly since Nigeria's restoration to democracy in 1999 was achieved by women, who won just three Senate and fourteen House of Representatives seats (Tables 3a and b).

Table 3a: Result of 2023 National Assembly Elections (Senate and House of Representatives) as Declared by INEC

Party	Seats (Senate)	Percentage
All Progressive Congress	59	54.1
Peoples Democratic Party	36	33.2
Labour Party	8	7.3
New Nigeria Peoples	2	1.8
Party	2	1.8
Social Democratic Party	1	0.9
All Progressive Grand	1	0.9
Alliance	109	100
Young Progressive Party		
Total		

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into Percentage was made by the

Researcher)

Table 3b: House of Representatives

Party	Seats (House of Representatives)	Percentage
All Progressive Congress	176	48.8
Peoples Democratic Party	118	32.7
Labour Party	35	9.7
New Nigeria Peoples Party	19	5.3
All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA)	5	1.4
	2	0.6
African Democratic Congress (ADC)	2	0.6
	1	0.3
Social Democratic Party	2	0.6
Young Progressive Party (YPP)	360	100
Vacant		
Total		

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into Percentage was made by the Researcher)

In 28 of the 36 Nigerian States, state governors were chosen in the gubernatorial elections of 2023. Eight of the thirty-six states in the country—Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo, and Osun—delay cycle gubernatorial elections as a result of legal disputes and rulings from the courts. It is planned to hold elections in Kogi, Bayelsa, and Imo in November 2023. Due to the two-term ban on governors in all states, the current governors, eighteen of them, are not allowed to run for office again. Across the 28 states, 18 political parties ran candidates for governor, and 416 of them expressed interest in the role. 19.3 million people cast ballots in 23 states during the gubernatorial elections, even though over 74 million voters were registered and over 69 million PVCs were gathered in the 28 states (Table 4).

Table 4: Result of 2023 Governorship Election (As Announced by INEC)

Party	Seats	Percentage
All Progressive Congress	16	57.1
Peoples Democratic Party	10	35.7
	1	3.6
Labour Party	1	3.6
New Nigeria Peoples Party	28	100
Total		

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into Percentage was made by the Researcher)

The results of the March election showed little change overall, with the state's ruling parties mostly maintaining their hold on the governorships. Similar to the federal elections, the post-election discourse was dominated by the performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission, with several candidates claiming that anomalies had affected their results. Furthermore, there were noticeably more reports of violence and vote-buying during the March gubernatorial elections than there were during the federal elections, particularly in the states of Lagos and Kano. Although many expressed relief that the presidential election schedule was honored this time around rather than having it postponed until the last minute, voting places opened later than expected due to personnel and material delays. Voters in the South-East and South-South geopolitical zones were disproportionately affected by these difficulties, which were not felt uniformly throughout the nation. Even though previous elections had shown a similar pattern, the regional disparity in delays was more noticeable in the 2023 elections, and INEC's lack of openness and communication about the origin and severity of these issues eroded trust in the process, particularly in those zones and among parties that saw those areas as their strongholds. Many voters were forced to wait in congested areas for extended periods before casting their ballots due to the delayed openings. Long wait times increased tensions at many polling places, and there was no consistent, organized attempt to extend voting hours.

Voters found the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) to be generally helpful in the accreditation process, while there were some glitches with the devices' thumbprint detection. The polling workers reported network challenges when the BVAS was unable to effectively send the results of all three electoral races at the polling unit in many instances. BVAS functioning was significantly enhanced administratively, as observed by citizen observers in the state and gubernatorial elections that followed.

Violent occurrences that were specifically targeted also affected voting and probably disenfranchised people. Election Day violence and disruption of the voting process happened in at least 22 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), including an attack on a collation center in Lagos, according to press reports, declarations from INEC and security personnel, and monitors of civil society violence. The 2023 elections were heavily impacted by election-related violence and instability, especially during the pre-election phase. There was more violence in the run-up to the election than there was in the corresponding period in 2019, and there were a lot more election-related deaths and violent events in a lot more local government units (LGAs) over the whole 2023 election cycle than there were during the 2019 one. The following occurrences were reported: attacks on the supporters and rallies of rival political parties; assassinations and attempted assassinations of political candidates and party leaders; and assaults against INEC workers, facilities, and procedures (such as voter registration events). With violent interruptions of election procedures recorded in 22 states and the Federal District of Columbia on February 25 and in 21 states during the gubernatorial and state elections on March 18, insecurity on election day was also noticeably greater than it was before the 2019 elections. A significant portion of the violence was directed

at political targets and appeared to be planned by politicians or party leaders, or at the very least carried out with their approval.

