"Held by the Monsters": Explaining the Barriers between the Electoral Reforms and the Credibility of 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract
Nigerians and observers considered the 2023 general elections as very critical as it promised to shape the country's political landscape. For this, it drew significant attention from both local and international observers and provided the implementation platform for the new 2022 Electoral Act that introduced several safety nets for containing electoral frauds and making ways for free and fair elections. Despite the high expectations, several indicators suggest that the elections fell short of substantial compliance and credibility measures. This paper, using the explanatory research design with document analysis and desk review methods of secondary data, examines the key factors that affected the process and, indeed, the credibility of the 2023 elections. The findings reveal that the credibility of the elections was compromised by a combination of logistical failures, technological malfunctions, voter suppression, security challenges, and questions surrounding the integrity of the electoral body. The paper also looks at the implications of such failure for future policy interventions and offers recommendations on how to further strengthen the process.
Keywords
Election, Credibility, 2023 general elections, Nigeria, Reform.

Introduction

Elections are fundamental to democracy as they serve as the medium through which the will of the people is expressed in selecting leaders to manage the affairs of their state for a specific period. Election is a means for citizens to exercise their right of participation based on the assumption that each voter possesses the ability to make free and rational decisions or choices (James & Garnett, 2023). Although periodic elections are the bedrock of modern democracy and politics, their efficacy in promoting democracy and national development is determined by the credibility of their process (Ebegbulem, 2017; Iwayemi, 2014). Indeed, as rightly observed, one of the major challenges of many African countries is indeed their inability to organise credible elections (Udeuhele & Ibiam, 2015) and that has remained a significant obstacle to the consolidation of democratic ethos in most African states (Nwanegbo, 2016; Nwanegbo, 2013; Jombo and Bamigbose, 2023).

Credible elections are elections that are free and fair, conducted in accordance with existing electoral rules, and that provides every contestant with an equal opportunity to win (Dauda, Ahmad and Keling, 2019). To Beetseh (2013), credible elections allow the electorate the freedom to make real and

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meaningful choices, free from coercion or intimidation. Without credibility, elections are mere futile exercises that defeats the essence of democracy and can led to crisis and underdevelopment for a nation.

Historically, several African nations have experienced election-related problems, where the democratic process has been undermined by fraud, manipulation, violence, and weak institutions (Lynch & Crawford, 2012, Nwanegbo, 2015; Ugwuala, Kalu & Elechi, 2020), security of the processes (Nwanegbo, 2014; Jombo and Bamigbose, 2023), etc. Among these nations is Nigeria, which even though has sustained its civilian rulership since returning to it in 1999, but have been seriously hindered by issues such as vote-buying, voter suppression, and violence continue to undermine election credibility (Ugwuala, Kalu & Elechi, 2020). One of the most recent efforts to address election fraud in Nigeria was the introduction of the 2022 Electoral Reform, which led to the enactment of the Electoral Act 2022. The Act was developed with input from civil society, past legal precedents, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), and recommendations from reliable election observation reports.

The Electoral Act incorporates specific measures aimed at improving the electoral process, as noted by the European Union (2022). These measures include provisions that legally permit INEC to use technology in elections, such as biometric voter registration, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) platform. The BVAS is designed to verify voters using biometric data during the accreditation process and electronically transmit polling unit results to the IReV portal after the election. The IReV platform allows for the real-time public viewing of results from each polling unit (Ahmed, 2024; Akah et al., 2024). These technological advancements were intended to prevent electoral crimes such as ballot box theft, tampering, and the manipulation of results at collation centers, thus enhancing the credibility of elections.

