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# **Electoral Reforms and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: Lessons for African Countries**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many Africa nations have recently be under attack by coup actions, which has once again put the continent in negative light globally, this calls for a need to sustain democracy in the continent. Since Nigeria's return to civil rule in 1999, the country has continuously developed its electoral reform to empower its democracy. African countries could embrace some of these reforms' components to consolidate democracy. This study assessed electoral reforms in Nigeria to highlight the lessons other African countries can gain for sustainable development in the continent. The study utilised secondary data, while qualitative mechanism was adopted to analyse the data collected. The study adopted the resource mobilization theory and found that the components of Nigeria electoral reforms include financial autonomy of the electoral umpire; introduction of electronic processes; exclusion of political appointees from acting as voting delegates or aspirants and constant improvement through reforms. The study concludes that Africa countries' adoption of components of Nigeria electoral reforms will substantially enrich Africa's electoral process and make it more credible and resilient. The study recommends the various stakeholders (electorate, aspirants, government officials, members of Election Management Body and the public) to work judiciously for improved elections in Africa.

**Key Words:** Election, Electoral Management Body, Electoral Process, Electoral Reforms

## **INTRODUCTION**

Election is a process that includes all stages of selecting people to fill elective positions, registering voters, publishing election notices, nominating candidates, running for office, and counting and announcing the results. The cornerstone of every democracy and the primary tool for enacting the democratic principle of citizen sovereignty are free and fair elections. By selecting candidates to lead their country in the pursuit of development, citizens can engage in the government of their nation through elections. Therefore, in any democracy, free, fair, and credible elections are a requirement for good administration. Elections that are free, fair, and trustworthy are also the result of a solid election procedure that has been improved and developed over time (Udeoba and Alokwu, 2021).

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How to effectively maintain and ultimately solidify democracy through credible elections is a fundamental challenge facing post-colonial African nations (Kolawole, 2007). This task has undoubtedly become extraordinarily difficult in Africa, where only a handful of nations can legitimately claim to have held elections that were free and fair. A common practice in many of these nations is to substitute a variation of it and defend its effectiveness on the grounds of practicality to maintain governmental legitimacy (Iwu, 2008).

In order to enhance the voting process for improved governance and prosperity, the continent needs electoral reforms. The numerous difficulties in holding free and fair elections for long-term democracy and national development have made it abundantly evident that Africa countries must start overhauling their electoral systems if they are to achieve these goals (Ojo, 2021)

The numerous difficulties in conducting free and fair elections for long-term democracy and national development have made it quite evident that if African countries are to compete with their counterparts in advanced economies, they must start modernizing their electoral systems. Electoral reforms have been a continuous process in Nigeria after every general election in order to improve on the lapses or loopholes noticed in past elections. The components of these various reforms can be adopted by other African countries and if properly managed will enable the achievement of the much needed sustainable and consolidated democracy in the continent. It is based on the above that this study assessed electoral reforms in Nigeria to highlight the lessons other Africa countries can gain from these various electoral reforms.

The objective of the study is to assess Nigeria's electoral reforms in relation to 2023 elections and highlight lessons for other Africa countries

The secondary data (internet, published articles, and books) was used to extract data for this study. Qualitative desk evaluation and observations were utilized to analyse the data collected.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on the resource mobilization theory which was developed by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald in 1977. The theory examined how social movements and collective action are organized and sustained through the mobilization of resources (McCarthy et al., 1977). In the context of the electoral reform and 2023 election in Nigeria, applying this theory can help analyze the role of resources in effectively implementing electoral reforms for impactful elections. One important resource that influences reforms is human and financial. These resources are required to effectively achieve the objectives of the reforms such as purchasing and handling of materials, remuneration, sensitization, logistics etc. The availability of trained and competent personnel devoid of corruption and adequate financial resources to carryout activities required for the successful outcome of a electoral reform will greatly enhance the democratic process of an nation. Human resources are instrumental in shaping the dynamics of elections. Actively participating stakeholders form a network that engages other individuals to achieve the electoral reform's objectives. Mobilizing these human resources involves recruiting, training, and coordinating individuals to act on behalf of electoral umpire for progressive democracy. A well-planned and transparent recruitment processes, social networks, and organizational structures can boost the overall success of any electoral reform for free, fair and credible elections.