Intra-party conflicts during some of the primaries, changing political allegiances, the rise of armed organizations, the appearance of new unofficial security forces, and the ongoing inability to hold those responsible for such actions accountable all contributed to the increase in election violence. The influence of peace treaties and other peacebuilding attempts seems to be relatively limited, and the impunity of violent criminals persists in impeding any positive progress. Many Nigerians fear that political operators may view political violence as a practical and inexpensive campaign strategy in future elections if meaningful changes and increased accountability are not implemented.

Since 2011, women's presence in Nigerian politics has been declining, and the elections in 2023 in the continent's largest economy validated predictions of dismal results for women. In the Nigerian National Parliament, the proportion of female members has decreased by 19% from the previous parliament. Currently, women hold 3 percent of Senate seats and 4 percent of House of Representatives seats (Elor, 2023). It is possible to comprehend the low performance of Nigerian women in the recent elections by looking at the obstacles and difficulties that female candidates and aspirants experienced in the 2022 primary elections. The outcomes of the primary elections for the major parties show the persistent barriers to women's involvement in Nigerian politics. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), the nation has the tenth-lowest percentage of women in national parliaments worldwide. Despite nearly equal voter registration rates for men and women in previous election cycles, there is still a representation problem.

Women made up slightly more than 10% of the almost 15,000 candidates that stood for president, the National Assembly, governorships, and state assemblies in 2023, across all national and sub-national categories (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Moreover, minor party platforms were the platform of choice for 90% of female candidates. Historically, candidates from smaller parties have had fewer opportunities to be elected to government, with the possible exception of an occasional upset by a relatively tiny party, such as the Labour Party.

The legislation requires INEC to make public the names of elected candidates together with their scores without setting a deadline. The methodology used by INEC to determine the winners of the National Assembly and presidential elections, as well as the turnout in each state, the number of voters with credentials, the total number of votes cast, the number of ballots rejected, the votes attributed to each party, and the list of polling places where elections were canceled, postponed, or not held, have not yet been made public. The lack of this data makes it more difficult to conduct an impartial verification of the results (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

In the run-up to the 2023 elections, youth voter registration in Nigeria surged, and young people actively participated in various facets of the electoral process. Voters between the ages of 18 and 34 made up

39.7% of all registered voters in 2023 and 76.6 percent of newly registered voters for the general elections of 2023, according to INEC. Young people worked as educators for their peers and communities, voter mobilizers, and community organizers (Yiaga Africa, 2023; IRI/NDI report, 2023). At the National Youth Summit, INEC Youth Ambassadors disseminated messages urging young people not to participate in electoral violence or sell their votes in the run-up to the election. In addition, young people, including more than 200,000 National Youth Service Corps members, worked as poll workers. Voters' outspoken displeasure and occasionally confrontational behavior were handled by poll workers, including members of the National Youth Service Corps, as a result of many logistical errors and uncontrollable polling delays.

Young people encountered major obstacles while trying to register to vote, notwithstanding their engagement. Since the current ASUU strike forced many students to relocate, it is possible that many young people who were unable to register in their places of residence were denied the right to vote as a result of INEC's failure to extend the deadline past June 31, 2022. Classes at universities and polytechnics were suspended in advance of the elections to facilitate students' travel to their polling places. According to the IRI/NDI report from 2023, 27.8% of voters who registered to vote in the 2023 elections were students.

Even in cases when a significant proportion of young people run for office, they are underrepresented as candidates. The #NotTooYoungtoRun campaign decreased the age minimum to run for public office, but despite this, not many young individuals ran for office. This is especially true when one considers the sizeable proportion of young people who are registered voters. In the national and state elections, the percentage of youth candidates fell, to just 28.6 percent, from 34 percent in 2019. Just 11% of youth candidates (those between the ages of 25 and 35) for state and national elections were women, putting young women at particularly high risk of underrepresentation (IRI/NDI report, 2023).