The emergence of the Electoral Act was heralded as a game-changer in Nigeria's political landscape. Observers, civil society groups, the electorate, and other stakeholders were hopeful that the Act would significantly reduce or eliminate the menace of electoral fraud that has characterized Nigeria's democratic process. There were significant efforts by the electoral body, civil society groups, political parties, and religious organizations to educate the public about the Act and reassure the populace that the desired change in Nigeria's electoral process had arrived. The first full test of the Act came during the 2023 general elections. With the Act serving as the framework, the elections were expected to mark a milestone in the country's democratic development, particularly with the promise of enhanced technology to boost transparency and accountability. However, several gaps and failures in the election process became evident, raising concerns about the integrity of the results. This paper examines the challenges that contributed to the credibility problems of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

This paper adopts an explanatory research design, aiming to provide an in-depth understanding of the underlying issues that shaped the electoral process. To achieve this, document analysis and desk review methods were employed, relying exclusively on secondary data sources. These sources include official reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), report of election observer groups, academic articles, government publications, media reports, and legal documents such as the 2022 Electoral Act. Document analysis systematically examined these sources to identify themes related to logistical challenges, technological glitches, voter suppression, security concerns, and the integrity of the electoral body, while the desk review compared data from multiple sources to ensure reliability and comprehensive insights. These methods are justified by their ability to synthesize a large volume of documented evidence, offering a cost-effective and efficient approach for drawing conclusions and proposing policy reforms.

Electoral Reforms and Election Credibility: Literature and Theoretical Discourses

The dominant argument among scholars is that credible elections hold the key to achievement off sustainable development in a polity (Ellena, Mitre & Quirk, 2024; OECD, 2024; Agbor, Agbor, Obaji-Akpet & Eja, 2024; Jejelola, 2022; Ajisebiyawo & Masajuwa, 2016; Ebegbulam, 2006; Udu, Nkwede & Ezekwe, 2015). The simple logic they all presented is that credible elections hold and maintain the required balance to sustain the trust of the people in democracy. With credible election, both the winner and the looser tend to accept the results as the true wish of the electorates. It helps in maintaining the two cardinal values of democracy – voice and choice.

Election itself is described as the formal procedure allowing citizens to choose their representatives by following constitutional rules or state-sanctioned guidelines (Bello-Imam, 2015). This process involves selecting leaders and officials through ballots cast by eligible voters, offering citizens the opportunity to choose among candidates and policies at regular intervals. Elections have replaced older selection methods, such as co-option and inheritance, as the standard in contemporary democratic systems.

Elections function as a fundamental mechanism for the public to express their preferences and evaluate those in power, who ideally serve as their representatives (Rose, 1978, cited in Obakhedo, 2011). As noted by Babalola (2019), elections primarily involve the selection of leaders, and according to Zhizhi and Ibrahim (2020), they are essential to the structure of liberal democracy. In democratic settings, elections are crucial, as they embody public expression, validate legitimacy, and facilitate leadership succession. Nnoli (2003) underscores that elections are intrinsically linked to the growth of representative democracy, widely regarded as a primary indicator of such governance (p. 220).

Huntington (1993) further emphasizes that the democratic quality of a political system is demonstrated through fair, transparent, and frequent elections, where candidates freely compete for votes, offering broad adult suffrage. Essentially, elections enable the selection of officials or representatives by the vote of qualified group members (Nwolise, 2007). Anifowose (2003) defines elections as a means by which elites are chosen by the larger populace within a political system, serving as a platform for diverse interest groups to assert and negotiate their claims to power through non-violent means.

The concept of election credibility on the other hand revolves around evaluating whether an electoral process is conducted with fairness, transparency, and integrity. Alemika (2007:2) defines electoral integrity as "the degree of freeness and fairness of election," shaped by several critical factors, including the quality of electoral procedures, the strength of the legal framework, and the electoral institution's autonomy from political interference, especially by the ruling party. In essence, credible elections demand a secure environment, free from manipulation, where both procedural protections and electoral outcomes align with democratic principles (Alemika 2007; Norris 2015).