## **Literature Review**

### **Nigeria electoral Reforms**

Nwanolue (2004), pointed out that electoral process is a multi-layered process, with one layer leading to the next, and that in Nigeria, elections were frequently seen as human-centered and human-based activities. Prejudices, errors, and manipulations are frequently present in these human-based activities, which hinder the holding of free and fair elections.

Nigeria, the largest country in black Africa and self-proclaimed "giant of Africa," has made numerous attempts during the colonial and post-colonial periods to improve the election system, which has resulted in electoral reforms in the nation. The election Management Body, which has undergone multiple modifications or adjustments under various regimes to better its election processes, is in charge of overseeing electoral administration in Nigeria. Six names were changed for the EMB between 1959 till date: Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN), 1959-1963; Federal Electoral Commission (FEC), 1963-1966; Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), 1976-1979; National Electoral Commission (NEC), (1986-1993); National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), 1993-1998 and Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), (1998-date) (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2006). Although it has been reconstituted endlessly: in 1958, twice in 1963, in 1964, 1977, 1981, 1987, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1998, 2000 and 2004 (Browne, 2004).

Lyman (2005) asserts that if the effectiveness of Nigeria's political process were the only thing at issue, that would be important enough, but the reality is that Nigeria's significance extends far beyond its borders. Nigeria is a pioneer in a lot of what is going on in the continent of Africa.

Esan and Ayeni (2017) noted that among other things, political violence, particularly assassinations and politicians' unrestrained desperation to ensure sweeping victories for their candidates lead to manipulation of the electoral process, brazen falsification of election results, intimidation of voters, electoral officials, and observers, underage voting, hoarding of ballot boxes, and the announcing of election results.

The negative effects of ethnicity in African politics will undoubtedly be reduced by electoral reform. This assertion is supported by Okafor (2010), who wrote that Nigerian leaders frequently engage in ethnic warfare as a means of gaining power. There is a need for electoral reform in Africa due to issues with godfather politics, poor security, material poverty, and external security danger. Jega (2015) noted that by excessive monetization of politics, material poverty disembowels democracy and taints the democratic process. While the detrimental effects of vote buying are well acknowledged, the role of money in African politics is very substantial.

Vote buying is more common among the poor, and even election officials might be swayed by gifts or other forms of gratification. Other than a lack of funding, there are logistical and communication issues that cause delays in getting election officials and supplies to the polling places (Ake, 1996). In coastal places where transportation is generally more problematic, this issue is particularly severe. There have been distressing instances of election officials and materials arriving late, leaving voters waiting for what seemed like an eternity, making them impatient and weary. Therefore, in order to have an election that is truly free and fair and to build true democracy in Africa, there must be an electoral reform.

According to Omotola (2012), the main goals of electoral reforms should be to establish a powerful election administration body with significant administrative and financial autonomy as well as to foster a democratic political culture among parties and the general public. It is argued that one of the essential prerequisites for genuinely free and fair elections and the formation of true democracy in any country is a neutral and independent electoral management organization. It is further argued that if the Election Management Body (EMB) is fair and accords all participants in the electoral process equitable access and treatment, the credibility of the electoral process would be significantly increased. A fair election in a democracy requires both freedom from coercion and fairness as the inverse of impartiality. It will continue to foster a deeply ingrained belief that the commission only carries out the wishes of the incumbent who nominated them because the independent Electoral Management Body (EMB) always approaches the presidency to request legitimate funds to carry out its duties.

Election reforms are consciously made efforts to alter the format and conduct of elections as well as the attitudes and behaviors of voters in order to enhance election processes for the advancement of democracy and the nation. Election reform is a complete overhaul of election administration with the goal of increasing participation opportunities in a setting that is transparent, free from bias, and fair (Arowolo, 2013). The improvement of efficacy and efficiency in election administration is due to changes in electoral systems (Butler, 2004).

According to Arowolo (2013), electoral reform may serve the following:

- ❖ To increase the impartiality of the electoral body and other institutions involved in the administration of the election, such as the police and the court;
- ❖ to guarantee the electoral body's inclusivity, independence, and financial autonomy;
- ❖ and to ensure transparency, the expansion of the franchise, broader participation, and the integrity of the process.