Just 3.7 percent of candidates under the age of 36 were considered young candidates for the federal elections. In contrast, a higher percentage of young people ran for office in state elections, accounting for 35.6% of state House of Assembly candidates and 12.2% of candidates for governor and deputy governor. In all, 51 youths ran for state elections as candidates for governor or deputy governor, according to the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room. Due to the lack of young candidates in Adamawa, Jigawa, and Ogun, the youth had the least representation in the gubernatorial elections (Ugwu, 2022; Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

Youth's capacity to participate as candidates was severely hampered by institutional and social impediments to nomination and candidacies for political office. These limits were mostly caused by unfavorable opinions about their ability to lead in politics and unfavorable assumptions about their involvement in violence associated with elections. Young people had difficulty covering campaign expenses since they were less likely to be in solid financial situations. One of the biggest problems was

the high cost of nomination forms. Some young candidates who were nominated and could run were removed to further the agendas of their respective political parties (Akhaine et al., 2023).

Youth are nonetheless eager and motivated to actively participate in determining Nigeria's future, even in the face of barriers to political engagement. Nigerians under 30 years old who ran for office increased in 2023, despite a fall in the overall number of young candidates (those between the ages of 18 and 35) (Yiaga Africa, 2023). For instance, Ibrahim Mohammed, who won the Bunza/Birnin Kebbi/Kaigo seat in Kebbi state at the age of 27, is expected to become the youngest politician in Nigerian history to be elected.

Factors that Influenced Voters' Turnout in 2023 General Elections

Voters' enthusiasm for taking part in the Nigerian general elections of 2023 was piqued by several INEC initiatives. The main one of those was the media campaign to inform the public about the upcoming election and the plans to employ technology in a way that had never been done before. They stressed that the implementation of election technology would require the use of three essential elements: the INEC voter enrolment device (IVED); the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), which allows voters to be accredited and results to be electronically transmitted for collation; and the INEC results viewing (IReV) portal, which allows the general public to view polling place results in real-time. The manipulation of results during transmission and collation has been the scourge of electoral fraud in Nigeria. Thus, it was extremely comforting and exciting when INEC devised such a creative strategy to stop election-related misconduct. The Amended Electoral Act 2022, which was ratified by the National Assembly and signed into law by the President on February 25, 2022, further enhanced this.

With the passage of the New Electoral Act, INEC launched a successful voter education campaign about the general elections in 2023, piquing popular interest in registering to vote. Voter turnout was extremely high during the voter registration and permanent voter card (PVC) update activity. Both the INEC Chairman and the Commissioner in charge of voter education actively pushed and oversaw voter education. One of the People's Democratic Party's (PDP) party agents, Senator Dino Melaye, informed the audience during the INEC Chairman's hearing during the announcement of the presidential election results at the national collation center that he had Googled the number of times the Chairman and the Commissioner had stated that the results will be transmitted electronically with the BVAS from the polling units directly to the IReV portal and discovered that it was more than eighty and one hundred and eighty times, respectively, by both INEC officials. Therefore, INEC increased public trust in voting by providing effective voter education on technology usage.

The President's seeming earnestness about leaving a record of conducting free, credible, and fair elections may have had a significant role in the general election participation in 2023. "As president, the goal I have set as one of my lasting legacies I would like to leave is to establish a process of free, transparent, fair and credible elections through which leaders will be elected based on the choice of Nigerians," President

Buhari stated in a speech to the UN General Assembly in New York on September 21, 2022 (Buhari, 2022). The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) developed the cash swap policy and currency redesign to stop politicians from using money to purchase votes and corrupt the election process, showcasing the government's resolve. This boosted popular trust once more in the free, legitimate, and fair conduct of the electoral process, which in turn affected voter turnout in the general elections of 2023.

Additionally, recognition should be given to the regional media outlets and civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly Channels Television, Arise Television, and YIAGA Africa, for their ardent and successful media education campaigns, which undoubtedly affected the number of voters who cast ballots in the general elections of 2023. Voters were greatly reassured that the 2023 elections would be distinct and legitimate from the ones that came before thanks to the daily and weekly briefings and explanations provided by these media organizations on their roles as voters and the expectations of INEC.