However, achieving a universally accepted measure for electoral credibility is challenging due to the complex nature of elections. Schedler (2012) argues that electoral integrity cannot be fully encapsulated by standard bureaucratic or numeric metrics, due to the "informational demands" involved in such assessments. He asserts that judging an election's credibility requires both contextual knowledge and analytical expertise, given that "the ideal of non-judgemental measure is unreachable" (Schedler 2012:26, 30). This suggests that credibility assessments must go beyond generic metrics to incorporate nuanced local realities.

Scholars have outlined specific indicators of credible elections that focus on both procedural and outcome-based elements. These indicators include transparency in the electoral process, voter inclusivity, adherence to legal guidelines, and independence of electoral institutions. According to scholars like Jega (2014) and Omotola (2009), critical aspects of credible elections also encompass equal opportunities for

political parties to campaign, equitable media access, and strict adherence to campaign finance regulations. The credibility of an election is also associated with a peaceful environment where voters are free from coercion, and where vote counting and result announcements are transparent and accessible to observers and the public (Omotola 2009; Jega 2014).

Conversely, it is to achieve credibility in elections that give rise to the series of reforms in the electoral systems which tends, at every stage, to close the loopholes in the practices and advance the processes of elections. The concept of electoral reform encompasses varied interpretations and perspectives. Katz (2018) explains that electoral reform is multifaceted, involving changes to election rules, processes, methods, and institutions aimed at enhancing representation, participation, accountability, and democratic governance. In a similar vein, Norris (2014) highlights that election reform extends to areas like campaign finance regulation, advancements in voting technology, and the establishment of independent electoral commissions to ensure fair practices.

Thompson (2020) argues that electoral reform often arises in response to issues observed within an existing electoral system, such as voter suppression, financial influence, security concerns, systemic fraud, and a lack of electoral body independence. Ogwu (2016) supports this view, defining electoral reform as a deliberate societal effort to address flaws within the election process, involving not only the government but also society's key electoral players, including voters, electoral bodies, political parties, the media, and civil society. This inclusive approach underscores the collaborative role that state and non-state actors play in developing and implementing electoral reforms.

In the views of Welp (2019), electoral reform is shaped by historical contexts and democratic developments, evolving to address societal needs such as universal suffrage, proportional representation, and election integrity. The goal of electoral reform is to improve electoral justice, inclusivity, representation, transparency, and overall democratic integrity. Abubakar and Yahaya (2017) emphasize that electoral reform is crucial for democratic stability. However, Omotola (2010) cautions that reforms may become ineffective in a system dominated by elite interests, suggesting that their success largely depends on the implementers and the political culture within a given society. Despite its limitations, electoral reform plays a significant role in enhancing election credibility. Botchway and Kwarteng (2018) advocate for periodic electoral reforms to address any remaining weaknesses and ensure continued progress.

Nigeria's electoral history has been marked by significant reform milestones, presumably aimed at establishing a more inclusive and transparent system. The first major reform came with the Clifford Constitution of 1922, which introduced a limited electoral process allowing select Nigerians to participate in the Legislative Council, though it was restricted to Lagos and Calabar elites. The 1951 Macpherson Constitution expanded representation further, allowing Nigerians from more regions to participate and paving the way for the rise of political parties that reflected Nigeria's diverse ethnic landscape (Orji, 2021). Following independence, the 1979 Constitution introduced a U.S.-style presidential system to foster national unity and address Nigeria's ethnic divisions, alongside the creation of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), which was tasked with ensuring fair election practices. These early efforts laid the groundwork for a more equitable electoral process but faced challenges due to entrenched political and regional biases (Orji, 2021).