Electoral reforms involve three domains, which are:

- a. **Administrative Domain:** The nature of conducting elections, which involved funding, ballot production, election time-table, recruiting and training of EMB and other ad hoc staff, voters' registration, technological based voting, and logistics, are all related to the day-to-day work of an EMB (International IDEA's, 2014).
- b. **Political Domain:** This is referring to the political climate in which an EMB operates, such as giving the EMB more autonomy. Ensure that the political climate of the election is supportive of an open process that offers enabling conditions for all participants in a way that allows more citizens to participate without fear of intimidation.
- c. **Legal Domain:** Changes to the constitution, statutes, rules, and electoral laws are involved. It relates to modifying the Constitution, the Electoral Act, and other legislation controlling the conduct of elections in order to change the makeup of INEC, implement the diaspora franchise, and improve the disciplinary processes to properly punish persistent electoral offenders. (Arowolo, 2013).

#### **Assessment of the various electoral reforms in Nigeria**

Electoral reforms in Nigeria could be traced to the colonial period, when the Clifford Constitution in 1922 for the first time introduced the elective principle into the political system. Elections were for four elective seats in the Nigerian Legislative Council that was sustained and developed by succeeding colonial regimes (Ogbeidi, 2010).

The Richards Constitution of 1946 established a central legislature for the country, with four of the 24 members to be elected into the central legislature and three from Lagos and one from Calabar (Sklar, 2004). The Macpherson Constitution of 1951 allowed the first nationwide election to be held, apart from Lagos the election was indirect. The Oliver Lyttleton Constitution of 1954, enabled for the first extensive direct election to be conducted, the only exception was the northern region where the election was indirect (Ikelegbe, 2016).

In 1959 the out-going colonial administration inaugurated a special electoral body named the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) to conduct the 1959 elections and the first direct elections in the country (Ogbeidi, 2010). In 1958, the Nigerian electoral provisions order-in-council, provided for the appointment of an electoral commission by the Governor General from amongst persons of neutral views (Kurfi, 2005).

After Nigeria gained independence, another electoral reform was made where the electoral umpire nomenclature was changed to Federal Electoral Commission (FEC), this was headed by a Nigerian and conducted the first post-independence federal and regional elections of 1964 and 1965 (Adibe, 2019).

The military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo in 1976, adopted a new reform of the electoral system in the country by establishing Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) which replaced the FEC. FEDECO conducted the elections of 1979 and 1983 (Nnamdi, 2011). Some of the guidelines set out were that a political party must have operational offices in 13 of the then-existing 19 states in order to meet the registration requirements because some of the rules governing political parties were designed to address the faults of the first republic. A second significant electoral change required that the candidate for president receive at least 25% of the votes cast in two-thirds of the 19 states in addition to having the most votes cast (Ogbeidi, 2010).

There was another electoral reform which established National Electoral Commission (NEC) by the General Ibrahim Babangida led military regime in 1987. NEC conducted the 1990, 1991 and 1993 for Local government chairmen and legislators, governors and presidential elections respectively. The major reform of NEC was the introduction of a two-party electoral system in Nigeria, adopted open ballot system of voting and the option A4 innovation, which required that any presidential aspirant had to contest elections from the ward, local government and state levels before getting to contest at the national level (Kurfi, 2005). The Nigerian Electoral Commission (NEC) is renowned for holding the election that was deemed to be the freest and fairest by domestic and foreign observers, but which also marked the first presidential election in Nigerian electoral history to be declared invalid. (Nwaodu, 2011).

The National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), which was established in 1995 by the military administration of General Abacha, was yet another electoral reform in Nigeria that was prompted by the annulment of the presidential elections and other issues. General Abdulsalami Abubakar disbanded the NECON and instituted the current Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1998 following the passing of General Abacha.

INEC which is the longest serving EMB in Nigeria history has conducted seven elections: the 1999 transition election, the 2003 election, the 2007 elections led to the first civilian regime change in the country; the 2011 election (Adele, 2011); the 2015 election, the 2019 election and the just concluded February 2023 general elections. INEC has also undergone several reforms over the years geared towards enhancing the democratic processes.