Last but not least, the INEC Chairman's presentation at The Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), London, on Tuesday, January 17, 2023, was a significant event that could have affected voter participation in the general elections of 2023. "To be certain, in the end, inclusive and credible elections are dependent on sufficient preparations, and my major preoccupation today is to share with you how preparations are being made for the general elections for high inclusivity and integrity in Nigeria in 2023," he said in his speech to the audience and viewers around the world (Yakubu, 2023). The Chairman continued, detailing the steps needed in getting ready for the general elections of 2023 as well as the lessons that may be drawn from the 2019 election. Election planning, the electoral legal framework, voter registration, PVC, election technology, increasing voter access to polling places, inclusive elections, hiring and training of election officials, and more are some of the phases. In closing, the chairman reassured everyone, saying, "We have made sure that no detail is overlooked in the preparations for the general elections in 2023, notwithstanding the numerous challenges. Nigerians and their friends have been promised that the elections will be free, credible, fair, and inclusive" (Yakubu, 2023). The public's confidence in the process was bolstered by INEC's media statements, the government's position regarding the implementation of the new, redesigned currency and cash swap policy, and the large turnout of voters who registered, waited in line for hours or even days to pick up their PVC, and enthusiastically cast ballots in the presidential and national assembly elections held on February 25, 2023.

2023 General Elections in Nigeria: Challenges of Electoral Credibility

Nigeria is in a very precarious situation. Indices that are now available display signs of a failing state. Everywhere you look, you can find conflicts and agitations, feelings of exclusion and marginalization, an increase in political and criminal violence, a loss of control over borders, an increase in hostilities between different ethnic and religious groups, weak institutions, a shortage of food, unemployment, inflation, crumbling infrastructure, and declining indicators of human development like infant and maternal

mortality and literacy rates. The general elections of 2023 became a pivotal event for the nation because of these unsettling facts.

Independence of the Electoral Umpire and the New Electoral Act

There has long been debate over INEC's independence as the election body in Nigeria. Questions concerning the commission's potential collusion were raised by incidents including the burning or theft of some of its materials, the use of false names on the voter registration list, and the registration of minors in various regions of the nation. New developments including the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System and the electronic transmission of polling place results were brought about by the 2022 Electoral Act. Their goal was to reduce rigging. However, it was thought that some political forces were against their application.

Emergence of 'Viable' Third Force Parties

Nigeria's political scene was controlled by the People's Democratic Party up until 2015. The only party capable of winning presidential elections was this one. This was altered in 2015 with the loss of the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, by the All Progressives Congress, an alliance of opposition parties. This ushered in a period of two-party dominance in the state. The dynamics of the elections appear to have shifted with the rise of the Labour Party and the New Nigeria People's Party. Due to his anti-establishment stance, Obi has been able to draw in a large number of disgruntled young people. Obi, being the sole Christian among the four front-runners, benefited politically from Christians who rejected the Muslim-Muslim ticket of the governing APC. He was winning the campaign in at least three opinion polls, while some have questioned the validity of the surveys. The Kwankwasiya movement's founder, Kwankwaso, is recognized as a grassroots activist. Though he didn't have a large following in the South, he was supposed to be well-liked by common people in the North.

Insecurity

To put it plainly, insecurity is the exact opposite of security. Nigeria's level of insecurity is complex, making it impossible to classify its patterns with precision. The year 2023 saw a generalized state of instability around the elections. Insecurity had reached all-time highs in 2022 due to several factors, including the spread of farmer-herder violence into Southern Nigeria, the growth of banditry in the North West, ongoing violence in the North East caused by the Boko Haram insurgency, the expansion of ISIS into Nigeria's North Central region, and the emergence of the IPOB insurgency in the South East. Stakeholders concurred that although insecurity has always been a part of Nigerian elections, it has been more confined in previous elections (IRI/NDI Report, 2023). Nigeria's national security has been undermined by rampant corruption, terrorist activities by Boko Haram, daily killings by Fulani herdsmen and other criminal gangs, dangerous poverty, inadequate infrastructure, underperforming institutions, and a governance elite that is too removed from the needs of the governed to be responsive to their needs.

These issues were sufficiently brought to light by the EndSARS protests that took place in the country in early October 2020. All Nigerians are still plagued by worry over security as it is becoming increasingly clear to them that the government cannot adequately ensure the safety of people and their possessions. The security of people and property is within the purview of state security agents, such as the police, state security agency, military, immigration, and prison service, all of whom have done a dismal job in carrying out their mandates. Credible elections were challenging, if not impossible, to hold in certain regions of Nigeria due to the country's overall instability.