The return to democracy in 1999 marked another records of multiple reforms in the electoral system. These include the 2002, 2006, 2010 and most recently in 2022. Some significant milestone that came with the reforms include the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), aimed at creating a non-partisan body to oversee electoral integrity. Building on these efforts, the Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee in 2007 introduced biometric voter registration, significantly reducing voter impersonation and promoting transparency (Suberu, 2021). The 2015 elections further

leveraged technology with the introduction of the Smart Card Reader to verify voters biometrically, a step toward enhancing the credibility of the electoral process. In 2022, the Electoral Act Amendment brought sweeping changes, including provisions for electronic transmission of results and stricter campaign finance regulations (Jega, 2015; Suberu, 2021). These milestones collectively represent Nigeria's ongoing journey towards a transparent and efficient electoral system, although challenges such as logistical issues and political violence remain areas needing attention.

Trajectory of Electoral Crises and Fraud and the Electoral Reforms in Nigeria

The history of elections in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. The first elections were conducted in 1923 under British colonial rule, following the introduction of the Clifford Constitution. This constitution provided for the establishment of the Nigerian Legislative Council, allowing a limited number of Nigerians to vote and be elected to the council (Tongs et al., 2023). However, suffrage was restricted to Lagos and Calabar, and only a small, educated elite of wealthy men had the right to vote, establishing a pattern of political participation based on privilege rather than broad inclusion (Tongs et al., 2023). Even though it came as a major stride in the country's democratic development, the early nationalist strongly criticized it as being very restrictive (Nwanegbo, 2016).

Subsequent constitutional developments, such as the Richards Constitution of 1946 and the Macpherson Constitution of 1951, expanded political participation by increasing the number of Nigerians in the Legislative Council and allowing for greater regional representation. The 1951 elections under the Macpherson Constitution marked the first major electoral contest in Nigeria, with political parties such as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Action Group (AG), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC) participating (Iyayi, 2005). These parties reflected the ethnic divisions that would later shape Nigeria's political landscape. The 1959 pre-independence elections were a pivotal moment, as they were the first nationwide elections, setting the stage for Nigeria's independence in 1960.

The first post-independence election, held in 1964, was contested by two major alliances: the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA), led by the NPC, and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA), which included the NCNC and AG. This election became a flashpoint for ethnic and regional tensions that had been building since colonial times, deepening divisions within the country. After thirteen years of military rule, Nigeria's Second Republic was established in 1979 with a new constitution modelled on the U.S. presidential system (Ogbeidi, 2010). The 1979 elections, supervised by General Olusegun Obasanjo's military government, saw Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) emerge victorious. However, the 1983 elections were marred by widespread electoral fraud, violence, and political instability, which led to another military coup and the collapse of the Second Republic.

The transition to the Third Republic in the late 1980s and early 1990s, under the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida, was part of a complex and protracted democratization process. The 1993 presidential election, held on June 12, is widely regarded as the most credible and free election in Nigeria's history (Omotoso & Oyeranmi, 2014). Chief Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) won, defeating Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention (NRC). However, the Babangida government annulled the election results, citing electoral irregularities, a move that led to national outrage and widespread protests (Okorie, 2020). This annulment led to continued military rule until 1999, when Nigeria returned to civilian governance.

The 1999 elections, which brought General Olusegun Obasanjo of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to power, marked the end of military rule. However, these elections were criticized for irregularities and manipulation. Subsequent elections in 2003, 2007, and 2011 continued to highlight flaws in Nigeria's electoral system (Isma'ila & Othman, 2015). Very prominent in these elections were electoral crises and frauds, marked by several recurring issues. First, the widespread contestation of official election results

has been a persistent feature. Since independence, nearly every election result has been disputed (Ajayi & Ojo, 2014). This problem was notably highlighted by the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua during the 2007 inauguration of the Electoral Reform Committee, where he admitted that Nigerian elections, most especially the one that brought him into power were flawed (Oyekami, 2013, p. 258). The second major issue is electoral violence, which has consistently undermined Nigeria's democratic processes. As can be seen, since the 1959 elections organized by colonial authorities, elections under civilian regimes have been plagued by violence (Ojiako, Umeasiegbu, Lawrence, & Okoye, 2023). The First and Second Republics were both destabilized by election-related violence, with the latter collapsing after the widely rigged 1983 elections, which led to a military coup (Michael, Ogunrotimi & Roland, 2023). Similarly, elections held after Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 to date were characterized by assassinations, vote rigging, and organized violence (Olakunle, Bamidele, Modupe, Oluwaseun, & Magdalene, 2019).