Elections in Nigeria are currently regulated by the 1999 constitution (as amended), the Electoral Act of 2010 (as amended) and 2022 respectively. The Electoral Act was passed in 2001, and other Electoral Acts have since been passed, in 2006, 2010, 2011, 2015 and 2022. Among many other changes introduced by the 2006 act, is that it empowered the commission to appoint its secretary, to undertake voter education and to prosecute offenders. The law also addressed the ambiguities surrounding the appointment and dismissal of resident electoral commissioners (RECs). The 2010 Electoral act was passed to address the shortcomings of the 2006 act and harmonise the act with the amended constitution. Additionally, the act was revised once prior to the 2011 elections to extend the voter registration period, move the election date from January to April 2011, and further streamline the act's authority to control the activities of political parties, particularly the process of nominating candidates through party primaries (Electoral (amendment) Act 2010). The 2010 act forbids parties from changing the names of individuals nominated as candidates, sets new limits on campaign spending, gives INEC the authority to deregister political parties in accordance with the law, and restricts the ability of an election petition tribunal to invalidate election results without also preventing tribunals from announcing candidates as election winners. The statute establishes criminal penalties for electoral offenses, requires the announcement and posting of election results at polling places, and gives INEC the authority to bring cases against offenders.

The first amendment of the 1999 constitution provided for the financial autonomy of INEC by charging its budget and salaries of its chair and members to the Consolidated Revenue Fund. The neutrality and non-partisanship of commission members, the timing of elections, the jurisdiction of the courts in determining election petitions, the composition of election petition tribunals and the time limits for determining election petitions, were also addressed in the amendments (Constitution (first alteration) Act, 2010). The second bill for amendment of the 1999 constitution included re-examining the new timelines for the conduct of national elections (Constitution (second alteration) Act, 2010).

Prior to the passage of the 2006 Electoral Act and the 2010 amendment to the 1999 constitution, the chain of command between the commission and the RECs was unclear, and there was no clear legal framework on the procedures for their removal from office. This was a challenge because RECs were not answerable to the commission, but to the president who appointed them (Guobadia, 2009). This issue was addressed in the reform process by providing for the tenure of RECs and their accountability to the commission in addition to stipulating the procedures for removing RECs from office.

The changes made since 2011 include the use of an electronic smart card reader, a permanent voters' card, a simultaneous accreditation and voting system, and stakeholder participation before, during, and after every election as well as off-season elections (Oliji, 2021). The electoral (amendment) act 2011, amends the electoral act (No. 6) of 2010, to abridge the time from 60 days to 30 days within which the INEC shall stop the registration of voters before any general election under the act (Electoral Amendment act, 2011).

The electoral (amendment) act 2015, further amended the 2010 electoral act, to increase the number of days for duplicate voter card applications and issuance, determine voting procedure, and provide for the secretary's tenure (the secretary shall hold office for a period of 4 years, from the date of his/her appointment, which may be renewable for another period of 4 years only). (Electoral Amendment act, 2015).

The latest electoral reform is the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2022, which came into effect on 25 February, 2022 when President Muhammadu Buhari signed the 2022 Electoral Act Amendment Bill into law. The Act repeals the Electoral Act No. 6, 2010 and it is aimed at reforming and bringing new innovations to regulate of all Federal, State and Area councils elections in Nigeria (Adewole, 2022). The major reforms introduced by the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2022 are:

1. **Financial independence of INEC. The Independent National Electoral Commission Fund was established by the Electoral (Amendment) Act 2022, and according to Section 3(1) of that Act, payments from the Federal Government, investments made using the fund's money, and other assistance and grants must be made to the INEC in order for it to carry out its duties.** The Act also mandated that election funds due to the Commission for any general elections are to be released not later than one year before the subsequent general election (Section 3(3), Electoral Act, 2022). This clause gives INEC greater financial independence because it allows it to collect funding directly for the conduct of elections rather than after being vetted by the Ministry of Finance as was the case under the previous Act (Section 5, Electoral Act, 2010).
2. **Extension of Timeframe for Publication of Election Notice.** According to Section 28(1) of the Electoral Act of 2022, INEC is required to publish a notice in each State of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory not later than 360 days prior to the day set aside for the holding of an election under this Act, stating the date of the election and designating the location at which nomination papers are to be delivered. Each constituency in which an election is to be held must publish this notification (Section 28(2), Electoral Act, 2022). The result of this extension of time is that the Commission will have more time to prepare for the election, and the political parties will no longer have an excuse for their candidates' candidacies or the partisan politics and propaganda that go along with those decisions and preparations.
3. **Encouragement of Early Party Primaries.** The Act mandated political parties to submit the list of their sponsored candidates who have emerged from valid primaries conducted by the party, not later than 180 days prior to the date scheduled for a general election (Section 29(1), Electoral Act, 2022).
4. **Extension of Timeframe for Campaigns by Political Parties.** The new Act stipulates that the period of campaigning in public by all political parties shall commence 150 days before polling day and end 24 hours prior to that day (Section 94(1), Electoral Act, 2022).
5. **Provision for Central Electronic Voter Database.** The new Act mandates the Commission to keep the Register of Voters at its National Headquarters and other locations, provided that the Register shall be kept in electronic format in its central database, in addition to being kept in manual or hardcopy format (Section 9(2), Electoral Act, 2022).
6. **Revision of Definition of Overvoting.** Under the new Act, the Presiding Officer must annul the election results in any polling unit where the number of votes cast at an election exceeds the number of accredited voters in that polling unit under the new Act. (Section 51(2), Electoral