Corruption

John Campbell, the United States Ambassador to Nigeria, asserts that corruption impedes any country's efforts to establish and strengthen democracy and sound government (Punch Newspaper, 2005). This demonstrates that democracy cannot be expected on a shaky political foundation. The core principles and ideals of democracy have been severely undermined by corruption, which has the destructive power to do so. According to popular definitions, corruption is the use of one's position, authority, and resources for one's own or selfish benefit. For example, "the betrayal of public trust for individual or group gain" is how Dobel (1978) described corruption. Comparably, Obayelu (2007) defines it as "an abuse of public power for private gain, or efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means for private gain at public expense."

Ogundiya (2010) claims that events in Nigeria since 1999 have demonstrated that the country's democratic endeavor has been up against tidal waves of reversal. Consequently, political and bureaucratic corruption is rife, making democracy extremely insecure and the future appear very grim. The level of corruption has escalated to the point where the typical Nigerian may now equate democracy with it. Political corruption has very visible aftereffects, including unstable party structures, persistent economic problems, unemployment, institutional disintegration, and most importantly, cyclical crises of legitimacy and overall instability in democracy. In this country, corruption is typically defined as the embezzlement of money and assets that are kept under wraps, such as capital flight; misappropriation and mismanagement of public funds; money laundering (obtaining funds through fraudulent means); trafficking in drugs and children; illegal arms deals; official abuse of office, which is when an official suppresses and violates an oath of office, and nepotism, which is when one gives undue favors to one's relatives. The extent of corruption in Nigeria is vast; examples include the N1.9 trillion oil industry corruption scandal from 1999 to 2019, the ₦18 billion Police Pension Fund, and the N450 billion James Ibori money laundering case in London.

Money

Any election is a contest involving money, but in Nigeria, where poverty is rampant, citizens must obtain financial assistance before they are allowed to attend campaign events. Additionally, vote-trading has grown in prominence throughout elections. In Nigeria, election campaigns are known for their extravagant

financial expenditures, which unfairly favor those in power over candidates and public resources. The motivation for political parties to gain the trust of people via issue-based campaigning and party platforms that address public objectives has also been diminished by the dominance of money in Nigerian political processes. Despite a well-established regulatory system, reports of vote buying increase significantly in the run-up to election day (IRI/NDI Report, 2023). Money was predicted to play a significant role in the general elections of 2023 even with efforts to increase electoral openness.

Ethno-Religious Factor

This continues to be one of the factors that has significantly fueled the nation's socio-political instability. Tribal and religious emotions continue to divide the community, as seen by the most recent sectarian unrest in the nation and the several ethnic groups' aspirations for the president (Victor, 2002). According to Ojukwu, Mbah, and Maduekwe (2019), every ethnic nationality in Nigeria has its own unique beliefs, interests, culture, language, and degree of desire. These factors appear to have an impact on each group's economic destiny. Furthermore, they complicate the process of forging a shared identity, which makes it harder for the community to achieve real democracy. The three predominant ethnic groups in the nation— the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo—represent four of the eighteen presidential candidates running in the election, who are considered to be the front-runners. The candidates for president from the North are Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso, a former governor of Kano State, and Atiku Abubakar, a former vice president of the nation (1999–2007) and the nominee of the People's Democratic Party. The All Progressive Congress, in power, put forth Bola Ahmed Tinubu, a Yoruba from the southwest, as its presidential candidate. The Labour Party's presidential candidate was South-East Igbo and former governor of Anambra State, Peter Obi. There has been an unspoken agreement that the Northern and Southern regions of the United States will alternate in presidential authority every eight years since the 1999 election. For this reason, a large number of people and organizations from both the North and the South feel that a South African should succeed President Muhammadu Buhari. Further, several Southeast residents and organizations contended that since the region hasn't produced a president yet, 2023 should be its turn. Since the Northeast, where Atiku is from, hasn't produced a national leader since Tafawa Balewa, the nation's first and only prime minister, in the 1960s, several in the region said it should be their turn.