The persistent pattern of electoral crises and fraud in Nigeria underscores the weaknesses in its electoral governance framework, despite constitutional provisions and electoral laws designed to ensure credible elections.

It is in response to the demands that emerged after even the election circle that the country has experienced several records of election reforms. Some however, were as a result of the efforts to establish electoral democracy arising from the demands of political representatives, especially in the first republic that came.

The 2007 elections, in particular, were widely condemned as one of the most rigged in Nigeria's history. While electoral reforms were introduced outside the constitutional establishing rules in 2000, 2002, and 2006, the electoral reforms of 2010 which came as as the outcome of the reform process initiated by Yar'Adua administration was indeed the most landmark. It introduced the fundamental reforms that enabled the evolution in the electoral system in Nigeria. The full implementation came in 2015 election which was significant in many ways. While some progress has been made, such as the peaceful transfer of power in 2015, the electoral process remains fraught with violence, manipulation, and disputes, contributing to a fragile democratic system. Reforms and a strong commitment to enforcing the rule of law are crucial to breaking the cycle of electoral crises that have plagued Nigeria's democratic development from independence to the present day. The 2019 elections, while relatively peaceful, were marred by logistic challenges, voter suppression, and allegations of rigging. The 2023 elections saw the emergence of Bola Tinubu of the APC as president also has issues of electoral credibility, violence, and manipulation continue to challenge Nigeria's democratic journey.

Technological Failures and Delays in Result Transmission

Technological failures and delays in result transmission played a significant role in undermining the credibility of Nigeria's 2023 general elections (Oyinmiebi, & Inokoba, 2023). The introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV) was highly anticipated as a major improvement to the electoral process. BVAS was intended to eliminate issues of over-voting and ensure accurate voter accreditation, while IReV was designed to enhance transparency by providing real-time transmission of election results to the public. These innovations were expected to foster trust in the electoral system (Ahmed, 2024; Apalowo, Osigwe, Adejumo, 2023). However, their implementation was fraught with serious challenges that ultimately had the opposite effect (Jaiyeola, 2023; (Abowei & Abowei, 2023).

In several polling units, particularly in areas like Lagos, Rivers, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), BVAS machines failed to function properly, leading to significant delays. Voters, some of whom had waited in long queues for hours, were frustrated as technical issues caused the voting process to be suspended or extended (Punch Newspaper, 2023; Onyemachi, 2022). Additionally, the IReV system,

which was expected to transmit results immediately after voting, failed to do so in real time. INEC's explanation of technical difficulties and network issues did little to assuage public concerns (The Cable, 2024; Anichukwueze, 2024). In many states and areas, results were either delayed or uploaded inconsistently, leading many Nigerians, including opposition parties, to believe that this delay created an opportunity for manipulation. This lack of transparency sparked protests, with opposition leaders and civil society groups accusing INEC of failing to uphold its promises of free and fair elections (https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/election-results-challenged-civil-society-reacts-with-protests/). The combined failure of BVAS and IReV undermined public trust in the electoral process, raising doubts about the legitimacy of the final results, especially in contentious states like Rivers and Kano.