- Act, 2022). “Number of accredited voters” refers to the number of intending voters accredited to vote in an election on the election day (Section 153, Electoral Act, 2022).
7. **The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)’s Power of Review.** The new Act states that INEC has the power to review the final decision of the returning officer in respect of questions of unmarked ballot paper, rejected ballot paper, declaration of scores of candidates and the return of a candidate, within 7 days of the decision, and return where the declaration was not made voluntarily or was made contrary to the provisions of the law or the guidelines for the election (Section 65(1), Electoral Act, 2022).
  8. **Exclusion of Political Appointees from Acting as Voting Delegates or Aspirants.** Section 84 (12) of the new Act stipulates that **no political appointee at any level may vote or serve as a voting delegate for any political party’s convention or congress in order to nominate candidates for any election, according to the new Act. This means that in order to be able to take part in the electoral process as a candidate or a delegate, political appointees must resign from their positions. This clause is viewed favorably since it forbids political appointees from using their position to influence elections and keeps them from wielding power for longer than is permitted. In consequence, this frees up positions for new candidates without any prior political appointments, rather than reusing the same old candidates.**
  9. **Death of Electoral Candidates.** According to the Act, if a candidate passes away before the commencement of polls, the election will be postponed and will start within 14 days after the candidate’s passing (23 Section 34(1), Electoral Act, 2022). In case of passing away of a candidate after polls, but before announcement of final winner/ announcement of final result, the election will be postponed for not more than 21 days (Section 34(3) (a), Electoral Act, 2022). Where the election is for a legislative house position, the election shall start afresh and the political party whose candidate passed away may continue to participate in the election but will conduct a fresh primary within 14 days of the passing of its candidate and submit the name of a new candidate to the Commission to replace the late candidate (Section 34(3)(b), Electoral Act, 2022). The running mate of a deceased candidate shall continue with the election (as the new candidate) and nominate a new running mate in gubernatorial, presidential and FCT area council elections (Proviso to Section 34(3), Electoral Act, 2022).
  10. **Technological changes in electoral process.** The new Act, allows the use of electronic devices such as smart card readers, electronic voting machines and other technological devices in accreditation process for voters and in the general conduct of elections (Section 47(2) and 41 of the Electoral Act, 2022). The new Act also provides for electronic broadcast of election results in accordance with the procedure determined by the Commission (Section 50(2), Electoral Act 2022).
  11. **Who is Qualified to Sue Candidates.** The new Act stipulates that any aspirant who participated in the primaries of his/her political party and has reasonable grounds to believe that any information given by his political party’s candidate in any document submitted by that candidate in relation to his constitutional requirements to contest the election is false, may file a suit at the Federal High Court against that candidate seeking a declaration that the information contained in the document is false (The Electoral (Amendment) Act, 2022). The provision makes it illegal for Nigerians other than aspirants to contest the credentials of candidates from any political party.
  12. **Political Neutrality.** To guarantee the political impartiality of INEC’s staff, clause 8(5) was inserted. Politicians and political parties’ members are prohibited from serving as INEC officials under this clause. The clause outlines the penalties that must be applied to INEC’s employees who have political links. Anyone who violates the law as it is stated in the clause is guilty of an offense and, if found guilty, faces a fine of N5,000,000 or a term of imprisonment not exceeding two years, or both. (The Electoral (Amendment) Act, 2022).