Similar to race and regionalism, religion has always been a powerful instrument in Nigerian strife and mobilization. To guarantee that the president and vice president do not practice the same faith, a rigorous balancing act has also been in place since 1999. The South is predominately Christian, whereas the North is mostly Muslim. When Yoruba Muslim Bola Tinubu selected Kashim Shettima, a Kanuri Muslim and the former governor of Borno State, as his running partner, this equilibrium was thrown off. The Christian Association of Nigeria is among the several Nigerians and organizations that vehemently denounced the ticket.

Burden of History

The pan-Igbo socio-political organization Ohanaeze Ndigbo, as well as a few significant non-Igbo organizations and people, including former president Olusegun Obasanjo, have backed Obi's candidacy. Because of their involvement in the Civil War, there is a widely held notion in the Southeast that there is a plot to keep the Igbo people out of certain important governmental positions in the nation (1967–1970). This idea has contributed to the drive for separation. Even though the region's political class has shown little interest in Obi's campaign, the general public in the area has essentially deified him due to their excitement for his "audacity" in running for office.

Presidential Debates

Numerous organizations have arranged debates for the nation's major political contenders in recent years. Despite being hailed by his fans as a superb strategist, Tinubu has avoided these discussions. Following a speech to an audience in the UK in December 2022, he delegated most of the questions to his assistants. The results of presidential elections are not much impacted by debates. Leading contenders frequently decline to participate in some or all of these discussions. However, Tinubu's disappearance highlights several concerns surrounding him and raises questions about his health.

Technology Adaptation in an Infrastructure-Challenged Environment

Every election cycle since 1999 has been worse than the one before it, with obvious symptoms and anomalies. Even though many were still waiting in line, the results were revealed. Professional godfathers took on the role of order and emergency in the form of ballot box theft, damage, and disseminated mayhem. As a result, INEC decided to use technology to reduce intentional, undesired human involvement in the system. As a result, BVAS, a program that guarantees a smooth and reliable procedure including accreditation, voting, result collation, and announcement, was "born." To perfect and acquire the program together with the necessary hardware, billions of hard dollars, including Naira, were used. INEC promised that BVAS and IReV would humiliate the political buccaneers and be the answer to all "electoral banditry" and related deficiencies. Snatching vote boxes, purposeful falsifying and manipulating results, missing result sheets, and writing up fictitious results would be useless with BVAS and IReV.

The fact that the much-heralded game-changers were let down by the inflexible Nigerian political system and culture was a massive letdown. Because the NASS findings performed quite well, the game-changers also got to decide if, where, and when to make positive, negative, or no changes to the game. That's why some heavyweights turned into paperweights overnight. Regretfully, INEC, which was backed by former President Muhammadu Buhari, made excessive promises but fell short of fulfilling them. The Chatham House reported that the presidential election was not conducted by INEC's guidelines, particularly the one bordering on real-time uploading of results. The NLC denounced the intentional subversion of the people's will by individuals, parties, INEC, and security agencies. They also failed to comply with the electoral act, raising and dashing peoples' hopes. By allowing for opportunities for public observation of all aspects

of the process and by giving the public comprehensive information about issues identified during these exercises and efforts to address them before subsequent elections, INEC could further improve transparency and boost public confidence in the use of these technologies.

Conclusion

The goal of the study was to examine democracy and the results of Nigeria's general elections in 2023. It was seen that voters' curiosity and zeal were piqued, leading to a significant increase in voter participation in the political process. This resulted from the successful voter education campaign that CSO, the media, and INEC ran. In particular, the focus on using technology to verify voters and transfer election results from polling places to the IReV site increased expectations for the exercise's integrity and fostered a sense of distrust to avoid any kind of result manipulation. To guarantee a smooth voting process, the voters genuinely collaborated with INEC and provided uninvited aid, which had a significant impact on the election outcomes.

With 62% more money spent on elections in 2023 than in 2019, it was determined that these elections would be the most costly in Nigerian history. Regretfully, the result was deemed unsuccessful in every aspect (Omotayo, 2023). All of the hoopla around the use of BVAS technology to guarantee ballot integrity was false. According to Agbakoba (2023), the BVAS was not what Nigerians were told; rather, it was only a tool for voter accreditation. Despite having their PVC and casting ballots, several voters were denied the right to vote because they were unable to find the newly established polling places where INEC had scheduled them to cast their ballots on time.