Voter Suppression and Intimidation

Voter suppression and intimidation were significant problems during the 2023 Nigerian general elections, often manifesting through violence, threats, or manipulation of the voting process (Ka-Admin & Ka-Admin, 2023; Bayode, & Monday, 2023). Numerous reports (Van Zeijl, 2023; (Freedom House, n.d.) surfaced of political thugs, many loyal to dominant parties, attacking polling stations, especially in areas known to be opposition strongholds. Voters in these areas were threatened or physically barred from casting their ballots, leading to widespread fear and disillusionment. In some instances, ballot boxes were stolen or destroyed, as seen in parts of Lagos and Rivers State. For example, in Lagos, there were several cases where voters were openly threatened based on ethnic or political affiliations, forcing some to abandon the process altogether. This suppression tactic was particularly effective in urban centres where political competition was intense and stakes were high.

The inability of security agencies to curb these violent acts, and in some cases their alleged complicity, further damaged the credibility of the elections. In cities like Kano and Lagos, security forces were criticized for either being absent at key moments or turning a blind eye to the activities of political thugs. In Rivers State, several polling units witnessed violent disruptions, with little to no intervention from law enforcement. This failure to ensure a secure voting environment meant that many citizens did not feel safe exercising their democratic rights. The widespread voter suppression, combined with the inadequate response from security forces, severely undermined the fairness and transparency of the elections, leading to doubts about the legitimacy of the entire process. When citizens are intimidated or prevented from voting, the democratic process itself is compromised.

Security Lapses

Security lapses during the 2023 Nigerian general elections significantly undermined the credibility of the process. Historically, Nigerian elections have been plagued by violence, and the 2023 elections followed this troubling pattern. In many areas, voters were caught in violent clashes, with attacks on polling units and election officials. For example, in Rivers State, political thugs stormed polling stations, physically attacking officials and destroying voting materials (SDN, 2023; Yusuf et al. 2024). The deployment of security personnel was inadequate in several regions, leaving polling stations vulnerable to these violent disruptions. In some cases, voters were forced to flee, unable to cast their ballots due to the insecurity surrounding the election process. The lack of sufficient protection created a climate of fear and uncertainty, discouraging voter participation and tarnishing the overall credibility of the election. In the northern regions of Nigeria, particularly in states like Borno and Yobe, insurgent groups also played a disruptive role in the election process. Boko Haram and other insurgent factions launched instill fear, further reducing voter turnout in areas already struggling with insecurity. These security lapses not only affected voter confidence but also led to irregularities, as many people were either too afraid to vote or prevented from doing so. The failure of security agencies to effectively safeguard voters and election officials in these hotspots, despite prior warnings and preparations, severely eroded confidence in the

integrity of the election. When security is compromised, the fairness of the process is fundamentally questioned.

Logistical Inefficiencies

Logistical inefficiencies have long been a significant challenge in Nigerian elections, and the 2023 general elections were no different. Despite the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) claiming that extensive preparations had been made, there were widespread reports of delays in the delivery of voting materials, particularly in rural areas and politically sensitive regions like the North East and parts of the South East (Yiaga Africa, 2023; Ezeador, 2023). In many instances, electoral officials and materials, such as ballot papers and BVAS machines, arrived hours after the polls were scheduled to open. For example, in states like Enugu and Nasarawa, voting did not commence until late in the afternoon, leading INEC to extend voting into the following day. This resulted in confusion, voter frustration, and logistical difficulties for election monitors who had to adjust to the changing timeline (Vanguard, 2023).

INEC's inability to ensure the timely distribution of electoral materials raised serious questions about its preparedness and competence. Given Nigeria's vast geographical size and infrastructural challenges, efficient logistical planning is critical to conducting smooth elections. The late arrival of materials, particularly in rural and underserved areas, not only delayed the voting process but also deterred many voters. In places where polling units opened late, voters who had queued for hours left without casting their ballots due to fatigue or a fear of security risks (Punch, 2023). The logistical failures further fuelled suspicions of deliberate disenfranchisement, contributing to the perception that the election was compromised and poorly managed.