## **Election Reform and Nigeria 2023 Elections**

The 2023 general election, tested Nigeria's democratic credentials. The Presidential and National Assembly elections took place on 25 February 2023, while the Governorship and State Assembly elections, took place on 18 March 2023. A new Electoral Act enacted one year in advance of the election stipulated the early release of election funds to INEC and empowered the electoral commission to deploy election technology, including electronic transmission of results. The Act made it possible for INEC to introduce new technologies for the general election such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Results Viewing Portal (IREV). The introduction of improved technology for voter registration by INEC, especially online pre-registration to vote, increased voter interest in the election. The Commission also established new polling units to decongest overcrowded ones and to locate polling units closer to voters to facilitate easier access. These positive developments raised public optimism and expectation that the 2023 general election would guarantee free choice, fair contest, and credible outcomes (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

The nationwide deployment and high functionality rate of the BVAS for voter accreditation in the February 25 and March 18 elections are bright spots in the 2023 general election. While the election produced the most politically diverse National Assembly ever, citizens' enthusiasm and interest to vote prior to the election did not reflect the turnout at the polls, as the election produced the lowest voter turnout in recent election history. The resort to the courts by aggrieved parties and candidates to ventilate electoral grievances signals advancement in Nigeria's democratic culture. INEC and other electoral governance actors did not meet public expectations for the 2023 elections despite the confidence-building and voter mobilization initiatives that preceded the elections. INEC's extensive preparations and public communications set the bar high for the election. Unfortunately, the Commission did not meet these expectations. The Judiciary delivered judgements that undermined provisions of the 2022 Electoral Act and rolled back reforms seeking to improve the candidate nomination process in political parties. The elections represent a missed opportunity, as incremental electoral reforms to enhance electoral integrity failed to deliver desired outcomes. Factors including poor logistics on election day, especially during the February 25 election; the failure of the technology designed to drive transparent result management, namely the result collation system and the INEC Results Viewing (IREV) Portal; poor communication provided by INEC at critical points in the process; tactical use of violence to influence electoral outcomes; voter suppression; vote buying; non-compliance with electoral law and guidelines; and apparent manipulation of results during collation cast doubts on the credibility of the process, resulting in broken public trust in INEC and the overall outcome of the elections (Yiaga, 2023 and Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023).

New provisions in the Electoral Act 2022 improved the participation of the special interest groups in our elections. For instance, Section 54 (2) of the Electoral Act 2022 mandates the INEC to take reasonable steps to ensure that persons with disabilities, special needs and vulnerable persons are assisted at the polling unit by the provision of suitable means of communication, such as Braille, Large embossed print or electronic devices or sign language interpretation, or off-site voting in appropriate cases. INEC procured assistive aids (Braille guides and Magnifying glasses), and maintained engagement with the disability community ahead of the elections. Despite all these efforts, reports by the TAF Africa revealed a low participation of (persons with disabilities) PWDs in the CVR. According to the report "The INEC did not adequately engage PWDs in the electoral process, especially in the voter education and registration exercises. Quite a few eligible voters with disabilities did not participate in the CVR to update their status as PWDs, while others were unable to collect their voters' card, due to lack of accessibility, hence the low number of PWDs indicated in the INEC register" (Yiaga, 2023).



In the February 25th presidential election, data showed that PWD voter information and statistics (Form EC 40H) were sighted in 82% of observed polling units, PWD posters (Poster EC 30E) were posted on the wall in 85% of observed polling units, magnifying glasses were sighted in 19% of polling units. 30% of polling units were not accessible as voters had to go up steps to access the polling units (this is an improvement from past elections) (Yiaga, 2023).

For the March 18th governorship election in the 28 states, data shows PWD voter information and statistics (Form EC 40H) were sighted in 67% of observed polling units, PWD posters (Poster EC 30E) were posted on the wall in 63% of observed polling units, magnifying glasses were sighted in 21% of polling units. 28% of polling units were not accessible as voters had to go up steps to access the polling units (Yiaga, 2023).

Although efforts were made through an improved electoral legal framework to ensure the participation of all eligible voters, not everyone who was eligible voted due to certain inhibitions. For instance, the PVCs of some voters were not available for pick up making it impossible for the affected voters to vote. Voters affected by the polling unit relocation encountered challenges with identifying the new voting locations on election day. Nigerians on election duties such security personnel, INEC staff, election observers, prisoners and Nigerians in diaspora are denied the right to vote due to perceived conflict of interest or legal restrictions. Early voting or advance polling allows citizens to cast ballots in person at a polling place prior to an election.