It is imperative to emphasize that the credibility, openness, and effectiveness of the parties involved in overseeing, controlling, and safeguarding the election process are critical to its success. INEC is a key election participant, burdened with the duty of defining the rules of engagement and executing the 2023 elections (Idayat, 2023). Although there has been an increase in confidence in the Commission since the 2022 Electoral Act was introduced, which encourages the use of technology such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), a facial recognition system that helps with voter accreditation, and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), overall trust in INEC has decreased. Additionally, the ruling by the Election Petition Tribunal to nullify the PDP governor's victory in Osun state due to issues such as excessive voting and BVAS synchronization has reduced public trust in technology's capacity to resolve Nigeria's electoral problems. Public dissatisfaction has also been brought about by the way the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) collection process has been handled. Many claim that INEC employees in strategic locations of the government or opposition parties are preventing residents from picking up their voter cards.

For the first time in almost ten years, the election administration agency, INEC, managed to conduct a national election by the electoral calendar despite widespread incidences of insecurity and acute shortages of petrol and cash. Additionally, INEC improved organization and planning while working hard to address

problems including polling place crowding and results transparency (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Nonetheless, INEC failed to deliver crucial election data on voter registration and Permanent Voter Card (PVC) statistics on time. It also failed to communicate developments and processes about the elections consistently and transparently. Confusion and ambiguity were increased by such acts and/or omissions. This was especially evident during and just after the elections on February 25, 2023, when INEC neglected to promptly or easily accessibly disseminate information on the kind and extent of late openings, postponed polls, and technical issues with the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). Furthermore, differences in the quality and accessibility of elections throughout Nigeria's six geographic zones as well as vulnerabilities in the integrity of INEC personnel and monitoring procedures were exposed by vote manipulation in a few Southern states that Yiaga Africa's Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) discovered. With the release of the polling station-level results via IReV, election transparency has significantly improved since the 2019 polls. However, the technology was not put to the test on a national level, and it malfunctioned in the critical hours following the election, adding to the uncertainty and skepticism surrounding the outcome.

IReV gave voters the option to view polling place-specific results, but the portal did not adhere to the principles of open election data and did not offer the data in a comprehensive, machine-readable format. As a result, citizens' capacity to independently confirm results at the local, state, and federal levels as well as to reconcile conflicting stories was restricted. Unreadable findings made up a sizable portion of the results uploaded to the IReV.

Moreover, Aina (2023) reports that INEC failed to disclose the number of presidential polling unit cancellations and failed to post some results to the IReV. In addition, the IReV system necessitated a password and login for a few days after the election, obstructing access to what ought to be an entirely open site. Section 38(ii) of INEC's Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of Elections, 2022, states that INEC posted the presidential results on the IReV before using an alternative site, which is against expectations and regulations. INEC struggled to explain, citing anything from cyberattacks to technological malfunctions. For the state and gubernatorial elections scheduled for March 18, 2023, the IReV system operated more by expectations, even though these problems with transparency and missing results fostered rumors of intentional misconduct.

Recommendations

The sincerity of the aim is evident in the process and a system that adheres to the declared objectives and tenets. There must be clarity in the aims and a consistency between words and deeds. This idea is crucial for governance and leadership positions in addition to commercial transactions. It also means that there are no covert plans, ulterior objectives, or dishonest intents behind the system—rather, it is motivated by a sincere and genuine desire to accomplish a certain aim, target, or result.

No official election in the country has ever taken place without a great deal of political tension, erratic emotions, and an overall sense of discomfort. The growth of democracy in Nigeria has been seriously threatened by election violence. Beginning with the general elections of 1959, which contributed to Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, and continuing through the First Republic of Nigeria's 1964–1965 elections following independence, the Second, Third, and Fourth Republics of Nigeria, and finally the current one. The most widely read pre-election stories in the media during electioneering seasons are usually negative ones. There have been incidents of political rivals being attacked by political thugs, popular marketplaces being bombed, as has happened in Borno state and Lagos, political competitors being assassinated or kidnapped, as has been reported in Kano, Ebonyi, and Enugu states in Nigeria, or campaign rallies. Gun-related occurrences involving deadly weapons can be observed in Lagos and Kano. A genuine or perfect democratic election is not depicted by these or a great number of others. In light of this, the study's recommendations are as follows:

First and foremost, Nigeria must, in general, start again and address the issue of electoral reform. Accountability from stakeholders and election authorities will be an element of that transformation.