Perceived Bias of the Electoral Body (INEC)

The perceived bias of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) played a significant role in undermining the credibility of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. As the electoral body responsible for ensuring free and fair elections, INEC was heavily criticized for its handling of various electoral issues, particularly its slow response to complaints of malpractices. Many Nigerians and political observers accused INEC of favouring certain political parties, especially when it came to delays in uploading results from key regions such as Lagos and Rivers. For example, in these areas, the Results Viewing Portal (IReV) failed to transmit results in real-time, which raised concerns about potential manipulation. INEC's refusal to address or rectify irregularities in contested states like Kano and Osun further deepened the suspicion of bias, with opposition parties alleging that the commission had compromised its neutrality.

In addition, allegations emerged that certain voter data may have been manipulated, and many questioned the integrity of the collation process due to inconsistencies in the reported results (Yiaga Africa, 2023). INEC's poor communication with the public, especially during critical moments of the election, added to the perception that the body was either inept or intentionally skewed towards particular political interests. This failure to maintain transparency and impartiality eroded public trust in the election process, leading to widespread dissatisfaction among voters and casting doubt on the legitimacy of the final results. The perceived partiality of INEC thus became one of the key factors that tainted the 2023 elections, further intensifying the political tensions that followed.

Desperation of Politicians

The desperation of politicians was another critical issue that marred the credibility of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Many political candidates and their supporters were willing to go to extreme lengths

to secure victory, often disregarding democratic principles and the rule of law (Ifedi, Ngwu, & Nnamani, 2023). This desperation manifested in various forms, including vote buying, voter intimidation, and the use of political thugs to disrupt the voting process. In almost all states, there were reports of politicians bribing voters with cash or material incentives to sway their choices, undermining the integrity of the elections. These practices distorted the democratic process, as votes were often cast not based on free will but under the influence of financial inducements or fear of reprisal.

In addition to vote buying, politicians in highly contested areas resorted to violence and intimidation to ensure victory. In several instances, political thugs attacked polling stations, destroyed ballot boxes, and assaulted voters, creating a hostile environment that discouraged voter participation (Abumbe, & Owa, 2024). This was particularly evident in urban centres where political competition was intense, and the stakes were high. The desperation to win at all costs not only dissuaded voters from participating freely but also raised questions about the legitimacy of the election outcomes. The actions of these politicians, driven by a fear of losing power, contributed significantly to the undermining of public confidence in the electoral process, casting a shadow over the overall fairness and transparency of the 2023 elections.

Conclusion

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria encapsulated a complex interplay of hope and disappointment. The introduction of new technologies and reforms aimed at enhancing the electoral process represented a progressive move towards improving democratic practices. However, several critical gaps undermined the credibility of the elections, contributing to a pervasive lack of confidence in the electoral process among the Nigerian populace. To restore trust in future elections, it is imperative for Nigeria to address these systemic issues comprehensively. Key measures must include enhancing the efficiency and reliability of election technologies, strengthening security protocols to protect voters and electoral staff, ensuring impartiality within the electoral body, and providing a safe and equitable environment for all voters. Only through the implementation of these strategies can Nigeria's democracy flourish and the true will of the people be accurately reflected in the election results.

The implications of this study offer a valuable roadmap for reinforcing Nigeria's electoral system. The findings highlight the urgent need for robust reforms in electoral management, focusing on transparency, accountability, and public trust. It is crucial for the government and electoral authorities to engage in a continuous dialogue with civil society, political parties, and stakeholders to identify and address the underlying issues affecting electoral integrity. Policymakers must commit to implementing comprehensive reforms that encompass the entire electoral cycle, from voter registration to result declaration. Additionally, there is a need for public education campaigns to empower citizens to participate actively in the electoral process and hold their leaders accountable. By fostering a culture of integrity and respect for democratic principles, Nigeria can pave the way for future elections that genuinely reflect the will of the people, ultimately enhancing the nation's democratic governance. By prioritizing these reforms, Nigeria can build a more resilient electoral framework that not only facilitates fair elections but also fosters an environment conducive to democratic participation and civic engagement.

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