Participation in Nigerian elections had declined over the years, from 52.26 per cent and 69.08 per cent of registered voters in 1999 and 2003, respectively, to 43.65 per cent in 2015 and 34.75 per cent in 2019 and in 2023 it was 26.72 percent voter turnout, which was the lowest since the return to democracy in 1999. Several reasons has be credited to the poor turnout of voters which include: late arrival of INEC's officials to pooling units and voter suppression and violence. Nigeria voters' turnout could have been overstated in the past, but technology has exposed this past flaws, technology has show that votes were probably inflated in several parts of the country (Amata, 2023)

### **Lessons for African Countries**

Nigeria, which is seen as a model in the conduct of elections by many African democracies, has continued to invest in innovations to sustain the gains made so far in order to continue to lead other African Countries in reforming their electoral system and making elections credible and acceptable to all. In every endeavour, whether positive or negative outcome there are lessons to be learnt. Some lessons from Nigeria electoral reforms for other Africa countries are:

- a) Financial autonomy of the electoral umpire: Many of the successes of the elections in Nigeria can be attributed to the financial autonomy of INEC. It is safe to say that the reform process has tried to insulate INEC from political influence by guaranteeing its financial and administrative autonomy to a very large extent. True financial autonomy should be adopted by other Africa countries, to make electoral umpire financially independent and not under the control of the government, which will enhance their capabilities in election management in the continent.
- b) Introduction of electronic processes: The introduction of information and communication technology in the election processes in Nigeria heightened people interest to participate in 2023, though the outcome of the 2023 elections showed that these were not properly handled by the electoral umpire. The e-voter registration, if implemented effectively will cube the issues of duplicate, deceased and fake voters populating the database, inaccurate and even fraudulent data in Africa. E-voter registration has increased the number of registered voters in the Nigeria, because people are now able to register in the comfort of their homes (Akinwelfare, 2022). No doubt, this practice can be adopted by other Africa countries to improve the integrity of elections.
- c) Trust of electorates: The introduction electoral technology has significantly imbued the Nigerian electoral process with integrity, as it was adjudged to have along with other reforms

reduced electoral fraud, violence, and election litigations. Notable areas where the improvement manifested itself include voters' enthusiasm not only about participating but about policing the elections to ensure that their votes counted; the adoption of a modified 'Option A4', which reduced the possibility of manipulation of results, at least openly, at the voting booths; and the announcement and placement of results on notice boards at the voting and result collation centres, which gave interested parties the opportunity to tabulate the votes (Kew, 2010).

- d) Constant improvement through reforms: Right from the colonial era, Nigeria has constantly improved on the electoral processes by formulating various reforms. There have been tremendous improvement in election management, which is due to the various electoral reforms in the country. These processes have also impacted positively on the electoral processes of the country over the years to be attune with the standard electoral processes of other developed climes. Africa countries can also follow suit and constantly improve on their electoral processes for more development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the various governments have consistently taken measures to improve on the errors observed from past elections by embarking on electoral reforms. These reforms have also developed the nations' electoral processes in different ways; the electorates are better enlightened; the electoral umpires have improved on their activities; the activities and practices of political parties have also been strengthened and improved upon. The adoption of electoral reforms such as e-voting, e-registration, administration and financial autonomy of INEC, use of e-collation, website for transmission of result, use of automated finger prints, use of digital security services, political neutrality of the EMB, **exclusion of political appointees from acting as voting delegates or aspirants, timeframe for campaigns by political parties**, voter's registration, political party registration, inclusivity (youths and persons with disabilities PWD) etc will substantially enrich our electoral process and make it more credible and resilient.

Despite these reforms of electoral processes in Nigeria, it is only when these reforms are adequately implemented, appropriate electoral system is in place and embraced by all that the goal of an enduring political stability can be realized in any democratic system. The various reforms' innovations should be sustained and even improved upon to ensure much needed political participation.

It is what the various stakeholders do, and not just the law, that will make the most difference in electoral processes in the continent, thus all (electorate, aspirants, government officials, members of Election Management Body and the general public) must work judiciously for improved elections in Africa.

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