Second, there should be more computerized involvement in the political process and less human interference. This suggests that results need to be published directly from the polling places, skipping the drawn-out procedure of uploading them through state centers, wards, and local administrations.

Third, INEC ought to set up a complaint system for partisan and dishonest ad hoc officers. INEC ought to make an effort to increase monitoring and surveillance of its personnel in high- and medium-risk states like as Lagos, Kano, and River states. Without a doubt, this will make space for the development of a mechanism that allows people to complain to INEC officials and express their concerns. In all honesty, the commission ought to place more Nigerians at the forefront than the few politicians vying for dominance.

Fourth, because of IReV's breakdown, the system has not brought about the desired accountability, which has put INEC's reputation in jeopardy. Nigerians must be given a thorough explanation of what went wrong and why by the Electoral Commission, along with transparency and candor. If sabotage occurred, those responsible ought to be held accountable. To prevent IReV's dysfunction from compromising the next elections, a more thorough stress test is required (CDD, 2023).

Fifth, and maybe most crucially, security guards were present in the majority of the polling places that were seen. They did not, however, have an effect in the areas where violent episodes occurred. Election officials, voters, and election documents should all be protected by security officers assigned to election tasks. In these cases, they failed to do so, which is a mirror of what happened during the February and March 2023 presidential and gubernatorial elections. It seems as though this phenomenon is the new normal. The people in charge of electoral violence or manipulation during the 2023 election should be found and brought to justice by INEC, the police, and the legal system.

Sixth, social media firms should improve their capacity to act quickly to dispel rumors that are spreading on their network, especially during and right after elections. To enable prompt response and action, more engagement with reputable fact-checking platforms is necessary.

Seventh, there have been very high instances of electoral and collation process abuse by political players this election cycle. If this tendency is to be halted, their support of blatant political manipulations constitutes electoral crimes that ought to be prosecuted. If the organizers and recipients of election crimes are not brought to justice, an atmosphere of impunity will grow and spread, thereby jeopardizing the credibility and operation of our democracy. In addition to increasing public awareness of its intolerance of electoral violations, INEC should carry out its duty of prosecuting those who violate the Electoral Act 2022 (CDD, 2023).

Eighth, to lower the possibility of post-election contestation, interpretations of the constitution about the conditions that must be met for a presidential winner to be proclaimed or potential run-off candidates to be chosen should be clarified before future elections.

Ninth, INEC must make sure that the many organizations and stakeholders from which it frequently recruits ad hoc staff—such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and Nigerian Youth Service Corp (NYSC)—have strong training programs that correspond with its efforts and are fairly compensated.

Tenth, proper and sufficient proof of Nigerian citizenship and birth registration should be in place. Nigeria is one of the few countries where it is not usual for citizens to obtain a national identity card and register their births. The government has responded by providing many replacements (birth certificates, voter's cards, driver's licenses, national identity cards, and foreign passports). However, because individuals from neighboring countries mix so freely, it might be difficult to distinguish between a Nigerian and a non-Nigerian. The cultural diversity of Nigerian culture makes this much more difficult. As was previously indicated, many pregnant women opt to give birth in a variety of informal settings instead of registering with hospitals, partly because of the high cost of health care services and the high proportion of poverty in the country (traditional or religious delivery facilities). As a result, few births are reported.

Some public hospitals in places like Abuja still offer free child delivery services, even though other states, like Ondo, have constructed modern facilities where giving birth is also offered without charge. However, sporadic industrial action forces these hospitals to close for protracted periods. Many women will not risk giving birth in a place where doctors may routinely go on strike as a result of the uncertainty this has created. Despite these challenges, the government should put in place a mechanism to register every birth and establish a committee to supervise this process. Accessible free childbirth would also greatly reduce the number of instances when illegal aliens pretend to be voters and greatly aid in the identification of native Nigerians.

Eleventh, because there are so many emergency numbers that might be confusing, the Nigerian state is infamous for taking a long time to respond to emergencies. A central hotline or number ought to be established to report voting irregularities and the associated social issues. Certain numerals have eleven digits, making them challenging to memorize. It is advisable to use fewer digits for easy remembering. Nigerians also need to be informed about risk zones, different security measures, and emergency response techniques.

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